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and Social Development and the Status of  
Persons with Disabilities**

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**Thursday, December 3, 2009**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Dean Allison**



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

Thursday, December 3, 2009

• (1330)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)):** Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), our study on the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada will commence with our witnesses this afternoon.

On behalf of the human resources committee, I just want to say that we're very grateful that you've taken the time out of your schedules to be here today.

As some of you are aware, we have been going through the study for the last year or year and a half. Sometimes elections and other things get in the way, but we're committed to getting this thing finished off and making some recommendations to the government. That's where you guys come in. We appreciate your being here, not only to give us your perspectives of what's going on here in Edmonton, but maybe to suggest some of the things that work, or some of the things that you think would make sense for us as a government or as a committee to put in that.

We have been east, south, and north, and now we're here. We'll finish off tomorrow in Winnipeg. We started this week off with Monday in Vancouver and we were in Whitehorse and Yellowknife on Tuesday and Wednesday.

As I said, thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedules to be here.

I'm going to start with Julian. You're each going to have seven minutes. I'm not going to cut you off if you go over the seven, but if you can try to keep it to the seven, that will be great. If you finish sooner, that's fine too.

I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Daly, who is with Boyle Street Community Services. Welcome. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

**Mr. Julian Daly (Executive Director, Boyle Street Community Services):** Thank you very much, Chair, and thanks to all of you, members of the committee, for coming here this afternoon and for hearing us.

My name is Julian Daly. I'm the executive director of Boyle Street Community Services. We're an inner-city agency working in Edmonton. We see roughly 8,000 people a year, mostly homeless, all living in poverty, and mainly aboriginal.

Thank you for the opportunity to come here to speak about poverty in our city. I'm left wondering a little bit about how much I can say in seven minutes, but we'll try.

To support your work and to prepare for today, I talked to colleagues at Boyle Street and to our clients. What I'm going to share with you today is the result of those discussions.

A good deal of what I have to say concerns the aboriginal community we serve. About 70% of our clients are aboriginal and we have about 4,000 to 5,000 aboriginal clients every year. I have sought permission from our aboriginal elders, staff members, and clients to speak on their behalf. There is much that we could share, obviously, but in the time we have, we've chosen to share some of the key things that we believe are causing poverty and keeping people in poverty in our community.

The first one is racism. Racism is still very much alive in our culture, particularly towards aboriginal people. How do you become part of the economic mainstream when you're constantly and consistently turned down for employment and housing on the basis of your race?

Aboriginal people are still regularly refused entry to commercial spaces in the city, and when they are allowed in, they are regularly followed by security. I would suggest that we have de facto apartheid operating in our country, under which you are treated significantly differently depending whether you are white or are aboriginal. You would feel ashamed, as MPs of this great country—and it is a great country—if you heard as many stories as I do about the humiliations and exclusions our aboriginal clients face on an almost daily basis.

In our country, apartheid is invisible. Unlike some places such as South Africa, where it was legalized and therefore more easily challenged, it remains very invisible and is much more difficult to address. But address it we must, I believe.

The second area is the profound experience of social exclusion that so many people experience. In our province, there is a common perception that people who are homeless or living in poverty are the authors of their own situation and are simply lazy and feckless. They are constantly viewed with some degree of contempt. This prejudice and the failure to understand the complexity of homelessness and its causes pushes people into poverty, further to the margins, and makes the journey back to the mainstream all the harder.

We need greater public education, discussion, and advocacy concerning the causes of homelessness and of poverty. In this city, we have seen security guards and bylaws used to systematically keep the clients we serve out of many public spaces and most malls. Again, this has happened quietly and without the notice of most citizens.

How can anyone feel part of a society and become economically active in it when they are excluded and feel excluded from the very centres of economic activity because they aren't in the right race or economic bracket? Canada is our land, the land of all of us, and none of us should be excluded from any part of it on the basis of race or economic means.

There's also a major issue with identification. Many people we serve don't have and can't get any form of identification, which means that they are excluded from many services and also from employment. There is a real need for an ID bank, or a system whereby the homeless can obtain identification easily and without too much bureaucracy.

Failure to address the needs of the urban aboriginal population, we believe, is another cause of poverty and is keeping people in poverty. Aboriginal community members who have moved into the city from reserves in search of a better life are immediately marginalized. None of the money or resources available on-reserve is accessible to them.

The systems for their economic support disappear when they reach Edmonton. We now have one of the largest urban aboriginal populations in Canada. There is no initiative currently under way by the federal government to release any of that on-reserve funding to assist them. The money, in some parts at least, needs to flow and follow the individual so as to increase their chances of success in the city.

• (1335)

As well, the housing, education, and health and safety challenges that drive many of our aboriginal clients from reserves into the city need to be addressed, rather than simply displacing those challenges and that poverty.

Another challenge is inadequate mental health and addiction services. Mental health and addictions issues are widespread in poor and homeless communities. Indeed, they're often the cause of homelessness and poverty. There's a tremendous need to provide better services to reduce these challenges.

Addictions, especially, keep people in poverty. A war on drugs isn't the solution. That usually results in more people going to jail, but it doesn't do anything to address the root causes of addictions. Harm reduction works well in the community we serve, but we have seen, sadly, a move away politically from support for this approach.

Mental health challenges keep people in poverty. How do you exercise the skills and the mindset you need to move out of poverty when living with profound mental health problems? Tackling mental health is expensive and it is still culturally taboo, but until we do so, we won't be able to tackle poverty comprehensively.

Another cause of poverty for the people we serve is insufficient benefits. Welfare payments and other benefits are minimal and are

barely enough to do more than stop someone from freezing and starving to death. They are not at a level to help people make changes in their lives. They often don't even cover the cost of the most basic form of housing.

Finally, I would see a barrier in that we do not listen to people and understand what poverty means to them. Individually and collectively, we as human beings usually have a solution to our own problems. We need to go to those who are poor and homeless, listen to them, and relinquish our power and authority so that they are empowered and enabled to take control of their lives and tackle the poverty that crushes them.

