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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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

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● (1035)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we continue our study on the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada. This is committee meeting number 25.

I want to welcome all our guests and witnesses today. Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedules. Thank you for all the work you do on the front lines. We are happy to have you here in Moncton as we move through.

We have been hearing a number of witnesses in Ottawa, but we realize that the real work doesn't happen in Ottawa; it happens out in the ridings, out in the various parts of the country.

We started yesterday in Halifax. We are here today in Moncton, and then tomorrow we'll be in Montreal.

As I said, we want to thank you for taking the time. We are interested in hearing what your stories are about, what is going on, what's working, and what suggestions we can take back and look at.

The way things will work today is this. I'm going to start over on my right-hand side. Bernard, we are going to start with you and work across the row of witnesses. We are going to ask for five minutes each, and then we are going to have a couple of rounds of questioning. If you don't get a chance to talk about all the things you were hoping to, they will probably be brought up in some of the questions and answers.

I'll identify each of you. We'll have a timer here, just so that we understand where we are. You don't need to touch the microphones; they're going to be operated for you.

The last thing I want to mention is with respect to translation. For those who need translation, such as me, English is on channel 16 and French is on channel 17. Some questions will be asked and/or answered in French. Please feel free to speak in your natural, native tongue.

I am going to start with Bernard Richard, ombudsman and child and youth advocate, who is here as an individual.

Sir, welcome. You have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Bernard Richard (Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate, As an Individual): Thank you very much. I'll talk as quickly as I possibly can.

The Chair: The interpreters may not be able to keep up. We'll strike a balance.

Mr. Bernard Richard: I stand corrected.

[*Translation*]

I am obviously very pleased to be here and I want to congratulate the members of the committee for having decided to leave Ottawa. There is certainly real work being done in Ottawa but it is also important for Canadian citizens to have this kind of access to their Members of Parliament. We are privileged to have this opportunity.

Thank you.

[*English*]

I am New Brunswick's ombudsman, child and youth advocate, privacy and right to information commissioner, and civil service commissioner; I have many hats and different roles. In the past, I've been a member of the legislature for a number of years and a cabinet minister in a previous government.

In the course of several years now I've had an opportunity to look at the face of poverty and to reflect upon what kinds of challenges it poses to any society and why it's important to deal with it, so I certainly welcome you here. I am sure you've been reminded a million times that the House of Commons has already taken a firm stand on poverty, way back in 1989, promising to abolish child poverty by the year 2000. We're not quite there yet. None of you was there in 1989, so I'm not holding you personally responsible for the fact that we're not quite there yet.

But I think it's important to remind ourselves that this is something that needs to be done, if all of Canadian society is to continue to advance. We have many advantages in this world and we are a model for many countries. Those of you who travel around the world have been approached by people who want to immigrate to Canada, who really hold Canada as a model, as just a wonderful place—and it is.

That, I think, makes it more embarrassing for us to realize that many children in Canada still live in poverty, and that while we export our wonderful water to other places, many children don't have access to clean drinking water. We should be embarrassed about that.

I think we need to understand that if we're to continue to be a beacon for the world in terms of human rights and economic development—and of equal opportunity, to use a phrase that was coined in New Brunswick—then we need to make sure that our tide lifts all ships and that all members of our society have an opportunity.

In my work I've had the chance to develop some recommendations around mental illness, particularly around youth suffering from mental challenges and how our criminal justice system responds not very well to them—not just in New Brunswick but in other parts of the country as well. If I can ask you anything in these very short minutes, it's to focus on child poverty and on some of the challenges that youth are facing in regard to limited access to mental health services.

I think it's true all across the country. I have had the opportunity to meet with ombudsmen from every province, and with child and youth advocates and right to information and privacy commissioners from every province. I think it is important to remember that these are not just challenges in New Brunswick, and that however well we're doing in places such as Quebec or Alberta, we are leaving behind some of our citizens. That holds back our possibility of becoming all that we can be.

● (1040)

[*Translation*]

So, it is important to include all our citizens in our efforts to make Canada what we want it to be and what it is in the eyes of many on planet Earth. However, we will not really have reached our objective if we cannot find a way to include everyone.

Furthermore, MPs' words are very important. Even though you were not there in 1989, Parliament made that commitment. And Parliament belongs to all Canadians. We all rely on commitments made not only by our MPs but also by our Parliament.

As MPs, we are proud to say that we fulfill our promises. At least, that was the case when I was an MP. And I do believe this is true of all Members of Parliament, whatever their party.

[*English*]

We make promises; we keep our promises. Well, Parliament has made a promise to Canada's children and has not kept that promise. I think we have the means of doing it, but it takes more than words; it takes action and commitment.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richard.

We're now going to Kelly Wilson, who is from the John Howard Society of New Brunswick.

I don't know, Kelly, whether in any of your remarks you're going to be talking a bit about what you guys do at the John Howard Society. If you aren't, I'd ask you to talk a bit about it, but if it's part of your remarks, that's great.

But the time is yours, for five minutes.

Mrs. Kelly Wilson (Executive Director, Charlotte County, John Howard Society of New Brunswick): Thank you for inviting us from New Brunswick today.

My speech is quite a bit different from Bernard Richard's. I want to talk about the fact that in my role as an executive director of the John Howard Society, I work personally and individually with people who live in poverty and who are suffering from the consequences of poverty every day.

Over 95% of the 150 individuals we deal with are living in poverty. These are people whom we actively work with each year, people who walk through our door. They suffer from low education levels, low literacy levels, poor employment history, poor physical health, engaging in risky sexual behaviour, and conflict with the law. To survive these challenges, they develop a lot of poor coping strategies, which lead to poor decision-making, poor problem-solving skills, impulsiveness, and of course substance abuse. Substance abuse is having a huge impact on our community and provincial resources. The cost to health care is increased vastly. A homeless person in Canada uses $4,714 in health care, compared with $2,633 for an average person. I think that's a significant cost to the federal government.

When you look at the province of New Brunswick—

The Chair: Kelly, sorry to interrupt. Is that $4,000 per year?

Mrs. Kelly Wilson: Yes, and per person.

The Chair: Thank you.

● (1045)

Mrs. Kelly Wilson: In New Brunswick, the average cost to the health care system to treat those with substance abuse problems is $1,500, compared with the national average of $1,267. In New Brunswick we also rank higher in substance abuse and treatment of it. This represents a huge financial burden on government funding in health care costs alone. We're not even talking about the criminal justice system. Over 80% of my caseload are individuals who have come into conflict with the law and who are suffering from substance abuse problems. I feel that a lot of these problems need to be addressed in the community through programming and services that we can provide as non-profit.

