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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Good morning. *Bonjour*. Thank you for coming.

You've travelled a great distance from the community of Cross Lake. The Pimicikamak First Nation is about 800 kilometres north of Winnipeg, so you've come a great distance to be here. I want to welcome you to the traditional territory of the Algonquin people here in Ottawa.

We're going to get started, because we want to be sure that we respect your time. You will have 10 minutes to present, and then there will be an opportunity for questions and answers with the members.

I'm going to call on Chief Cathy Merrick to present to us. Thank you again for coming.

Chief Catherine Merrick (Chief, Pimicikamak Okimawin): [Witness speaks in Cree]

Tansi. Thank you.

I'd like to acknowledge the Algonquin land. I bring greetings from my people in Pimicikamak.

My name is Catherine Merrick. I was elected by the Pimicikamak people to be the chief of the Pimicikamak Nation in accordance with Pimicikamak law. I do not come here as a chief of an Indian band in accordance with your system of law. It is not a customary law in accordance with the Indian Act. I have been invited to speak on a very sensitive issue, the issue of suicide, which stems from hopelessness and despair, an issue that stems from 150 years of oppression from your policy of cultural genocide. Suicide is one of the mitigating factors stemming from this policy.

As a primary spokesperson and the leader of the Pimicikamak Nation, I will summarize in a nutshell where I come from, who I am, and who I represent. For you to understand who we are, where we come from, and what we need to do to survive, we must jointly examine what our best and collective interest is to co-exist in the spirit of our treaty relationship.

First is the need to understand our Pimicikamak Okimawin government.

In Pimicikamak territory, the crown, including its crown agency, Manitoba Hydro, needs to understand the environment that it's creating for the Pimicikamak people and their experience. Its system continues to impose genocidal policies and inflict harm on the health

of Pimicikamak traditional territory and people. This infliction has traumatized our people and the land the Pimicikamak are spiritually connected to.

Suicides are one of the effects of this trauma. The concept of trauma engages a holistic view that may aid in building a new relationship. An ongoing national trauma afflicts the Pimicikamak people. It began almost 140 years ago.

Entered into in good faith to protect the settlers, Treaty 5 was soon revealed to be a genocidal fraud. Like other indigenous peoples in Canada, the Pimicikamak have endured governmental policies that were designed to exterminate them as a people and to separate them from their territory. Plainly, this trauma did not begin with Manitoba Hydro.

The Pimicikamak have survived better than some of Canada's indigenous peoples. Thanks in part to the situation of its territory, some of the worst inflictions largely passed it by. Then, in the 1960s, Manitoba Hydro built the Kelsey dam. It's both a dam and generating station and began to ruin Sipiwesk, the ancient heartland of the Pimicikamak people. The Jenpeg hydro development project, located only miles upriver, permanently destroyed our lands, our hunting territories, our water system, our traditional foods, our traditional medicines, our ways of life, our culture. In essence, the project stripped us of our ability to preserve our identity and our way of life, the sources of our wellness for thousands of years.

As I've mentioned, the elders tell us that there were virtually no suicides prior to the arrival of Jenpeg hydro development project. We have lost 40 individuals to suicide, most of them young people who would have had a long life. From this development, a modern day treaty was made between Canada, Manitoba, and Manitoba Hydro to mitigate and compensate for the losses we sustained. This agreement has still not been honoured.

Pimicikamak is a self-governed indigenous nation. The word "Pimicikamak" means the place "where a lake lies across the river". Okimawin is our government. It predates the European settlement of Canada. Pimicikamak became part of Canada by its representative, Té-pas-té-nam, signing Treaty 5 at an historic ceremony in Norway House in 1875.

Suppressed by the federal policy of cultural genocide and federal laws for more than a century, the Pimicikamak Okimawin reawakened in the early 1990s. Pimicikamak Okimawin is a grassroots, people-driven government based on traditional Cree democracy.

Some may confuse Pimicikamak with the Cross Lake Band of Indians, the first nation, or even regard it as a new name for the band. In reality, the two are as fundamentally different in almost every way, as, say, Canada and Winnipeg are.

• (0850)

Some of the main constitutional and legal differences between them include the following.

In the last decade, the Pimicikamak's unwritten constitution and other customary laws have been updated to meet modern needs. The Pimicikamak laws are made by the people, in contrast with Canadian laws, which are made by the crown in Parliament in Ottawa. The authority of its people to make their own laws has always been and has never been surrendered or lost. The Pimicikamak Okimawin is a corporate and political body comprising the executive council, chief in council, the elders' council, women's council, the youth council, and the secretary to the councils.