We also need to have a more complex understanding of the meaning of poverty. It is not simply a material matter. Spiritual and emotional poverty can be just as terrible. Meeting only material and economic needs does not address the whole. Racism, social exclusion, and economic marginalization can often cause excruciating alienation, loneliness, and spiritual poverty, and this needs to be recognized and addressed.

I wish I were able to introduce you to some of the members of the communities we serve. Their stories would be far more eloquent than I am. On Tuesday I was talking to one of our community members, one of our clients. I explained to him—he was an aboriginal man—that I was coming here today. I asked him what poverty meant to him and what he would like to say to you, if he had been invited here today.

This is a little bit of what he said. He said a lot, but I chose some words that I felt were most pertinent to the hearing today.

He said that the high-ups don't care. He said that they say they do, but they don't. They give us a little food and a little benefits, but not enough, he said; they just want to appease us, just to make themselves say, "Yes, we are doing something". He said that the high-ups should come and talk with them, come and experience and see what poverty is, smell the place, and smell what poverty is like.

How can we understand what poverty means unless we talk to the poor, listen to their stories, and hear their solutions? How can we understand until we have smelt poverty? We cannot address what we do not understand.

The doors of our centre are always open to you. Any of you or all of you would be welcome to visit and have the privilege of meeting our clients and hearing their witness.

Thank you for your time.

• (1340)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Daly.

We're now going to move to Tanya Tellier from the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness.

Tanya, welcome. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

**Ms. Tanya Tellier (Member, Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness):** Thank you.

The first portion of my presentation is in French.

**The Chair:** That's great. That gives us a chance to get our headsets on.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Tanya Tellier:** ECOHH represents more than 30 community organizations who work with people who have security related issues where they live. The vision of ECOHH is for Edmonton to become a city where there is affordable and appropriate housing for everybody since this is a fundamental right that should be guaranteed in a democratic society.

In the context of the work done at this time by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, ECOHH considers that housing security must be part of any strategy to eliminate poverty. A good housing policy is also a good economic policy. This clearly implies that, if we eliminate the dangers caused by extreme poverty, it will reduce some of our major expenses, like increasing health services costs.

When people cannot find decent and safe accommodations, several other negative impacts come into play that may have costly repercussions for a long time. Our member organizations face this issue every day. Here is an example. A young mother must stay in a violent environment with her children because she cannot afford to have her own apartment. Her health suffers, her children are taken by the youth services, and they lose contact with their mother. To forget the situation she's in, she turns to drugs.

When people have their own housing, an affordable accommodation corresponding to their circumstances, they are able to make decisions to better their life and to help avoid the negative effects of poverty. A national policy on housing is an essential component of an integrated action on housing safety. To eliminate poverty, the federal government will have to act in close cooperation with provinces and territories.

Immediate and focussed attention is required to finance more efficiently solutions to the issue of housing security. ECOHH is concerned by the fact that millions of dollars are spent right now to supply housing, but this money is not used for the purpose of having a direct impact on the elimination of poverty. Elimination of poverty depends in a major way on having access to safe housing. We need a national strategy on safe housing. We need immediate action to facilitate access to affordable accommodations, if we don't want to strengthen the link between poverty and housing problems.

• (1345)

[*English*]

A national housing policy is needed as a foundation for integrated action on housing security. This would be an important element of a national poverty elimination strategy.

Bill C-304, which is currently before the House of Commons, would be a good step in this direction. Poverty elimination will require the close cooperation of the federal government, the provinces, and territories.

This needs to be true of the development of the housing strategy, too. Large amounts of money are being spent by the federal

government and provinces on various aspects of housing security, but in the absence of a comprehensive plan, it is difficult to measure the value of these investments or to ensure they are being targeted in the best ways and are not duplicating or leaving serious gaps.

When all that exists is a patchwork of short-term programs and funding there is an instability created that makes it difficult to build in a careful, steady way, using the results of one activity to move on to the next in efficient and effective ways. It is a ramshackle affair rather than a strong edifice. This instability is transferred to the lives of those needing assistance with housing matters in their lives.

It's vital to act on this now, because the recession is making things worse. Here in Alberta, we have seen a massive increase in welfare and employment insurance caseloads in a very short period of time. In the absence of a comprehensive strategy, it is even more likely that costly band-aids will be created to try to respond to crises, but without the benefit of the overall context.

More careful and immediate attention is needed in order to fund issues related to housing security more effectively. Two and a half billion dollars will be invested in the home renovation tax credit program, which will enable those who already own their homes to make them nicer. That will have absolutely no value to the half a million or more people who are currently homeless.

Half a million dollars is going to affordable housing, but only for three categories of people: low-income seniors, persons with disabilities, and first nation communities. This is not based on any clear and accountable plan.

Small investments in renovating rundown social housing are entirely inadequate, so the quality and quantity of such housing will continue to disappear. The pressure with urban core redevelopment is for these properties to be more lucrative for owners to convert to condos for those with money, rather than continue to provide low-income affordable housing. This drives poor people with little transportation capacity further and further away from both the informal community they depend on and the actual formal services they need.

Attention to the dangers of ever-rising rents in the for-profit market is weak, so more and more people are competing for fewer and fewer units. These units are declining in quality since they are the only affordable ones.

One effective way to fix this would be to have measures that would raise the amount of income people have so that they could rent other places. At any time in Edmonton, there are a lot of units available for those who can afford \$1,000 a month or more. It is those with no money who have to compete for the little bit of housing at the bottom. Improvements to employment insurance and child tax benefits are just two examples of ways that could put more dollars in the pockets of low-income people to use for better housing.

Once again, I would just like to emphasize three key points. Poverty elimination depends significantly on housing security. We need a national housing security strategy plan, and we need current action in relation to both supply and affordability in order to prevent the poverty/housing problems links from becoming even greater.

Thank you.