Low education levels also have a significant impact on our target population. According to Literacy New Brunswick, we have the second lowest literacy rate in Canada. Specifically, 60% of New Brunswickers aged 16 and over are at the lowest levels of literacy. That's a huge problem. Families with low literacy levels are more likely to be sick more often; they're more likely to smoke; they're less likely to go to a doctor or an optometrist; they eat poorly; and they're more likely to be poor. Over 80% of incarcerated individuals have low literacy levels. Low education levels affect an individual's access to employment, which affects the quality of life for families. I think we need to examine responses that target multiple risk factors at the same time. We need to find ways to treat the individual as a whole person.

A response to poverty will take time, and measurable results may not be as immediate as we would like. I think measurable results definitely need to be flexible in order to capture good results. We can't just look at a black and white approach. What I mean is this: if we're looking at a person who's suffering from substance abuse or having an addiction problem, and we're counting that person only when he stays clean for the rest of his life, we're missing the boat. Slips are part of the substance abuse recovering process. If a person has a slip and doesn't go into a complete relapse, this ought to be captured. We ought not to count that person as a failure.

In these tough economic times, our target population really suffers when government cutbacks are made to services and programs. It has a huge impact on them and they lack the knowledge and skills to advocate for themselves. Their concerns may go unnoticed until a crisis occurs.

I want to talk a bit about the John Howard Society approach and some of the things we do in our office. I believe that in order to reduce poverty we need to address its root causes. It is important to connect with your community, your province, and also your country to understand the latest challenges and opportunities that exist for our target population. As an agency, we need to stay current with the latest research and implement the best practices and lessons learned into our programs and services. All the clients who walk through our door need to look at where they have been, where they want to go, and what they need to do to get there. We need to support them throughout that process.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm now going to move to John Castell and the Fundy Community Foundation.

Welcome, sir. The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Mr. John Castell (Member, Moving Forward Together Steering Committee, Fundy Community Foundation): Okay.

Now, because I can't possibly say everything I want to in five minutes, I'll say right at the beginning that I'm going to advocate a bottom-up approach to poverty in Canada. I think the closest interaction with and the closest feel for poverty comes from the local communities. Groups like the John Howard Society, which Kelly represents, and many of the charities or not-for-profit groups that I'm involved in have the hands-on feel and the trust of a lot of the people in poverty.

I'm hoping that by speaking today I will advocate for a forum where you will have continuing input from representatives of groups like the one I work with. I'm not part of the Fundy Community Foundation, but I work intimately with them. I would like to speak to their model of approaching community development as one of the means at the community level—but with a national organization, the Community Foundations of Canada—to approach dealing with poverty.

That's what I wanted to say in my five minutes, so I got that off my chest to begin with.

I'm involved in the Charlotte County Dial A Ride program, which provides volunteer transportation for seniors, disabled, and needy families in Charlotte County. We have a number of volunteers who give up their time and will transport those people otherwise unable to have transportation in a rural community to medical appointments, to banks to cash their cheques, to grocery shopping, to social events, and to quite a few other things.

We do about a thousand trips a day. It's not something that was developed in Charlotte County. We stole the idea from Nova Scotia. There are about 10 counties there that do it. It was facilitated in our county by dialogues that were put on by the Fundy Community Foundation. They organized a community dialogue with stakeholders involved in programs to assist those in need in our county. At that time, it was the Charlotte County Benevolent Society that I was involved in, which provided support to families of seriously ill children. Through that dialogue about transportation, that problem was solved.

The foundation now has a poverty working group. I'll give you a little history, if I may. The premier of New Brunswick set up an advisory council on not-for-profits, headed by Claudette Bradshaw. In order to approach input to that in Charlotte County, quite a large number of the not-for-profits organized meetings to get together to share ideas so that we could give a better picture to Claudette Bradshaw on how she should advise the premier. I believe the input from Charlotte County was very helpful to Claudette. She spoke very highly of the organized approach we had to begin this.

That led to the idea that a lot of us overlapped in our objectives in helping the people living in poverty in our community and that we had a problem of not knowing each other that well. A lot of us are run by volunteer boards—and sometimes not even with any paid staff—with a mission, and we are very enthusiastic in approaching that mission, but there is difficulty in finding funding because we don't have a professional fundraiser. There are all kinds of grants that we don't know about.

In that dialogue when we got together, we realized how much we could contribute by working together rather than as individual charities, so one of the greatest things that Claudette's group did was to get us together to talk. In getting together to talk, we felt that we could come up with solutions. Yes, we can wait for the province and the provincial government to help out, and we can look to the federal government, but we feel there are things we can do without waiting for government support.

With the help of the Fundy Community Foundation, we began a series of dialogues. They have a nice process. You call together the stakeholders who have a similar interest, you address the need—and addressing poverty was the need—and then you have a facilitated dialogue. You have groups of five to ten people who get together, address and identify the problems, and suggest solutions.

We had a series of dialogues. Out of that, we decided within the group that we would do a number of things. We'd pick three target projects that we could and will do. We may get government help, but we'll do something.

● (1050)

First of all, because they interacted with the poverty people, we invited people living in poverty to work with us and advocate with us. Our committee includes people who are living in poverty, so input was there.

Three programs relate to food security and housing security. The outline on that is here.

Third, because of the volunteer hours, we learned of a program called time banking, and I've provided information on that.

I would like to address those in question period, if we may.

The Chair: Thank you. Hopefully, the question period we have here will be more productive than the question period we have in Ottawa.

I'm going to move along to Brian Duplessis. Thank you very much, Brian. You're with the Fredericton Homeless Shelters, so I'm going to turn it over to you for five minutes.

Mr. Brian Duplessis (Executive Director, Fredericton Homeless Shelters): First of all, thank you very much for the opportunity to be here. The opportunity to speak to members of Parliament is one that can't be turned down.

I will tell you that a few months ago I was asked to speak at a local church, and the minister asked me how much time I would like. I said I was good for anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours. We did compromise on about 20 minutes.

I've never tried to speak on this subject for five minutes, so I'm really going to focus on two things. First, I'm going to tell you a little bit about the shelters that we run in Fredericton. I think it's important for you to know that. Then I'm going to talk a little bit about how our whole society and the different levels of government need to work together to deal with poverty.

Before I even do that, I want to tell you that the people I work with—the 389 men who used the Fredericton Men's Shelter last year and the 96 women who used Grace House for Women, our women's shelter—don't live in poverty. They live and exist in abject poverty. There is poverty, unfortunately, then there's worse poverty, then there's the worst, and then there's the bottom. That's who we work with—the close to 500 people we work with in Fredericton.

When I say abject poverty, I am talking about the welfare rates and systems in New Brunswick that drive people into poverty and then keep them there. The single employable rate of welfare—and I'm going to call it that, not income assistance or social assistance. I'm going to call it what those who receive it call it, and that's welfare. The single employable rate in New Brunswick is $294 a month. That's $294 in Fredericton, where the cheapest room in the cheapest, seediest rooming house is about $325 to $375 a month.