The four councils meet as a single entity and determine national policy by consensus. The executive council, with its chief in council, is a modern innovation. It is responsible for the executive function of managing the day-to-day affairs of the nation. It does so by consensus. Its decisions are governed by national policy. Through the executive council, national policy also applies to the Cross Lake band of Indians.

The Pimicikamak have been working hard to revise their traditional government and culture. This will enable any hope for survival. The current system imposed by Canada continues to threaten our survival. It's paternalistic and legalistic. Steps for our survival include the introduction of the 2003 national policy of finance administration and the 2016 transparency project. We are taking these steps to account for how our elected officials on council conduct our nation's business and how they manage its affairs and those of Cross Lake.

Since the Indian Act, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has presided over third world conditions of poverty, corruption, and human despair. Their system has left us no option but to raise the bar of accountability. We need the ability to govern our own accountability to our people without legal terms compelling us to be beggars in our homeland at the feet of Indian Affairs. Our national policy will hold the crown to high standards of accountability for their conduct and actions.

Breaking free from this colonial system, the Pimicikamak Okimawin has accomplished most of the reforms that the Minister of Indian Affairs is hoping to set in motion in proposed federal legislation.

Historically, the Pimicikamak have been systematically suppressed by the Canadian policy of cultural genocide. The 150 years of systematic race-based standards are evident in the crown's track record in failing to honour the treaty relationship with indigenous tribes like the Pimicikamak. That treaty was regarded as a sacred covenant between Britain and the nation of tribes.

After entering into the treaty relationship in 1875 with the crown in right of Britain, the Pimicikamak and their ability to govern themselves were quickly suppressed by the creation of the state of

Canada and the paternalistic Indian Act, which created Indian bands, band memberships, and chiefs and councils for those bands.

Where is Pimicikamak? Cree culture centred on our vast Pimicikamak traditional territory that enabled the ancestors of the Pimicikamak people to adapt to change and to survive since time immemorial. It is the only known indigenous nation on record whose territory was recognized the surveyor general of Canada in March 1877.

Cross Lake Band is the epicentre of this territory where most of our Pimicikamak people live. They are both citizens and band members. *Nikikonakos* is the name of our ancestral village, now referred to as Cross Lake, Manitoba. This community of 8,400 people lives on Pimicikamak territory.

The strategic objective of our Pimicikamak is to survive as a people, which is a serious challenge in the face of continuing federal efforts to extinguish the nation, and environmental and spiritual damage.

We have historically suffered from cultural genocide, the intentional destruction of a people as the people, distinguished by its not necessarily intending to kill individuals. Again, suicide is one of those key mitigating factors stemming from the cultural genocide. Many indigenous people are at the edge of the cliff of the mountain of oppression, and attempted suicides continue and hopelessness still thrives.

I have invited the Prime Minister to witness first hand the atrocities created by your Indian Act in the midst of our last suicide crisis. He has failed to respond to my invite. This is evidence of the failure of the crown and all its agents to honour this relationship. The current problem is that despite multiple government apologies, both the federal and provincial levels of government continue to actively pursue these policies while proclaiming their desire for a new and respectful relationship.

• (0855)

The Chair: That's time. Please wrap up.

Chief Catherine Merrick: What we need to do for our people to survive is to clean up our Pimicikamak territory from economic destruction and reconnect the spirit of our nation back to the land. We also need *Ininiwi Pimatisiwin*—land-based activities, cultural and traditional pursuits programming. We need to restore our governance, improve hydro operation rules, archaeology, and have a forestry venture, wellness centre infrastructure and programming, and cultural awareness programs to stop identity theft. Stop legislating our culture, our language, our way of life, and our very lives and health. There should be no more failures by the crown parties to meet their constitutional responsibilities to honour the treaty relationship.

This is the only way my people will survive. A coherent whole may offer the best way for the crown, including Manitoba Hydro, to turn its back on genocide and for all parties to begin reducing total trauma.

I am here to deliver this message for my people.

If we are going to address suicide in a serious manner, the crown will have to do whatever it takes to provide financial and human resources to help us rebuild our nation so we can start eliminating—

The Chair: Thank you.

Chief Catherine Merrick: —the effects of cultural genocide that the crown has created.

[*Witness speaks in Cree*]

The Chair: *Meegwetch*, Chief Merrick.

Thank you very much.