• (1350)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Tellier.

We're now going to move on to the Métis Nation of Alberta.

Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne, thank you for being here. The floor is yours for seven minutes.

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne (Vice-President, Métis Nation of Alberta):** Seven minutes? We are really struggling trying to get seven minutes and give you the answers to all the things you wanted to know.

**The Chair:** You should see how tough it is for the MPs to ask their questions in seven minutes.

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** I'm Muriel Stanley Venne, the vice-president of the Métis Nation of Alberta. I was elected last year.

Before I begin, I would like to ask if you are receiving other written submissions? I'm also the president and founder of the Institute For The Advancement Of Aboriginal Women and the chair of the Aboriginal Commission on Human Rights and Justice.

**The Chair:** Yes, by all means. You can send us the submission through the clerk.

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** I really listened to the racism as it was documented by the Boyle Street representative.

I would like to thank the committee chair and members for giving me this opportunity to make a presentation on behalf of Audrey Poitras, the president of the Métis Nation of Alberta.

I commend the committee for taking on this important challenge of studying the federal contribution to reducing poverty. As I have said many times in the past, if you have no money, you have no rights, and the level of poverty correlates to the amount of prejudice and discrimination. Therefore, our objectives are clear: that the attainment of skills and academic acumen is critically important to the Métis people in this province for their well-being, their prosperity, and their citizenship.

I do want to recommend to you at this time the book *The Frog Lake Reader*, which was just published. It talks about the mass hanging of eight Indian leaders a week after Louis Riel was hanged. It will give you an insight into the background.

We have another presentation that we are submitting because the seven minutes doesn't give us enough time to do that. It will just put it in the context of this country, Canada, where I was born, just 65 miles east of here. I've just read it and it was so stirring that I thought I would recommend it to you.

In my remarks, I would like to tell you about the Métis people in Alberta and the Métis Nation of Alberta and share with you some information about key federal contributions to address poverty in the Métis community—education, housing, and economic development, for example—and offer some suggestions as to how the federal contributions could be strengthened and the benefits that would result.

First of all, on the background of the Alberta Métis and the Métis Nation of Alberta, Alberta has the largest Métis population in Canada. The 2006 statistics from the Alberta census reported over 85,000 people who self-identified as Métis, which includes over 5,000 Métis who live on Métis settlements. The vast majority, however, live “off-settlement”, a minority in a province with three million residents. The Métis Nation of Alberta, established in 1928, is one of the oldest Métis representative organizations in Canada.

The briefing I handed in has more in-depth background, which I would encourage you to read as it will give you a better understanding of who we are as a people in this country.

I will share with the committee some factors that contribute to Métis poverty in Alberta. There are many interacting factors that contribute to poverty in the Métis community in Alberta. For example, while the large majority of Métis live in Edmonton and Calgary, many live in rural and remote areas, especially in northern Alberta where the settlements are located.

In rural and remote areas, there is limited access to quality education, job opportunities, and medical care. Poverty is a contributing factor in the apprehension of Métis children by children's services in this province and the Métis are not identified in the Alberta legislation. We have been trying to get the province to identify the Métis children because as a Métis mother you lose the culture and you lose track of them.

Lower school achievement levels and high-school completion rates are important factors that impact future success in life, including income levels and the ability to get a good job. Lack of affordable child care and attachment to the work force affect the ability to get a good job. Lack of social and affordable housing makes a big difference.

On federal contributions to addressing poverty in the Métis communities in Alberta, I would like to focus on three key contributions that the federal government makes to alleviating poverty for Métis people in Alberta.

•(1355)

One: investments in post-secondary education, housing and economic development. The Métis Nation of Alberta plays an important role in delivering programs in these areas to the Métis people: the federal aboriginal skills, employment and training strategy, the new one—it looks like ASETS—and the MNA labour market development programs.

There are two major issues that the committee must deal with in our view. The first is what to do to alleviate the plight of all people who are currently in poverty, however that may be measured. The second is a long-term strategy to reduce the incidence of poverty in the Canadian population generally and in key segments of the population such as aboriginal people.

On the first point, it is very important to appreciate the importance of social programs to alleviating poverty. The Canadian government, as we know, will soon have to start dealing with its deficits. The government has already said that it will not increase taxes or cut into provincial transfers to deal with the deficit. This means that the Government of Canada will be looking to cut its program budgets.

Since aboriginal programs are funded almost entirely by the federal government, they are very vulnerable to eventual cutbacks. We state very strongly that the federal deficit must not be paid for on the backs of aboriginal Canadians.

On the second point, the surest way out of poverty is a decent job. To get a decent job means to get an education. To paraphrase a former prime minister—I don't know which one it is—the best social program is a good job.

Now, the MNA is very appreciative that the federal government introduced the aboriginal human resources development strategy, which has enabled us since 1996 to fund training programs to assist our people in finding jobs. Since 1999, over 6,000 Métis in Alberta have found jobs through the MNA's labour market programs.

However, the committee must realize that MNA and other agreement-holders have been operating labour market programs at basically the same level of funding for over a decade. With a youthful population, the number of clients has increased, and the recession is only now compounding this problem, while tuition fees and costs associated with education have climbed since that time. Yet year after year, we operate with budgets that do not increase.

Once again, funding to agreement-holders under the new ASET strategy will remain static. Our budgets will remain the same for another five years. What funding increases there will be will be diverted to the federal bureaucracy, not to the organizations such as the MNA that provide service on the ground.

There are limits to what we can do under the federal program. We know that our high-school dropout rate is very high among our young people. It exceeds 40%. For aboriginal people, and Métis in particular, the most successful programs are run not by federal or provincial bureaucrats but by our own people and our own government and community organizations.

Yet there is a very strong inclination on the part of federal and provincial bureaucracies to want to control the show and manage and deliver aboriginal programs directly. You would think that with all

the talk of self-government and devolution, this would not be the case. However, there is a great disconnect between the rhetoric used by the government and actions on the ground by government officials.