The next level of income assistance—basic assistance it's called—is $537 a month. With either of those levels, take into consideration that Statistics Canada has said that the poverty rate for a single person in Fredericton is around $20,000 to $22,000 a year. At $294, that's less than $4,000 a year. At $537, that's between $6,000 and $7,000 a year. Abject poverty is what we're talking about.

We run these two shelters around the clock on $400,000 a year. We staff them and run them on $400,000 a year. Even as an organization, we are just providing a basic subsistence, roof-over-the-head situation while at the same time trying to coordinate the efforts with all the other agencies that exist.

Our funding is $60,000 from the province, zero from the federal government, and zero from the municipalities. Fifteen per cent comes from any level of government. We have some through United Way and the rest we fundraise, $250,000 to $275,000 a year in Fredericton, to keep the doors open and a roof over the heads of those 500 people.

I've only been doing this about a year and a half. All of the services exist to help transition those individuals we serve out of shelters in a reasonable length of time into the community. They all exist and they all operate in silos. Within the Department of Social Development there are silos with housing, adult protection, child protection, and other services. They don't coordinate well among themselves. They don't coordinate well with mental health and addiction services. Sixty per cent of those we serve have mental illnesses. I think it's a low number, but we estimate it at about 60%, diagnosed or undiagnosed.

About 80% have addictions, either gambling, drugs, alcohol, or a combination of. Many with the mental illnesses have the addictions because they are self-medicating through the addiction. Nobody works together. I'm going to take that up another notch and say that a huge part of the challenge in this country is that you, as representatives of the federal government, those who are at the provincial level, and those who are at the municipal level, are all in your silos. To put it bluntly, you all have your heads stuck in the sand when it comes to dealing with poverty. I'm going to be very blunt about it.

You all have funding mechanisms for different things. Through the federal government and under the homelessness partnering strategy, it's not a problem to get money to build a new shelter. Grace House, our women's shelter, was opened in 2001. There was some money through the old SCIPPI program. You can get projects and extra funding in projects to go on, but we can't get operational funding, which would allow us to be able to help coordinate those activities for individuals.

I'm sure I'm coming up close on my five minutes, but I'm going to try to tell you one story.

Are there media here, by the way?

● (1055)

In Fredericton, New Brunswick, there is a man. I'll use the guy's real name. Danny is a 53-year-old man with multiple mental illnesses who has resided in our dormitory-style men's shelter for 14 years. He's had no medical treatment in years. He's had no psychiatric treatment. He's had nothing. He's fallen through every crack. Within the next two months he's going to move out, because we, our organization, has taken all of the people in social development and mental health and we've essentially banged their heads together and said we're drawing a line in the sand on Danny. Danny is going to move. He's going to get the treatment, he's going to get the care, and his life is going to change.

He was married. He had children. The file in social development goes back this far, when you finally get everyone to dig it out, but nobody's working together. We discovered months ago that there are no case managers for people on basic assistance in New Brunswick. You get $537 a month and you get a cheque writer. You do not have a case manager. So Danny is left to be there. We have others with fewer years. Danny's going first, and then we're going to tackle the others.

We need to work together at all levels of government and with the non-profit sector in a meaningful way if we're going to really change the lives of those who are living in this abject poverty.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks, Brian.

We're now going to move to Dan Weston from the Fredericton Anti-Poverty Organization.

Welcome, Dan. The floor is yours, sir, for five minutes.

● (1100)

Mr. Dan Weston (Coordinator, Fredericton Anti-Poverty Organization): Thank you. Welcome to the sticks.

We have been at this for quite a while and have spoken to many committees over the years. Usually it happens at the end of a mandate.

I am one who is known a little bit for being audacious, so I'm going to look at things not from a micro-economic point of view, which is what you'll get at most of these travelling committees, but from a macro-economic view, if I may.

What I have done, remarkably, is reduce 35 years of economic history into a page and a half, so it shouldn't take too long.

In the early 1970s, capitalism was restructured. After Henry Kissinger met Zhou Enlai, vice-premier of China in 1971, and Richard Nixon shook hands with Mao Tse-Tung in 1972, Nixon then moved the U.S. off the gold standard in 1973. The American dollar became the base currency of world trade and business competition. These events placed the American and Canadian workers in wage competition with the same jobs developing on a much larger and cheaper scale in the third world.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the structural adjustment of capitalism became global, and this saw American and Canadian secondary industries, the job creators and the product makers, seek cheap labour off shore, aided and abetted by government. Consequently, America and Canada, with Canada in tow, exported their secondary industry to low-wage countries and thereby exported their ability to create production jobs at home, the backbone of job creation and nation building.

In order for consumers in North America to have the purchasing power to buy all of these cheap labour products made by the third world, and especially the developing Chinese joint ventures, North American workers had to have access to more money than their stagnant pay cheques provided. So credit cards and, a little later, debit cards were introduced. Presently, everyday things like gas and food, for example, are being credited and debited by the consumer. The future is financing the present.

This financial process channels all the workers' money through the banks, instead of only the money that workers had previously chosen to deposit. Finance markets boomed, financing both the new factories abroad and the developing service-based debt-dependent economy at home. Business expansion and job creation are now dependent on financed capital and/or taxpayers' money through government assistance. Structural adjustment, viewed on a global scale, has all countries dependent on a global supply chain for everyday things.

In the face of a sustained crisis in finance capital, such as the present one, the sustainability of the global supply chain is dependent on the success or failure of the third world worker, who is working in or unemployed from what was once our secondary industry.

It is the view of FAPO that unemployment and impoverishment will affect more income groups in the near term in New Brunswick and in Canada. Once the morphine of government financial injections has worn off, inflation will combine with unemployment, creating the first major crisis of unemployment in this new debt-dependent financial market system in North America.

The ability of government to create jobs by bailing out the financial sector with borrowed money secured by the debt-ridden taxpayer, as opposed to assisting the long lost productive sector, is throwing good money after bad. It is a recipe for disaster that sees a future financing the present, instead of the present financed by the past.

A little bit about FAPO, the Fredericton Anti-Poverty Organization. Established in 1983, FAPO is New Brunswick's largest poor people's organization, helping many thousands of people each year throughout central New Brunswick maintain their standard of living through our recycling and distribution programs.

FAPO does not receive funding assistance of any kind from government, organizations, associations or individuals. Our three facilities are open seven days a week.

Thank you.

● (1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weston.

We'll now start our first round of questions, which will be seven minutes for questions and answers. My colleague, Mr. Savage from the Liberal Party, will start.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank you very much for coming today. Those were very compelling and thought-provoking presentations.

I come from neighbouring Nova Scotia, and I know a couple of you mentioned that you have had experience in Nova Scotia.

Monsieur Richard, you have a unique perspective to offer, it seems to me. We're active politicians, or reasonably active politicians. You've been a politician; I think you've been a municipal councillor, a provincial MLA, a cabinet minister, and a leader of a provincial party. Now you're advocating for some of these issues that we're trying to get to the bottom of.