Next presenter, you have 10 minutes. I hope I'm not going to mess up the pronunciation of your name too badly. From the Ojibway, we have Chief Kathy Kishiqueb.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb (Chief, Ojibways of Onigaming): Yes, it's "Kishiqueb".

The Chair: Welcome. Thank you for coming. You have 10 minutes to present to the committee.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: *Meegwetch. Bonjour.*

I am Chief Kathy Kishiqueb from Ojibways of Onigaming.

In my language, I am [*Witness speaks in Ojibwe*], Standing Brown Buffalo, and Kishkaminsi is my *doodem*.

Chi Meegwetch.

Thank you for the opportunity to stand before this committee today to share the story of my community. The Ojibways of Onigaming are one of 28 Anishinaabe communities in Treaty 3 territory. Our community has a membership of approximately 780, and 50% live in the community. On October 30, 2014, our community declared a state of emergency in regard to suicide following two youth suicides and having recently experienced three other funerals related to suicide within a span of six months. We have not and will not end our state of emergency until there have been changes in access to mental health services and support for community wellness and community healing for our people.

In the following year, the community also lost adults and elders related to self-neglect and self-harm due to alcoholism and many chronic health conditions. Historically, over decades our community has experienced a significant number of losses due to suicide, self-harm, and violence, including multiple homicides. Our staff continues to respond to suicide ideation, threats, and attempts on a weekly basis. In the past three months there have been at least 20 known suicide attempts or threats in our community where we have had to facilitate some type of immediate response, such as setting up safety plans, crisis counselling, hospital visits, and police intervention. The majority have been youth under 20 years of age. We have identified at least 25 families in our community who could benefit from family counselling and family mediation services. These supports would help facilitate family healing, enhance parenting skills, and help rebuild healthy and thriving family systems.

In the past year, our team has interacted with approximately 70 adults who have reached out for support and/or received crisis support. Our team has attempted to connect them to adult mental

health services, but clients are met with a variety of barriers in accessing supports, such as distance and cost associated with travelling outside the community, personal motivation, fear, lack of family and peer support, availability, wait lists, and lack of culturally safe options. We have noticed that many of our community members are not comfortable accessing services outside the community or with someone they do not have existing relationships with or identify with. Clients who have experienced trauma get tired of telling their stories over and over to new faces.

A significant gap of ours is the lack of a community-based certified mental health counsellor. Community-based mental health counselling could offer many opportunities such as being present and visible in the community, which gains the trust of community members, provides opportunities for immediate clinical interventions, and allows for accessibility to care and continuity of care.

In the past year, over 100 Onigaming children and youth have accessed community-based counsellors at least twice. Our school mental health counsellor currently holds a case load of 40 children and youth she sees on a regular basis, and in many cases, weekly or bi-weekly due to the high needs. When our children and youth are reaching out and seeking help, they are walking into systems of inadequacy.

It is important to understand the reality of the community situation. People were not reaching out actively and seeking help. People do not have the means to travel outside the community. People are using unhealthy coping strategies such as drugs and alcohol and are not ready to face their grief or trauma to begin their personal journey to healing.

Our approach has had to be very proactive and creative in order to reach these high needs such as being available after office hours to deal with after-hours situations and allowing open-door policies not restricted to appointments. We have created an environment where it is easier for people to reach out for help, but our services are feeling the pressures of the needs, and we need more capacity to respond.

A critical part of our approach was a shared management system. In post-crisis, we had a group of 50 on our list. As a team, we would do regular check-ins with each of them through home visits and/or planned activities that targeted these 50 youth.

We are working to create an environment that promotes life where our children, youth, families, and elders know we care and where suicide is no longer an option.

● (0900)

The Chair: There is only three minutes left.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: We clearly see that suicide is a symptom of trauma, unresolved grief and loss, exposure to violence, addictions, disconnection to culture and land, and the poor social and environmental conditions that have existed in our community for decades. Solutions to prevent suicide have to be holistic and multi-pronged. Approaches need to have combinations of clinical, community-based, traditional, family-based, and system-focused solutions.

Community-based solutions must not only focus on increasing access to mental health supports but also look at the social determinants of health, including more resources for prevention, cultural and land-based healing and activities, improved housing conditions, and employment opportunities.

Over the past two and a half years, we have been applying a unique comprehensive community-based and community-driven approach to preventing suicide and in supporting community wellness and healing. Areas of priority include improved access to mental health services, youth engagement and resiliency, family resiliency, community engagement, connections to culture, and healthy work environments.