As long as aboriginal people—and the poor generally, for that matter—have their lives controlled by officials and their program rules and regulations, we will never move beyond dependency.

•(1400)

On federal housing programs and the MNA housing initiatives, the Government of Canada homelessness partnering strategy provides housing dollars to assist the aboriginal off-reserve population. The percentage of homeless aboriginal people shockingly outweighs that of other Canadians; in Alberta, this funding helped to battle the affordable housing shortages for aboriginal people.

This year marks the final year of funding specifically addressed to aboriginal housing. We understand that Alberta municipalities continue to receive funding to address homelessness. Métis Capital Housing is working closely with the City of Edmonton on the Boyle Renaissance project, which will eventually provide housing for 900 homeless and at-risk people who frequent the inner city. We also hope to be able to manage 70 seniors' units and 30 handicapped units in this project.

Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel has also used federal funding to partner with Métis Capital Housing in the Cornerstone project. The City of Edmonton provided approximately \$2.5 million in assistance, with federal support, to purchase land to construct a fourplex providing 12 units under the emergency housing transition program.

The Métis Nation of Alberta would like to see the federal government restore housing dollars to assist aboriginal people in Alberta to retain, repair, and increase the number of affordable housing units for our people.

Just quickly, in closing, I'll turn to federal economic development and the MNA's industrial relations unit. Government and industry must support Métis economic development in every way possible to truly reduce poverty in this country. There must be support not only to address the challenges Métis individuals face in accessing affordable capital and business development, employment, and skills training, but also to address how Métis governments can participate in major projects and create our own-source revenues through for-profit ventures.

However positive this may look, it's only half of the equation. There needs to be support for these initiatives by the government and industry if they are to be successful.

The MNA is working to improve the social and economic position of its citizens and the time has come for government and industry to step up and do their part in making Métis people full and meaningful partners in the Canadian economy. As it stands right now, the economic potential of the Métis in the province is not being maximized. The MNA is looking to government and industry to partner with us to close this gap.

In closing, I again wish to thank the committee for listening to my words. I hope it will take them into account as it goes forward in making the important decisions that will have a meaningful impact on the lives of Métis people who are struggling to overcome poverty and build a better life for their children and their grandchildren.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Stanley Venne.

Now we're going to move to the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers and the former executive director, Jim Gurnett.

Jim, welcome. The floor is yours.

**Mr. Jim Gurnett (Former Executive Director, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers):** Thank you very much.

As we talk about immigrants and poverty, I would like to start by acknowledging, as I think we always need to, that we're doing this work on land that is the traditional home of first peoples. The rest of us are here, continuing to live together and enjoy that land.

As you hear over and over, poverty doesn't affect everybody equally. I want to focus my comments on the fact that immigrants are in one of the demographics that most experiences poverty, particularly more newly arrived immigrants and immigrants with refugee or refugee-like backgrounds.

I'm going to try to make a couple of comments about two groups of immigrants: first, those who are highly skilled and educated; and secondly, those who, like refugees, often come with a background that does not prepared them very well for life in Canada.

Overall, immigrants are brave, talented people. They bring tremendous social and financial assets with them when they come to Canada. For their story in Canada to be one of poverty is both immoral and foolish on the part of Canada.

They want a chance to use their assets and achieve for themselves. They don't want to spend their lives in extended dependence on public services and finances. But if that's going to happen, Canada needs to understand the importance of investing at the upstream end of their lives so they can avoid poverty and, more than that, can start making significant contributions to the overall economic strength of the nation that will really benefit all of us, not just themselves.

For a number of years, research has consistently shown that immigrants are taking a longer time to achieve economic equivalence to Canadians compared to what was happening one, two, or three decades ago. A couple of very sensible, basic things would make a huge difference to all immigrants.

Immigrants often have families and there are a lot of children in those families. Today, you've already heard about the idea of an

expanded or a richer child tax benefit. This is a very effective way to get more income into people's hands.

The other point is that the lack of a national housing strategy to ensure adequate, affordable, and appropriate housing for people with low incomes is especially serious for immigrants. Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers did some research on this three years ago. We found that over 70% of the sample of 200 families we looked at were paying more than 30% of their monthly income for rent, and 30% is considered to be the maximum that should be spent. Over 30% of the families were spending more than 50% of their monthly income on rent, and in that sample of 200 families here in Edmonton, the monthly incomes involved were about \$1,500.

When you're spending more than 50% of \$1,500 you don't have much left for the rest of your life. This whole issue of housing is one that's particularly serious for immigrants.

Brand new Statistics Canada information that's a few weeks old shows that there have been dramatic job losses for recent immigrants, and not having employment is a sure path to poverty. In Alberta, there was a 2.4% reduction in employment in the year from October 2008 to October 2009 for the population overall. For immigrants, it was 21.2%.

One out of five immigrants lost a job in the last year in Alberta. If that doesn't increase the probability of poverty being part of what characterizes their lives, I don't know what does. Poverty nurtures poverty. You know about so many of these domino stories where the beginning of a life in poverty leads on and on. We see so many immigrant families living in overcrowded conditions in basement suites. The children aren't eating well because there's no place to prepare and store food, so they're unhealthy and they're missing school. As they miss school, they fall behind academically. They get discouraged. They drop out of school. They end up on the street. You can take that story on and on.

• (1405)

I've always been chilled by a story one of the staff shared with me while I was working at the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. It was about a mother from Africa who came here with two children. They were escaping a war. The children were excited to be in Canada and looking forward to futures as doctors and engineers. After a couple of years of living in poverty, this mother said to the staff person that it would have been better if they had stayed home. At least there, she said, she could see the war that they were caught up in. She said Canada was in an invisible war, but it was just as dangerous for her and her children. That's what we're facing.