Can you give us any advice on how to deal with our colleagues in the House of Commons in being serious about tackling poverty? It's not that most of them, I don't think, don't really want to get at it, but I don't know if some of them would prioritize it the way that you're talking about.

Do you have any advice for us in that regard?

Mr. Bernard Richard: I'll do the best I can. I don't want to be presumptuous in any way.

My experience is that all elected members I have met with, from all parties, want to see things improve. I've worked with people from all parties for many years, and I've always been convinced of that.

I think that as politicians we often tend to say, “Well, we've done this or we've invested $500 million or we've created this new program, so what do you mean, we're not doing anything?”

In my view, the one thing that I would like to see of Parliament, irrespective of the governing party—which has changed quite often in the last few years—is to talk not about initiatives, but about outcomes, measurable outcomes.

If Parliament tasks this mighty and very resourceful civil service that we have in Canada to produce results that are measurable, then regardless of which party you're in, you will have something you can look at every year or every two years. Outcomes means looking at whether we are actually lowering the rate of poverty in Canada or whether children are going to school. There are ways to measure that.

Last year our office initiated a report on the state of children and youth. We found out that New Brunswick is—like Canada, I'm sure—data rich but information poor. There are a lot of statistics out there, but not many people take the time to analyze them to try to find out what they're really saying, so we've taken it upon ourselves every year to measure child obesity rates, child poverty rates, and teen pregnancy. No matter what government is in power, if a minister tells me they've created this new program or they're investing more money in schools or in health and it is not measurable, in my view it doesn't exist. I think that's true in the business world as well as in the political world. If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist; if you can't measure it, you don't know if it's being done.

Officials at the federal level can establish benchmarks that you can look at, regardless of the party you're in, in one or two or three years. They're very resourceful. There are thousands and thousands of civil servants who are very smart. They can establish the benchmarks. Whether you're in government or in opposition, in five years you can know if we made real progress in attacking these issues.

What's embarrassing to me is to see native indigenous Canadians. This is the richest country in the world, and at times the best country in the world in terms of social indices, yet we still support having some of our citizens living in these kinds of conditions.

Today, as we speak, the minister in Fredericton is announcing in the legislature that she is asking my office to review child welfare services on the 15 first nations in New Brunswick. One thing that I'll want to do is establish benchmarks so that we know that we're actually making progress, not that we're spending billions of dollars. That's easy to do, particularly at the federal level, but in my view, measuring where we're going and if we're meeting our goals is the key.

● (1110)

Mr. Michael Savage: I think we've moved from looking at government support for social infrastructure as charity to seeing it as justice, and maybe now we're at the point of seeing it as an investment as well. If we look at the countries that do invest in what I call the social infrastructure, they also do well economically. They have lower rates of illiteracy, etc.

I would like to talk about mental health for young people.

Brian, we mentioned to you very briefly before that we were at Metro Turning Point shelter yesterday with Michael Poworoznyk. He appeared at our committee, and then we went to have a look. They have a capacity of 75 beds, dormitory-style. There are men sleeping there. Somebody from the committee asked what percentage of his clients would have mental health issues or addictions, and there was a chart that showed 50% for mental health.

He said if you look at it, how do you diagnose these, necessarily? It's difficult to really know, but I think he said yesterday that he guessed it would be 90% to 95%, because if you didn't have those issues when you got there, after spending night after night in the same room with 60 or 70 other men, and listening to people with hallucinations and waking up in the middle of the night, you would end up with them.

On youth—and John, you mentioned this too—how do we do mental health better for young people? How do we get to the point of diagnosing it and treating it so that we don't criminalize them further down the road and have them end up dealing with Kelly and her organization or the Elizabeth Fry Society or something?

Are there any specific ideas and investments in mental health for young people so that we can make a difference?

Mr. Brian Duplessis: I would throw the number 60% out, and much like the chap you're talking about in Halifax, I would say it's much higher.

We see the results of the children who didn't get the mental health help, and who perhaps have never been diagnosed or who have multiple mental illnesses at the same time and then addictions on top. We see the mixture of all that, but we have also seen directly some of the younger people. When I say younger, I mean as young as 16. We'll take 16-year-olds into our shelters. I'm very unhappy when someone who's 16 shows up at either of our shelters, and I get directly involved before they can come in. We do everything to keep them out, but we have them at 16 to 18 years old. Everybody's given up on them.

Some of it starts in the school system. There are opportunities, I believe, to identify and provide those services through the school system, through the medical system, to start to diagnose and work with the children at that young age. I'll give you one example.

We had a young man who was 20 years old. He was with us a few months last year. His mother had taken him out of the school in the Fredericton area when he was eight years old. He was in grade three. The school found him unmanageable, so she took him home to home-school him, and she home-schooled him up to 16.

There were no medical interventions. Her husband refused to admit that there was any real problem and had challenges there. Nobody followed up. I had many conversations with the mother and father in this case. He's back home at the moment, getting some help, but once she took him out of the school, I was told, there were no other approaches. She said, “I'm going to home-school him because that makes it easier for everyone.” They weren't getting the calls from the school to have to try to deal with the problems, all the difficulties he was in, and he was just abandoned.

I think an awful lot of children, one way or another, who aren't receiving the treatment, are effectively abandoned, either to go home like that, or, if they stay within the system, they're just manoeuvred and shoved through, and given a little assistance here and there, as teachers say “let's move them and get them out of my classroom” to the next one to the next one.

It's a sad commentary, but it's an observation based on the experience that we've seen.

The Chair: Because this is an important part of the topic, why don't we go to Dan and then Bernard, just for a couple of comments, and then we'll move on to the next questioner?

Go ahead, Dan.

Mr. Dan Weston: There is one measurement of poverty that sticks out in my mind. In 1974, what a single welfare recipient received to live on was reduced from $254 to $100 a month, and it stayed that way for years. Today it has just recently gone up to about $290. If you measure that in constant dollar value, a single person on welfare was much better off in New Brunswick in 1974 than he or she is today.

Second, in terms of what to do about the situation involving people who suffer from not being able to mentally adjust to poverty, the state seems to be willing to spend a lot of money on what I call the psychosocial industry, and it deals with that situation rather than giving any money to the people. Really, anybody would go half nuts if they had to live on a welfare cheque for the rest of their lives, which is the way it seems. In New Brunswick, we say that when you're on welfare, well then, it's just farewell to you, because you're never going to get off it.

So really, the situation is whether the government is willing to commit to finance and money to help this situation. They've taken a lot out of employment insurance. You would think it's time to give some of that back. I think if a lot of money were spent and a lot of other programs were introduced, that would help to ensure people's ability to work. In New Brunswick, for example, we have a large construction industry, in proportion to other industries in New Brunswick. Decimating employment insurance here in New Brunswick was extremely difficult on people who owned businesses who were trying to keep things going, because they weren't able to keep their crews. If the crew was laid off for a while because there was a shortage of work because the person didn't have a whole lot of contracts, they knew that employment insurance would keep their crew around in the local area and they could get them back and make some money. One of the hardest things to do is to find a crew you can train and then keep.