Our approach with our youth involves a team of staff, including the school mental health counsellor, customary care counsellor, and crisis coordinator. The team coordinates a shared management system of families at high risk with regular updates and recommendations to chief and council. Through this system, we have regular contact with clients. The team works together to target high-risk groups through direct counselling, after-school programming, and cultural activities. With the additional capacity of an adult mental health counsellor, we would be able to do more work with parents and support the families in healing.

• (0905)

Engaging youth is an instrumental part of the strategic plan. The youth identified seven key areas: one, opportunities for recreation; two, youth employment; three, access to a broader education—

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: I would like to say, I'm not allowed enough time here to finish my presentation, but what I do have to say is that—

The Chair: Please, continue your recommendations for us.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: Okay. What the youth are saying...four, community safety; five, access to healing and supports; six, community infrastructure; seven, connections to culture.

We have committed to working with our youth. We have a number of challenges that we are experiencing, and they are included in this report. The reality is that the community-driven approach is what is helping us at the moment; however, the load and the burden that our workers have to carry really creates burnout and a real fatigue to our helping system and our current infrastructure of workers.

As for our relationship with the federal government, we've been working for two years in one of our key priority areas, and that is to facilitate what the youth are asking for. One of the priority areas is a community multiplex building. We've been working for two years with INAC, and this most recent year we were told we were eligible for such a building, to bring hope to our people, to the youth, and to

the community, but I was just told that all funding for those types of infrastructure no longer exists and is exhausted. So we're back to square one. This is very disheartening and discouraging, not only to me as a leader of the community, but to the people I work with. The federal government cannot and should not walk away. They need to be accountable and work with us in partnerships. We are open to working in partnerships.

• (0910)

The Chair: *Meegwetch.*

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: I'd like to say.... *Meegwetch.*

The Chair: Thank you, Chief. I appreciate that. I know that the time is tight, but we will have an opportunity for you to respond to questions from members of Parliament, and you can elaborate on whatever areas they ask about.

The first question is from MP Michael McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you for your presentations. I certainly can relate to a lot of what you're saying. I'm from the Northwest Territories.

We've been on this study for some time now on the issue of suicide, and it's still shocking to hear the number of people who are attempting to take their lives. It's still shocking to hear the level of despair that's in our communities. I often wonder if it would be in order, to bring more attention to the issue, for us to collaborate and start putting the numbers out there on a national level. But I'm always advised by people who are professionals or in that field that this may lead to copycats. A lot of people might start to mirror what's happening in some of the communities.

In Nunavut, as Hunter can attest, we had 28 suicides over the summer. I had a suicide last weekend in my community. Labrador has had eight since November. So the crisis is not slowing down, the crisis is actually escalating, and it's very concerning.

We heard in other testimonies many of the comments that you have made. I certainly agree that the oppression that the aboriginal people have suffered over the last 150 years is at the root of what is happening in our communities. We certainly need to start looking at becoming self-governing. My observation has been that communities that are self-governing seem to do the best. But there are other issues in our communities, including cultural disconnect and abuse. I was home last weekend. I witness a lot of violence in my community—I'm probably one of the few people who still live in a small aboriginal community, as an MP—and a lot of it is as a result of the residential school trauma, which I suffered.

The question I have is around trauma, and more specifically sexual abuse. I didn't hear you mention sexual abuse, but we have issues in our communities. Residential school, lack of housing—a lot of things lead to sexual abuse. I wanted to know if that's something you would attribute to some of the causes of the current levels of despair and suicide.

Maybe you could both spend a few minutes talking about it.

Chief Catherine Merrick: As a leader in my nation, I want to share with you the hopelessness of my people due to the lack of housing. We have three or four generations of families who live in one house. We have two-year-olds who are sexually abused in these homes because of the fact that 20 people live in them.

People don't want to talk about sexual abuse in our nations. It's something they're not healed to talk about, through the impacts of the residential school. It all started from that era, when our people had to go to residential school. They were stripped of their culture. They were stripped of their language. They were stripped of everything to be who they were, really. The little bit they had was what they carried in their heart about who they were as aboriginal people.

There's a young man sitting here with me. He's part of the next generation. He's a youth council member from my community, from my nation, and he speaks on behalf of the youth. I would like to have him speak and to be able to respond to some of the questions that will come up.

Sexual abuse is real. It's real for the two-year-olds, for the women who are raped in our communities, for the women who are bought in our communities, because of the impacts of residential school. There's a thought that it's okay because nobody talks about it. Nobody talks about it in our nations.