The first point I want to make is that poverty results from wasting the talents and energy of highly skilled immigrants, from undervaluing the education and experience they have from outside Canada. There have been some recent announcements in the last few days about measures that might make a small impact, but these measures relate to a few licensed professions. This is a large, complex issue that involves a significant number of immigrants. The great majority are from the skilled class, so it's not just a few licensed professions where this undervaluing happens.



We know from research that employers place just about zero value on work experience outside Canada, so people are discounted without even having their credentials properly looked at. We have to pay attention to these things. If you get trapped in a low-paying job for a few years, the chances of ever getting back into the fields that you're truly qualified for become very small.

We have to focus our strategies on employers. It's not a matter of technical recognition. It's a matter of people being able to get the jobs that they're truly qualified for, that they've invested in, and that they want to do. That's what we need to be doing for people so that they can contribute.

These strategies need to provide post-secondary institutions and NGOs with the flexibility to develop innovative programs that prepare immigrants for the labour market. Too often, publicly funded programs have mere employment as the expected outcome. That's not the point. It's the good and proper jobs that have a long-term positive impact. The temporary foreign worker program and its relation to unskilled jobs is another issue that has created poverty problems.

The second item I wanted to address is refugees. More and more, the refugees who come to Canada are coming with virtually no education and no job skills that are relevant to the Canadian labour market. It's tough for them to get out of poverty. They also have higher levels of mental illness because of long periods of time in dangerous war situations. When you're struggling with mental illness, you can't concentrate on education or holding a job.

So we need to fund a spectrum of specialized mental health services for refugees. This will require training specialists for therapy and will support community-based activity so that we can address these issues early on.

In addition, the living allowance provided for government-assisted refugees for their first year in Canada is based on welfare rates in provinces, which are far below what people need to live with dignity. This allowance needs to be based on the market basket measure of poverty, so that it pays attention to actual costs of living. Even little issues like immigration fees or the required repayment of transportation loans as a debt burden upon arrival in Canada should be addressed so that people have a chance to move out of poverty.

None of these are very expensive suggestions, but I guarantee you that they are smart investments that let immigrants, as they come to this country, move quickly to contribute to Canada in positive ways. We'll all benefit from that in the years to come.

Thanks for your interest and your work on this challenging and important issue.

● (1410)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Gurnett.

We're going to start with Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank you for being here to give your testimonies. They will certainly feed our thinking about what we have to do about poverty and especially, they will guide us in preparing our recommendations.

I also want to thank Mrs. Tellier for her sensitiveness toward the 10 per cent Francophones who live in Alberta and who have heard her today and who will see that they are not alone here. This is good.

I said about the people that we have met up to now, that even if we have done an analysis that leads us to the same conclusion, they bring us a point of view that will enrich our thinking on all these issues.

I will first address more generally my question to Mr. Daly. We all know that the situation of Aboriginal people is more serious than that of all the other homeless people. If someone has a particular profile, let us say an Aboriginal woman with an invalidity, this situation is much worse. We just come back from the North, we were yesterday in Yellowknife. We have heard things that shocked us. We are trying to see how to deal with those situations. I will first talk about the situation of the Aboriginal people.

Mr. Daly, you say we should give them more autonomy. If I understand correctly, it is the autonomy to be able to exercise a power, with tools which will be transferred to Aboriginal people.

How do you see the autonomy you mentioned and which are the tools, the powers that could be transferred while keeping a guiding role?

● (1415)

[*English*]

**Mr. Julian Daly:** Thank you.

When I said autonomy, I meant that I believe that all of us have the solutions within ourselves to many of the problems we face. I believe that far too rarely have we actually gone to aboriginal communities and asked aboriginal communities to come forward and be part of the solution. I think that is important. To properly resource that is also a significant contribution that needs to be made.

I find, in our city, that many aboriginal people remain voiceless still. It's quite possible to go to meetings all week in the city and not encounter an aboriginal person, unless it's on a particularly aboriginal issue. This is in a city that has the largest aboriginal population of a city of our size.

It's about bringing all people into the political process and into the civic process. It's about seeking views and opinions and listening to them and acting on them and moving away from that invisibility that is so prevalent, I think, in our cities. There's no voice, even. It starts with dialogue and visibility, and I think we move from there. I believe, largely, that we're not even there yet.

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** I'd like to address that. I'm speaking now for the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women.

We have done everything in our power. We have begged. We have sent request after request for funding for the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women for administration so we're not constantly writing proposals and waiting for the government to send us money.

We had a comment from a federal bureaucrat who said “We like to keep you hungry”. I was so shocked. I mentioned this to another bureaucrat, and he said “That’s fascist”. That’s what they are doing. They’re keeping us hungry so we cannot participate as full citizens in this country.

I heard a brilliant man say that poverty is when you don’t have any money. I also heard something that startled me. Senator Hugh Segal talked about having guaranteed income that would assure each citizen in this country enough money to live. Is that so radical an idea? Coming from Hugh Segal, I just about fell off my chair. We really have to open our minds to doing very creative and meaningful things for our people—all of our people.

Obviously the system is not working. For two decades there have been attempts to address poverty. I guarantee you that we have more poverty now than before. Our children are the ones who suffer. Yet it’s all there before us. The question is, why aren’t measures being taken to address that? When I was given the comment, “We like to keep you hungry”, that was so appalling.

In my presentation when I talked about self-government, self-determination, and all the things we talk about as a people, they really don’t exist. I challenge every one of you to open your hearts and eyes to the pain that exists in this country, which shouldn’t be there. There’s no reason why it should be there. There are enough resources and untapped potential in first nations, Métis, and Inuit people, as well as the new immigrants who are coming in and Canadians who have been here. We have it all, but we haven’t been making good use of our resources and our attention.

Thank you.

• (1420)

**The Chair:** Mr. Lessard, we’ll come back. We’ll try to get in another round.

I’m going to turn it over to Mr. Martin now for seven minutes.

**Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP):** This has been very enlightening and certainly compelling testimony here this afternoon. I think all of you speak to an underlying dynamic or value set that we really need to get to at some point. I’m not sure if this committee is going to be able to get there. We’ve been charged with looking at a federal role in a national anti-poverty strategy, although most of you mentioned that poverty is at the root of a whole lot of the challenges that you face every day and that you are dealing with, no matter what the group is.

There is indeed an insidious racism and attitude in the country and it shows up every now and again. Every now and again you get an e-mail that talks about how immigrants get \$2,500 a month and it’s more than seniors get. It’s just not true. It’s patently false, but they do it. They target almost every group that we could actually talk about here and I have heard about here at the committee, who are living in poverty. It’s hard to get at that while that attitude exists, because you have to convince the government and the general populous that this is a priority, that we really need to be spending our money there as opposed to someplace else.

With the whole issue, Tanya, of the commitment that the government made to renovating homes, it’s non-refundable, so you have to be making money and be paying taxes to take advantage of

it, firstly. So persons with low to modest income probably wouldn’t be able to do it in the first place. It’s that kind of thinking that gets us to a place where, even with the best of intention, we don’t actually touch the problem. So we’re here today asking for your best advice.

First of all, I don’t think you disagree that we need a national anti-poverty strategy and we need to be working in partnership with the provinces, territories, and municipalities to get that done.

I’ve come to the conclusion that there are at least three things we need to deal with. One is income security, because if you don’t have income, you have problem. Another is housing, and we’ve heard that in spades, over and over again—affordable, safe, and accessible housing. And there is certainly the whole notion of social inclusion, making it possible for people to participate in the communities in which they live.

Is there anything else? I’m interested in your response to us in terms of the report we’re writing, which we will table with the House of Commons, so that it might have some real effect where you are.

• (1425)

**Mr. Julian Daly:** There’s one thing I didn’t mention because of limited time: that is, proper support for the sector, which is usually the non-profit sector, that is supporting people out of poverty. It seems somewhat ironic that the sector that does most of the front-line work with people who are homeless and living in poverty has in fact, over the years, itself become rather impoverished and marginalized. I think what is required is a proper recognition of the value of the non-profit sector in this country and what it does in civic society and what it does to increase social inclusion and tackle social exclusion, and resourcing that appropriately, because it’s very hard for the non-profit organizations to attract and retain the staff it needs to do what is a very challenging job. Some of the most challenging work in this country is done on the front line by non-profit organizations, yet I don’t think that’s always recognized culturally and I don’t think it’s always rewarded appropriately.

**Mr. Tony Martin:** It’s interesting that you should say that. Don’t mind me intervening just quickly. I do want to hear from the others.

In Vancouver, one of the presenters who was an advocate on behalf of the poor said that she’s now competing with the poor for the available housing stock out there and she can’t afford it in some instances.

**Mr. Julian Daly:** We have several colleagues where I work who are working two, if not three, jobs simply to stay working at Boyle Street Community Services, because they are deeply committed to the work. I find it quite shocking that they need to do that in order to carry out that important work in our country.

**The Chair:** Mr. Gurnett.

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** I'd like to add one to your list, Mr. Martin, but also just confirm that when you talk about income security being one of the three key ones, I would say that it has two components to it that have to be kept distinct because they both matter. The one is to make sure there's well-designed public funding to make up for shortages of income for those people who need it—a good EI program, for example, and a richer child tax benefit and things like that. The other is measures that make sure that people start earning more money for the work they do because there are way too many people who don't earn very much. In Alberta one quarter of working people earn less than \$15 an hour, which is kind of a living wage. So I just want to make sure that income security doesn't blur the two different areas.

The other that I'd like to suggest needs to be added, though, is critical to this list. It's the issue of assisting people to gain assets, because having assets of your own in the long run as a counter to falling into poverty has a huge value, even maybe beyond your income at any given time. In my experience, particularly in the immigrant world in this country, that's a critical issue. When you have no assets, you can never start to move out. If all your income always has to go for rent and you're not building up anything that's yours, you can't get out of the well. This issue of asset creation for people is another key component.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll come back for a second round.

Ms. Cadman, seven minutes.

**Ms. Dona Cadman (Surrey North, CPC):** Thank you.

Mr. Gurnett, on our inner stats we have about 32,000 newly arrived immigrants in Edmonton. Can you tell me what percentage of those would be living in poverty now? Would you have any idea?

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** A lot of these things are very hard to get statistics on.

What I would say is that a significant majority of the number of immigrants who have arrived in the last five years, well over half of the immigrants who have arrived in the last five years in Edmonton or anywhere else in Canada, would be living at a significant depth of poverty. It depends how you break it down. If you looked at those with a refugee or refugee-like background, it would probably be 90% because they need a longer period of time.

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** So it depends on why they came over here?

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** That's right. If you looked at skilled immigrants coming from western Europe and the United States it would be a relatively small number. But if you looked at—

• (1430)

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** I don't know about that. I'm from Vancouver. So we have a lot of immigrants coming to Vancouver. I have been in taxicabs with drivers who are doctors, lawyers, and they're barely squeaking by.

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** That's right.

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** I noted that lower skills would put you at more of a disadvantage.

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** No, not skilled. I say place of origin—if they're coming from the United States or western Europe.

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** Right.

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** But for most of the world, that's what I was saying, skills are totally discounted and the chance of having them adequately recognized is terrible.

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** How many clients do you see a year?

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** When I left Mennonite Centre for Newcomers in the spring of this year we were probably serving about 10,000 people a year. And that varied. That might be somebody coming in for one afternoon's help with their résumé, right through to people living for several years in supported housing facilities that we have. We're one of about five immigrant-serving organizations in Edmonton and one of 450 immigrant-serving organizations in the country that are providing a whole range of services.

But again, the problem is often that the way we approach funding and providing services to immigrants now is almost trapping them for an extended time into needing to depend on services because it's providing a small ration that's stretched out over a long time instead of providing a rich opportunity to make a good start. Then most people, when they have that, take over and move themselves forward.

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** Yes. I agree.