In a lot of ways, governments, federal and provincial both, have failed to really have a kind of macro outlook as to what they are doing. They keep thinking it's just a little band-aid type of problem. As this gentleman just said here, now we've gotten to the point where we think if we put in some money to help people out, it would be an investment in terms of working more dollar value for the state. Indeed, it would be. It really would be the opportunity to do this on a large scale. You know, we're one of the richest countries in the world, and we happen to have a large problem with poverty. There are only three people per square mile. Do you mean to tell me that we can't keep these people productive and involved in society and fit and mentally healthy and eating proper food? What's happening? Are we allowing the whole infrastructure of this country to just disappear? That's the way it seems to be going.

● (1115)

The Chair: Bernard, you can have just a quick response.

Mr. Bernard Richard: On the mental health issue, what kind of brought it home to me last year was a mom who's the mother of one of the girls and youth we followed for a couple of years in preparing our report, *Connecting the Dots*. She looked at me and said that she wished her daughter had had cancer instead of schizophrenia, because then she would know that she would have gotten treatment and help.

To me, that kind of says it all. We look at mental illness in a different way than we do physical illness. We spend a lot of money on physical illness. Your dad was a doctor, I think. We spend a ton of money. I think we compare well—there's a big debate on that—to the rest of the world. Yet, when it comes to mental illness, we don't like to talk about it. Even in families we don't like to talk about it. If someone in our family has cancer, we rally around. We say that by God, we're going to beat this. But if someone has schizophrenia or autism, it's like we're on our own. The same kind of support is not there.

So I think we have to look at mental illness more as we do other kinds of illnesses. I'm sure Michael Kirby will give you a lot to think about in the next few years. He's been given support now much more, and I think that will be helpful. But on the issue of the stigma attached to mental illness and all of that, she said it all in just a few seconds last year at about this time.

I think that's a big challenge. We should be addressing these issues, not ignoring them. We pay the price. We pay the price as taxpayers, family members, and society. Where do they end up? They end up in Brian's place, or they end up in prison, where it costs $100,000 a year for not treating them, and they'll come back over and over again. We see that in our office every day.

The Chair: Thanks, Bernard.

I know we had Mr. Kirby out to our committee over the last couple of weeks. That was exactly his point: awareness. Even the fact that we're talking about it more is a good first step, but there's more that needs to happen. And being able to talk about it is one of those first steps, as opposed to hiding it or keeping it in the background. We really appreciated having this testimony.

I'm going to move over to Madame Beaudin for seven minutes, please.

● (1120)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. chair. Do I have an hour? There are so many things that I want to talk about.

I would like to continue on the same topic since it is very relevant. I have a question for each one of you but the first one is for Mr. Duplessis and is on the issue of shelters.

Yesterday, we met with the director of a shelter in Nova Scotia and I was telling him that we have similar shelters in Quebec. I am a Quebec MP. One of the major problems we have with those shelters is that it is very hard to ensure some follow-up when people leave a shelter.

I have two questions for you. You seemed to say that existing programs relating to homelessness as well as grants for partnership initiatives were only aimed at the physical infrastructure, at housing.

Can you give us more information about this? Did you mean that this does not really meet all your needs?

You would also need funding for human resources and for providing some professional follow-up to the people you deal with, I suppose?

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Duplessis: If I understand the question correctly, there is no coordination to follow the individuals, to provide supervisory support, until a real crisis occurs, and even then usually it's a band-aid that's used. I know a lot of work has been done in Montreal, for example, with the Old Brewery Mission. Jim Hughes, who's now our Deputy Minister of Social Development, was running the Old Brewery Mission. He developed programs to help transition people from the shelter into the community, and then to follow them as well, and I think that's what you're asking.

There is also an interesting model in New Brunswick, in Saint John, from the Salvation Army Booth Centre. They have the shelters, but they also have a nurse practitioner who comes into the shelter to provide support. They also obtain apartments and rooming houses in the community, so if someone comes into their facility, they work with them, develop them. They take conservancy, they take responsibility for the person, so a person signs over, to be their trustee. Then they help them live in the community, and they follow them. If they're in a rooming house or a bachelor apartment, they make sure they continue to get the support and services they need. It's an interesting model, but I know they struggle all the time as to how to fund it, how to support it.

The Salvation Army has a rich 100-year history of helping people with their most basic needs, and we're trying to work with them, to learn from them, to see what we can do as well. But it's within the government sphere and all of the services that exist that we're missing that coordination.

To really help those who are at the bottom of the bottom, we have to be thinking of housing first, and maybe you've heard this expression before. If somebody doesn't have housing, doesn't have a place to live—and I'm not talking about a shelter—nothing else matters. They're trying to get by each day, to survive in the environment of a shelter, to survive to get something to eat. If they have some housing, that basic little room, that apartment, then that starts to become the transition that takes place. But if the basic welfare rates are so low that you can't even afford a room in the community, that doesn't even start to take place.

I would like to say, as a bit of a follow-on to what Dan said about money and solving poverty, that we can talk about programs, we can talk about structure, but money comes to the root of it. At $294 a month, you're going to supply all these other programs, but the person can't live in a room, even, by themselves. In New Brunswick they've just frozen those rates again this year because of the economic situation.

I would challenge you and I would challenge the provincial government to try to think of economics a little differently. I think this makes sense. Whenever I talk about it, people seem to think it does.

We want economic stimulus in the country and we want it fast. There's lots in the news about the big economic stimulus package that isn't getting moving, all the infrastructure. If you want economic stimulus to happen, and you want money in the system, give it to the poor people. For the person making $294 a month, make it $400 or $500. Every penny of that will go into the system again, will get circulated quickly. Give it to organizations that are trying to provide the support. We will spend every penny of it. We won't hold it. We'll spend it immediately. You'll see your two-month, three-month, four-month economic stimulus come from that money much faster than from trying to get the agreements from the levels of government to build a new bridge, to refurbish this, to do that—which is all great, but we're saying we're in a crisis situation. Put the money in the hands of those who are going to spend it on the basic needs and services of surviving.

You'll have the economic side of it. And you know what? We'll all feel good about the fact that we're doing the right thing. When we're talking about doing these things, we still have to come back to that base. We need to do the right thing for those who are really suffering in our communities. We are not doing the right thing. We are not supporting them. We're paying it lip service over and over again.

Did that answer any of your questions, or did I just get on my soapbox again?

● (1125)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Yes, thank you very much, you have fully answered my questions.

Mr. Richard, you were referring to early childhood, which is an issue that is very dear to me because I have worked for many years with very young children, up to five years of age. I believe that we might be able to break the poverty cycle if we could provide some tools to those very young children.

You were talking about the steps taken by the government over the past few years to try and eradicate child poverty. Do you have any explanation for the failure of those initiatives?

Mr. Bernard Richard: That is a good question. I cannot claim to have the answer but it is quite clear that they have failed. We have not made very much progress. We hear that the rate of poverty today is roughly the same as in 1989, twenty years ago. However, our country has become much more wealthy in that time.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: So, why have we failed? I would really like to know.

Mr. Bernard Richard: My thinking is the same as Fraser Mustard's. I don't know if you know him. He is a great Canadian and a great Canadian expert also. His position is that the sooner we invest, the better it is. In other words, it is a matter of prevention, of helping people...

We do not choose where we are born and in what circumstances. With a little bit of help, we can achieve whatever we want, without consideration of where we were born. What counts is to be involved as early as possible, otherwise the cycle cannot be broken. That is the lesson of the past twenty years and that is what will happen again during the next twenty years if we cannot find a way to invest as early as possible, to be involved as early as possible, to provide adequate support where support is not available, for all kinds of reasons, good or bad.

I believe that Canada is wealthy enough to be able to intervene and to provide enough balance and opportunities so that each individual can reach his or her full potential. There are no real limits in a country like Canada if we are really committed to find real solutions.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: So that each child gets the best possible start in life.

Mr. Bernard Richard: Absolutely.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bernard Richard: You are welcome.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to move over to Mr. Martin. Sir, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you very much. I have to say right at the start that I think Dan is absolutely right, that it is a macro problem that we have failed to address over a number of years now. The signs were all around us. We should have known and seen it coming. Some economists warned us, but we didn't listen. The different expressions of poverty are like the canary in the coal mine. They should have told us that there was a problem and that eventually it was going to catch us all.

Now we're at that place where we have the kind of poverty that you're seeing every day. We have seen over the last few years a growing number of working poor, people who are getting up in the morning, getting out, doing the job, working full-time year-round at minimum wage, and are just not able to make ends meet as inflation continues to grow. Now we have groups of people who, because of the way the system has been set up, are deep in debt and have no savings left. The safety net has been shredded. They're going to be at your door pretty soon, too.

We have a disaster in the making here that the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives says is eminently preventable. To be frank with you, I'm not quite sure how eminent it is, even with, as they suggest, a change in the EI system so that we catch more people. After 50 weeks, they run out. They've added five weeks, but they still run out. Then, when the people who run out look behind them to see what's there, there's really not much. Social welfare has been ratcheted down now so that it's just a last gasp of help for some folks.

The question is, what do we do? We're into stimulus in a big way, but stimulus to do what? Is it to recover what we had, which has just failed? Does that make much sense? I know we need to do what are often described as band-aid things. We have a charitable non-profit sector out there working full-time overtime and running out of money. We have a group out of Toronto called the Recession Relief Fund that is trying to send a message to the government to say that they're going to be broke within a matter of weeks. The sources of money of the charitable sector are drying up because the investments they made are no longer producing the income they used to produce.

Having said all that, I think we have an opportunity in front of us to change the system, if we want to, so that it works better for everybody. I'm out there trying to get some answers from people as to how we change the system so that it works better for everybody.

Dan, do you have thoughts about that? You've done an excellent analysis. Have you done any thinking about how we change it and what we can do to make it work better?

● (1130)

Mr. Dan Weston: If you look at the Obama administration in the United States, one of the avenues they're choosing, with this infrastructure money, is to start to develop a new, more environmentally friendly and more technologically modern infrastructure. Canada needs to do somewhat the same thing. It needs to be able to produce more of its own products out of its own resources. This line has been going on for fifty years, people saying this, and it's still true.

If we do that, we will develop an economy that deals with and produces our own resources for our own country first. We should then begin to trade what we have to spare. In that way we'll find we're employing more and more people. However, if we continue on the way we're going, there will only be work when somebody can finance something.

It was hard enough during the oil shock to try to have a contract with somebody that would cover your oil costs, or to try to do anything with a long-term projection, because everything was so up and down. There was no economic stability. The economy didn't make any sense. Even in terms of capitalism itself, it makes no sense when you cannot control energy prices because you can't have a contract and make a stable prediction of how much money you can make.

Because of so-called "globalization", we are at the whim of all sorts of forces that we can no longer control. We go along and say this is all right. It is not all right. We need to control this economy and we need to build this nation. That's the direction we have to take. That's the opportunity. The opportunity is to build a nation that produces products in an environmentally friendly and technologically advanced way.

There are other countries we can look at to help give us some ideas. We can look at Germany. They are quite far advanced in developing new technologies that are environmentally friendly. We can look at Denmark. Denmark is eliminating most of their hydro poles and overhead wires, because a lot of their institutions and apartment buildings have their power generated right inside the building through natural gas. Instead of wasting natural gas on the oil sands, we should be doing a lot more with it that would be more constructive.

There are many ways to do it. You only have to think about it, instead of going the same old way that the Conservatives, the Liberals, and the NDP have been providing for us all this time. You know, it's their economic policies that have put us in this situation.

Let's try to think outside the box, is all I can say.

Mr. Brian Duplessis: I have a question for you as well.

Although I know we like to think in terms of today's modern mediation, this is the crisis of all crises. It's been building for many years.

Many of the individuals we're dealing with have been living in poverty for many, many years. This is the current economic cycle; it's part of the cycle. It's going to be worse than it was, but it's still a cycle. Those who are at the lowest end of the scale have always been there. They don't see much change either way. What came to my mind, even as I was driving here, was that as you're touring the country, you're collecting all the reports that have been done in the 1970s and 1980s on the issue of poverty. Many have been done here in New Brunswick, right back to the Hatfield days: details, consultations in the community.

There's a whole round being done by the poverty reduction task force in New Brunswick right now, and I think we've all had an opportunity to participate. I posed that question to them a little while ago: had they read all the reports? Quite frankly, they hadn't at that point collected the report that had been made. There's a real focus in Saint John on a public housing area called Crescent Valley, where I happened to grow up. A tremendous report was done in the early 1970s, and they're now redoing new reports on Crescent Valley. But nobody has dug out the ones from the 1970s. I suspect you will find an awful lot of what you're hearing today is what we heard in the 1980s and the 1970s, when all those reports were done.

Please take the time to collect those reports across the country and start to recognize that this isn't only today's problem; it's systemic. It has been long-term systemic. You can learn from all of that. You don't have to talk to all of us. It is good to talk to us, but you don't have to talk to all of us to learn what many have known for many years and have been fighting for many years. Please, please collect those; please get them together and take that into consideration when you're putting your report together.

● (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Tony and Brian.

We'll move over to the last questioner of this round.

You have seven minutes, Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's a fair point. I think what I hear is that many are saying there's a lot that you know, but it's action you're looking for, and some positive steps.