Ms. Stanley Venne, you have the largest Métis population. I believe you said 85,000. Was that right?

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** Yes, that's right.

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** How many are off reserve, would you say? What percentage is it?

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** Alberta is the only place where we have settlements for Métis people. About 5,000 or perhaps 6,000 of the 85,000 are on settlements. They have land, and they have the ability to kind of run their own show. But they were placed on land that was the poorest, except in the Paddle Prairie area in northwestern Alberta, which is good land. But all the other land is very poor.

**Ms. Dona Cadman:** Have you ever thought of being self-governing?

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** Absolutely. That's what we want. That's what we've been striving for. As one of the three recognized aboriginal groups in the Canadian Constitution, that is our objective: self-government. I'm actually working on our governance model. We've been working on it for a long time. We believe that would give us the answer to a lot of the situations that exist for our people today. We consider them our citizens.

I just want to comment a bit on this. One of the biggest things that has happened in this province is the establishment of food banks. Alberta has been in a tremendous boom. I spoke to the person running for the premiership of Alberta, and I said to him something that I believe he took as quite shocking. I said that if it were up to me, I would close all the food banks tomorrow. I would close them and give the people enough money. He asked why, and I said that it is because of the humiliation. I told him to go to the food bank and beg and put himself in that position and then be turned down.

We're not only talking about the food in their mouths. We're talking about the spirit, the Canadian spirit. For you or you or you to go to a food bank would be very humiliating. I'm talking about the humiliation we have launched on the poor in this country so that they have to beg and go from office to office and have to do this, this, and this. Where are we as a country? Are we really doing this deliberately, or has it evolved over time? With this committee that has travelled together across the country can we not come up with something far better?

When I spoke to this particular cabinet minister, we had billions in excess money—billions, not millions—yet we had food banks in our province. How does that correlate? How does that function within a country that is one of the best in the world. We put our people through this humiliation and expect them to get up off their feet and do things, when they're shoved down at every point.

• (1435)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Cadman.

We're now going to have a second round, and I'm going to turn it back to Mr. Lessard for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Last year, I found out that it is in Alberta that there is the biggest number of people who work and who use food banks. It was a new thing for me. Yet, the province of Alberta has known the most constant, continuous and the strongest economic boom ever. This confirms what Mrs. Stanley Venne was saying.

I am deeply convinced that our report must give hope to poor people, about concrete things, about things which can be done in the short term. In each of your comments, I hear this expectation. I will use, as an example, the words of Mrs. Tellier, who is saying that the problem must receive immediate attention. It means we want to identify priorities. We must rank those measures by order of priority, because the government cannot do every thing at once — if he even wants to do something.

My question is for those who work on the front line and who brings us very tangible testimonies.

Today, if we were to tell the government that there is a priority that comes first in dealing with poverty, which would that be?

I would like to each of you to answer my question.

[*English*]

**Mr. Julian Daly:** I will start with one that immediately comes to my mind, because there are so many. I would say tackling mental health. Certainly, with the population we serve, which is a largely homeless population, mental health I would say is the single most significant underlying cause of their situations. I see a real paucity of provision in our province, which has some of the largest mental health challenges, I think, of any province, and certainly some of the highest suicide rates. I think if we did tackle that, we would support people to begin the journey out of poverty and into housing and into all the other things, and to sustain that journey. If you have mental health challenges it's hard to sustain that journey, because you keep going back to where you came from without the proper support.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yves Lessard:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**Ms. Tanya Tellier:** I would have to say affordable housing, because they cannot get out of poverty and tackle some of their barriers, their mental illnesses, their addiction issues. If they haven't got a place to lay their head down at night and if they haven't got a good source of income to be able to meet those needs, then they're left stuck in the rut of poverty and homelessness, and there are no solutions to that. You have to have a place to start, a place to call home, a place to move forward and onward from. So it's affordable housing.

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** I would highly endorse both of those. I want to say for my Métis Nation, we need self-government, we need self-determination, we need our own policies, our own way of doing things. That is part of the pride in being a Canadian. We're proud of our country. We manifest it in the way we treat each other, the way we respect each other. Like I said, people are forced to go to the food bank. They are humiliated in every way possible because they have no alternative, they have to go at this point in time. I would think the whole building of the pride means enough money, housing, services, and the ability to make decisions and to even go on vacation maybe. These are things we take for granted in many cases. I want you to think about the pride and the essence of being a Canadian and how that must be dealt with; otherwise we're just going to be a collection of some poor people and some middle-class people and so on, and that coming together, for me, is the most important part.

• (1440)

**Mr. Jim Gurnett:** I may be taking a chance to dream in the sky about this, but I think it would be the leadership of a national public policy approach that moved from band-aid, disconnected, patchwork first aid to an asset base that moved upstream and said let's be preventive of poverty afflicting us. Specifically, housing and early childhood education and care are two powerful tools in moving to that upstream approach instead of the first-aid approach.

**The Chair:** Tony.

**Mr. Tony Martin:** I want to talk for a few minutes about housing. Of all the things we've heard over the last couple of years in doing these hearings, the call for affordable, safe, accessible housing comes up every time, over and over again, no matter where you go. That's a huge issue.

Just to let you know, the national and provincial housing ministers are meeting today. They've identified three priorities for themselves in this meeting. They are not hearing from anybody. They are not meeting with NGOs or anything like that. But they said in regard to the timely flow of federal housing money, as you know from reports that were in the media over the last couple of days, that only \$68.4 million out of the \$1.9 billion that was promised has actually flowed. They are talking about that and trying to figure out why that is, to get at least that \$1.9 billion out there and get it spent. Their second priority—and this is interesting in light of what we're doing—is a comprehensive national housing framework, which I think would be excellent if they could achieve that. It would fit into our work.