On a less serious note, in the last round it was said that many politicians do a lot of blowing in the wind, so to speak, and you were saying it's with heads in the sand, and I suppose that's partly true. Some would displace more sand than others, but the fact of the matter is that it is a serious issue. I think my colleague said there's a bit of a transformation in thinking, in not looking at dealing with the roots of poverty as a matter of charity but as a matter of social justice, and really also as an investment in our social infrastructure.

I take note of your words, Kelly, when you say that when you look at the health costs we have, and the criminal justice system.... I was a lawyer in my former career and I know something about the costs associated with the justice system. When we put that together, we could, by trying to deal with the root causes much earlier, actually save some money if we were prepared to make that investment.

I do appreciate that treating the individual, the whole person, takes more effort. It will take more moneys to do that rather than to just look at it as a black and white issue, which maybe we have been doing from point to point.

My initial question is to Mr. Richard. Senator Kirby talked to us about mental health issues, about some of the stigma and misunderstanding there, and how we might deal with that. But could you describe what you see in terms of young people with issues falling through the cracks? Can you describe what you see as the inadequacies now? Also, maybe you can describe some of the practical things we might consider in fixing those gaps. Then I'll move on to some other areas.

Mr. Bernard Richard: Certainly, I would refer your clerk to our report that we published last year, *Connecting the Dots*, in which we addressed a lot of those issues. All of the recommendations were accepted by the provincial government. Some of them are being implemented now.

I think there's a lot more here than I can talk about in a few moments, but certainly identifying mental health issues early on and intervening in the right way—these are solutions. All too often, youth dealing with addiction or mental health issues act out, obviously, but the response to that is usually the criminal justice system, not treatment. They're not diverted away from the criminal justice system.

I think that takes the right training. I think it takes youth mental health courts. There's a pilot in Ottawa now, which I'll be visiting on Friday. I hope it really takes off, because I think it's a wonderful approach to diverting youth away from the criminal justice system into treatment. It's multi-disciplinary and multi-departmental so that people are not working in silos. They're actually working together. Once a youth is identified with a mental health issue, that youth is directed away from the criminal justice system into treatment.

If we can do that, if we can identify early enough and provide the right response, then they won't be coming back time and time and time again, so that people like you and me, as former lawyers, can make a living at representing these people. We'll be providing treatment. They won't be going to prison, where they become better criminals. In prison, they're dealing with mental health issues, so they'll be coming back out and we'll be facing property crimes, theft, and violent crimes. In prison, they're just going back into the system, where it costs $100,000 a year just to hold them in a cell while they're not improving.

Solutions include early detection, early intervention, the right kinds of intervention, the diverting of youth dealing with mental health issues away from the criminal justice system into treatment, better coordinated efforts, and better sharing of information. As parents have told me, “My child with autism changed schools and it's like starting all over again.” There's no reason for that in a province like New Brunswick. Moving to a different region should not be like starting all over again. Those parents didn't know anything. They couldn't get the files from the other region. Privacy has become almost an obsession with civil servants; they're very nervous about it, and even when it's in the best interests of a child or a family to share information, they're not doing it.

I think there are solutions out there. There are really good models and good practices being established in all parts of the country. We just need to make sure that we're able to learn from them and support those kinds of models.

● (1140)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: That's a fair comment. Dan mentioned that perhaps we should be thinking outside the box, and that's a fair point. Mr. Castell, in his opening remarks, talked about a bottom-up approach and having to hire professional fundraisers and people who can apply for grants, to be sure you get the money. Also, there's a certain element of competition amongst the various groups to try to target the money, as opposed to asking where the greatest need is and where the best spending is for those dollars.

It seems to me that we need to have some sort of systemic approach to deal with that. It's fine to say that we should put out a call for proposals for what we think should be out there and ensure that it's done properly and so on, but maybe we've gone a little too far in that direction. If we were going to have a systemic approach to getting to the ground and making sure the money gets up, with the dollars flowing back, how would you suggest that might be accomplished in a country as diverse as Canada? Knowing that we have regional differences, jurisdictional issues, and all kinds of things like that, how would you tackle it? What kind of system would you put in place to ensure we reverse that order?

Mr. John Castell: I'm not sure I'm so wise that I have the advice on how to solve these things. But I see in the Canadian community foundations, and in the example of the Fundy Community Foundation, which is in Charlotte County, New Brunswick, a model for something that works in supporting a large number of not-for-profits. The Fundy Community Foundation isn't there to do charitable work itself, but to support the other not-for-profits and charities in facilitating funding for them. They're set up so that people can donate and create foundations to assist themselves and others. They have general endowment funds, and the interest on money that's invested is there for them to put back into charities.

They also work as facilitators of communication. I think facilitating communications at the community level and upward is important. But rather than writing a report at the end, I think there should be an ongoing dialogue from the bottom up—through municipal, provincial, and federal governments. It's our community dialogues organized by the Fundy Community Foundation that end up solving a problem.

Transportation was identified as a problem. We ended up stealing an idea from Nova Scotia and setting up a Dial A Ride program, for alternative transportation. Tomorrow night I'll be speaking with all the mayors in Carleton County. They're looking at copying our model and setting up a Dial A Ride program there. I've spoken with the MLA from Sackville, and they're looking at setting up a Dial A Ride program in that county. I spoke with people from a town in Queens County, Chipman Parish, and they're looking at taking that model. So the Fundy Community Foundation had the dialogue, addressed a problem, and we came up with a community-based solution to it. We have volunteers who are participating.

Rural communities don't have bus service, and you have transportation problems. With the centralization of hospital services, there are many people in St. Stephen, in St. Andrews, and in the area of LSD, Rollingdam, and so on, who have cancer, who have kidney problems and have to go for dialysis, who have no money because they're living on welfare. How the heck can they afford a taxi or $100 each way to go from St. Stephen up to Saint John for the treatment they have to have? The Dial A Ride program has solved that. It's a model of the sort of thing that can work. The Fundy Community Foundation is community-based, but it has a national organization. It's a model; it's not the solution.

● (1145)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Interestingly enough, in Halifax, there was an information service called 211 dial-up, where you could dial up and they would refer you to the person you needed to see, as opposed to having to figure out for yourself where you needed to go. MOSH, a mobile medical unit, went out there. My thought was that this was something specific to the community, an example of community outreach doing some positive things that otherwise might not be done.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: You talked a bit about thinking outside the box. I think that's true, but I also think there are other matters to consider. We've heard from some strong social policy advocates that we now have some mechanisms that work in dealing with poverty. The child tax benefit is an example. It was introduced in 1996-97. That $1,500 is now somewhere around $3,500. They're suggesting that if it went to $5,200 we could further reduce poverty.

GIS for low-income seniors has helped a lot with seniors poverty. The working income tax benefit has great potential for the people Tony referred to, who are actually working very hard and still can't get out of the hole they're in with their families. The Caledon Institute has produced an idea for people with disabilities that would set up a basic income for persons with disabilities. It would equal the combined OAS and guaranteed income supplement, giving people a better chance. One of the sad things about poverty in Canada is the groups that are continually marginalized—aboriginal Canadians, people with mental health issues, people with addictions, and persons with disabilities. The challenges faced by people who have some kind of physical or intellectual disability are just amazing. It's really and truly almost impossible for them to have equal access to the wealth of the country.

I wonder if any of you have thoughts about producing a basic income for persons with disabilities.

Mrs. Kelly Wilson: I think it's more important than just throwing a dollar their way. You need to teach them skills with that dollar. So if you were going to look at finding a way to fund a certain portion of society or a marginalized group, you need to develop some benchmarks before you do that so you have something to measure, to see whether or not what you're putting out there is working. If you're just going to throw a dollar at a problem, it'll only work as long as the dollar is there. When the dollar is gone, it's going to be the same problem over again. And those same people are going to be back in the same group.

It's really important to develop some benchmarks, to figure out what you want to target with that dollar, and to figure out what kinds of measurable milestones you're looking to attain with that dollar to make sure that the people who access a service are coming through and maintaining those measurable outcomes at the end.

Mr. Michael Savage: I agree with that a hundred per cent. But it seems to me that in the meantime, people are starving to death. And they can't get around.

Mrs. Kelly Wilson: Right. So develop some priorities and then figure out what you're going to fund next.

Mr. Michael Savage: One of the things I see in my area—and I'm sure other MPs do too—is people coming into my office who have children now in their early twenties who have issues; maybe it is Down's syndrome, maybe it is CP or something else. They went to high school and were part of the team of kids who actually graduated. They were mainstreamed into high school. And they feel great. They go to the graduation. All the other kids love the fact that they've been able to help them graduate. It's good for them; it's good for the other kids. And then they fall off a cliff. The other kids go on to university, to community college, or to jobs. For these kids, there's nothing.

When you talk about spaces, in my own area of Halifax, you're talking about hundreds of kids for four, five, or six spaces. There's a program that has 20 spaces or so. So absolutely, we need to provide training for those people.

And their parents are going to bed every night wondering what happens when they leave this earth, with these kids. We don't seem to provide them with a living income.

So I certainly agree with you, Kelly. We have to provide more opportunities for kids like that, for adults like that to get training.

● (1150)

Mr. Bernard Richard: I'm a great supporter of the child tax benefit. I think it's great. But it underlines the importance of different levels of governments working together so that the benefits created at the federal level are not just a good opportunity for provincial governments to claw it back—because we've seen that as well, very often. At the end of the day, for the individual, there's not a huge benefit because some of it is being clawed back.

So having federal-provincial-territorial cooperation and an agreement on some of these programs is hugely important. In terms of extending it to people who live with handicaps, I think you're right, it's important. Unfortunately, I'm old enough to remember when kids with handicaps didn't even go to school. They were hidden in backrooms, in bedrooms of houses, because there certainly was no place for them. So I think we've made strides in that respect. They're now included, and it's become a fundamental principle of our society so that other kids know that they actually exist.

I think you're right. At some point they're well included, they're part of the gang, and then all of a sudden they fall off the cliff, as you say so well. There needs to be a transition into a different world, obviously, from school.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to go to Mr. Lobb. He'll be the last questioner of the morning session.

You have the floor.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, guests, for coming here today.

As you can well imagine, we've met with numerous people who are professionals and experts such as you, and you can well imagine we've heard a consistent theme. Our most vulnerable have housing issues. We've also heard of working together with our non-profit groups at all levels, NGOs on the ground, consistent operating funds, health, mental health, addiction and education, persons with disabilities, early childhood education. Those are the themes I hear. I'm sure my colleagues do as well. However those are our most vulnerable, and as we are well aware, there are different groups and categories under the poverty umbrella.

I want to look at the glass being half full, if I may, and I want to direct my questions to Mr. Richard because he served with Premier McKenna. I'm sure one of your colleagues was Georges Corriveau, whom I know from NRC. I've had some business dealings with him.

I want to focus on one quote Mr. McKenna made, and I believe to some degree it is very accurate, “the best social program is employment”. I want to focus on what's happened in New Brunswick, the good news story in Moncton. I think Mr. Corriveau is known for bringing the Internet to New Brunswick. Maybe that's not quite fair, but definitely Moncton has transitioned into a knowledge-based economy to some degree, and that has taken the underemployed to gainful employment, it's taken the unemployed to underemployment—the natural progression we would like to see in society. As a former education minister, you would see some of this as well.

I wonder if you could comment on what has taken place in Moncton in the last 10 years, and specifically your time when we've made this great transition in New Brunswick and where we need to go. I know ACOA has been a great regional tool to continue to spur growth and trade growth. The HST has been great. So have tax incentives.

Explain to us how we got to where we are today and where we can go to take it to the next level.

Mr. Bernard Richard: Obviously, Mr. McKenna was a firm believer in creating jobs; some would say he was obsessed by that. The prime focus of his 10 years as premier was to create jobs and to use new technologies to take us out of the traditional industries.

I live in a small community of lobster fishermen. These are not really good times there right now. When I wake up in the morning in my village of Cap-Pelé, I see Jamaicans walk by my house to go to the fish plants, because it's not possible to find people in this Acadian village of Cap-Pelé to work in the fish plants. Many of them are working in call centres in Moncton.

Moncton, because of its bilingual nature, its access to a bilingual workforce, and despite our issues with illiteracy and all of that, I think has been able to transform itself. It's not true for every community in New Brunswick. Our unemployment rate is still way too high, but obviously the message of hope, as we found out from our cousins to the south, carries very strongly; it's the little train that can. It compels people to do things, so the business community in Moncton, the municipal leadership, and the provincial leadership through Mr. McKenna that was carried on through Mr. Lord and now through Premier Graham, has decided we can accomplish things. Just because in the end shops can't continue to survive in Moncton that we.... Now here we are, we've come full circle. A local businessman just got a $100 million contract to refurbish VIA railcars here in Moncton. It was announced last week.

I think a positive attitude, knowing that we can do things if we're obsessed by it, if we're really determined, but that we need to carry people with us.... That's why he said “the best social program is employment”.

What concerns me is when I look at the government in this race to the bottom, because New Brunswick is absolutely determined to have the lowest tax rates in Canada, but I'm absolutely certain that another province will want the lowest tax rate in Canada. If we don't maintain the balance we need to have and enough flexibility and resources to make.... We'll always have sick people. We'll always have handicapped people. We'll never abolish car accidents and we'll have people in wheelchairs. If we don't find a way to get the balance so that every member of society can feel included, then we won't succeed as a society. I'm convinced of that.

I think it's possible, with the right attitude and the right efforts, but we can never lose sight that we need to bring everybody with us.

● (1155)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

To our witnesses today, thank you very much for the work you're doing on the front lines and for taking time out of your busy schedules to come here today to talk to us about this important issue.

The meeting is adjourned.

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