Let me go to the third point, which is to enhance federal housing and homelessness investments. In my own community of Sault Ste. Marie, the biggest challenge for the folks dealing with homelessness is that there is no core funding. They are spending all their time organizing bake sales and car washes instead of actually helping people find more permanent funding for their homeless. The third priority is to enhance the federal housing and homelessness investment and stop any cuts that might be coming, so that's good news. We always have to be aware of what's going on.

I would suggest that this focus on housing by the ministers is driven by the fact that people are starting to talk about it. People like you are coming forward and speaking at tables like this, and others across the country are speaking up and saying enough is enough; we know what the problem is and we need to address it. So at least the provincial ministers are looking at it, and I'm sure they will be sharing a strong message with the federal minister on this, and at the very least get that \$1.9 billion out the door and deal with the federal housing and homelessness strategy.

I'm talking a bit more than I'd like here, but this morning my colleague Mike Savage, from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, the home of Sidney Crosby, was very animated in his passion about the fact that the government, in the statement yesterday, laid out the big deficit that is in front of us, and as he said, it didn't really trickle down at all to the really at-risk and poor. It got stuck at a certain point, and even on that, we're not sure how it's actually rolling out and going into effect. But now, in dealing with the deficit, we're going to target those at the bottom end, because it said very specifically—and you spoke to this earlier, Julian, in regard to the not-for-profits—the not-for-profit sector is going to get hit. It was mentioned in the release that it's a sector that is going to get cuts.

How are we going to deal with that? I know from the meetings I've had with people out there that there are some really well-meaning, hard-working people in the trenches doing the work, running the soup kitchens, running the food banks, and providing the housing as best they can. They're getting tired, they're getting older—except for Tanya here—and they're looking for leadership. They are looking for some help from higher levels of government, and so far it isn't coming.

You used some pretty big words this afternoon: “racism”, “de facto apartheid”, and “social exclusion”. I'm thinking “tsunami”, if in fact this is what the federal government chooses to do, because they've said they won't cut transfers. There are a few things they said they wouldn't do.

• (1445)

It's actually the non-profit sector right now that's doing the work on the poverty front. So could you just give some quick response on that, if you don't mind? Maybe there isn't anything to be said; I'm not sure.

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** I will just refer back to one of my first comments to substantiate what you're saying. The reason I recommended the book *Frog Lake*, recently written by an author whose name just escapes me for a moment—it's just out—is that what happened there was that the Indian people were being denied food by the Indian agent. And the warrior came up to him and said, “Give us the food; give us the beef.” He said, “I'm going to ask you

four times. Give us the beef.” His people were starving. They were in desperate straits and the stores were all there; the food was there. The Indian agent refused four times, and he shot him. And I think we can come to a crisis where the situation can be so desperate that we will enter into civil disobedience and unrest.

I'm just saying we are at a crucial time in our history. We either have a way to turn to supporting the people who will build strong and good citizens, or we can cut them. We can say no, you're not getting anything.

**Mr. Tony Martin:** Did somebody else want to respond?

**The Chair:** Just make a quick comment. We'll just wrap up with a statement from Tony after Julian answers some more.

**Mr. Julian Daly:** I have just a quick response, Mr. Martin. You said earlier that homelessness got on the national agenda by people talking about it at some length, and you asked what you could do in terms of the non-profit and the contribution it makes to tackling poverty. I think it's about talking about the role. If our MPs talk about the role of the non-profit in the same breath that they often talk about the roles of government and the private sector, I think it then begins to create a national consciousness about the importance of the role of the sector in terms of finding a solution, not just to poverty and homelessness but to a range of other areas too, and also brings the due respect and recognition to the sector.

I think if you talk about it, people begin to listen and take it seriously.

• (1450)

**Mr. Tony Martin:** I just wanted to say quickly that this morning we had a very excellent presentation from the Homeward Trust Edmonton group, and I was actually hopeful. If in fact we carry out what they're proposing, it sounds like a really good program.

Is there any conflict between yourself and them in terms of where they're going?

**Ms. Tanya Tellier:** May I comment?

No, there's absolutely no conflict. It's a wonderful service, the Housing First initiative, absolutely.

But further to cuts to the non-profit sector, it's underfunded as it is. And one huge issue I'm sure many communities are afflicted with is capacity. There isn't the capacity in the communities to be able to meet the needs of those communities, so there are wonderful services and initiatives going on across Alberta—the Housing First initiative and other programs in the non-profit sector—but all of those, I would guarantee, are at capacity and not able to meet the needs of their own communities. So people are still suffering and not able to access services.

**The Chair:** I want to wrap up by saying, once again, thank you very much.

Everyone here is concerned about what's going on, and everyone cares about this issue. We appreciate your giving us feedback that we can then put in the report. Julian, you talked about that and talking to your MPs.

Because you men and women live it every day, I think you assume it has been talked about too much. I can assure you that it's never talked about too much, because MPs come and go. Tony has been in this business for 20 years; Dona was recently elected, and I've been here five years. We're all at various stages. I appreciate how tired you can become of going over and over it, but I can assure you it never hurts to continue to raise these issues with your elected officials, on all levels. You would be surprised at the level of knowledge of each individual.

As I said, maybe that doesn't give you any sense of comfort, but I think if we're going to make changes we need to push the issue at all levels all the time.

Thank you for being the champions. You are on the front line and you are the heroes.

Frankly, if there's any way we can help by trying to leverage what you're already doing.... I can say you just hit the nail on the head. It's about trying to take that capacity and leveraging what's already there. What you need is a bit of oil and grease to keep the thing going. Very few dollars are leveraged greatly in not-for-profits because you've had to operate that way all your lives.

We'll continue to fight the fight. We appreciate what you're doing and the difference you make in people's lives every day.

Thank you very much for being here.

**Ms. Muriel Stanley Venne:** Mr. Chairman, I have a gift for your committee. It pertains to the pride of Canada. This is a book called *Our Women in Uniform*, which is the story of eight Métis women who served in the Second World War. I'm so proud of them. And I'm so delighted to give you this gift, because I think Canada has to be the spirit within us.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

This meeting is adjourned.

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