This is the time when we need to start talking about these issues that impact our men, that impact our women, that impact our children and our *koochichims*. We have to take care of the future. They're the ones who will make it right for our people. They're the ones who will come to Parliament and be able to address Parliament and say it's not okay. Genocide is not okay.

● (0915)

The Chair: We have a minute and a half.

Chief Catherine Merrick: And resource sharing is something. We should not be poor because they extract minerals and do hydro projects in our territories. Resource sharing should be something so we should not be a poor people to beg.

Thank you.

The Chair: Chief?

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: Through our experience at our initial crisis stage, I did become aware quite quickly of some of the issues in regard to what the youth and adults were dealing with in the community.

One of the things that became quite clear to me was that we had a day school in our community in my generation. A lot of people in my generation attended that day school. Through this crisis situation and through connections we were making with the families and adults, disclosures were coming out of abuse that was experienced in the day school. The day school treated us students the same way as

the students got treated in residential schools. That's one of the unfortunate circumstances that we have to deal with in our community. Day schools are not recognized under the residential school—

The Chair: Thank you.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb:—where there were benefits and where they were allowed opportunities for disclosure and healing to take place. That's a major gap.

The Chair: Thank you. That's a good point.

The question goes now over to MP Arnold Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

To our guests, thank you for your passionate testimony today.

We have been dealing with this study now for several months. There are two aspects that always come up. There is the need for an immediate response, and then there's the need for a rebuilding of culture so that we move away from this crisis-to-crisis situation.

I am going to start with more of an immediate response question for Kendall in particular.

Kendall, would you say that within your communities, most specifically with the youth, that almost everybody is on Facebook? Would you say that's correct?

Mr. Kendall Robinson (Youth Councillor, Pimicikamak Okimawin): Yes, that is correct. They're always on Facebook.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes. We've heard from other witnesses that sometimes there are some issues around that. Would you say that's correct as well?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes, that is correct.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Online bullying and things.

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Online bullying and lateral violence.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Are you aware that Facebook has an algorithm that predicts that you may be leaning toward suicide or something like that?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: No.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you think that an algorithm that would say...? I know that Facebook will send you a message saying, "Hey, we think that you should be looking for some help. You're in a bad place right now." Do you think that would be helpful, seeing as everybody is on Facebook, for them to say, "Hey, reach out to so-and-so. They can help you."? Would that be helpful?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes, that would really help because the youth are always on Facebook. If they had a Facebook page where they could get help, where somebody could talk to them and help them....

● (0920)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Does the chat feature work fairly well on Facebook? Can you communicate? I know that within the communities in my riding, everybody seems to be on Facebook. However, the Internet connectivity is sometimes a bit of a challenge. Would you say that's a correct assessment as well?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: In our community, the connection is not very good. It would take a while to get a message, sometimes even a couple of hours.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay. Another witness has talked to us about the lack of addresses on reserves. Where you come from, is that the case? There are no house numbers and there are no street numbers. Is that the case?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: So they said, if we have a response, a medical emergency, and we send out responders, they sometimes can't find the place because it says, "It's John's house." or "It's at Joe's house." And they say, "Well, who's John? Where's Joe's house?" Is that the case in your experience, as well?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes. It would help if we had house numbers, a street address. That way we'd know where they're at.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You can't find them because there's not a physical location.

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Right.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Moving on to "renewing culture"—I guess I'm going to use that terminology—I think we would all agree that education is probably the area that most needs to be impacted in order to renew culture. Would you agree with that assessment?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes, I would.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Wikipedia, which I know is the be-all and end-all source of everything, talks about how education is the passing on of knowledge, values, systems of living, and these kinds of things. Would you agree with that kind of definition?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Well, I wouldn't agree, because I think the curriculum that was given for aboriginal people, for aboriginal schools, is a curriculum that will lead them to fail. We need our own curriculum and our own education in aboriginal communities.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: We all agree around this table that the residential schools were a complete failure on the part of the state. For me, the number one issue with that is the complete disrespect by the state for the role of the parent in education. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Would you say that parents should be the number one educators of their children?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes, they should.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: We should definitely put education back under the control of the parents.

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'll ask some of the other witnesses as well about the role of parents in education.

If you want to speak to that a little bit, it would be much appreciated.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: As part of my report here, there's a big emphasis on the gap in support and services for adults. As I mentioned earlier, a lot of adults in my generation encountered either physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual abuse in our day school. From that experience, obviously a lot of the parents, as well as the grandparents who had gone to residential schools, have been

really negatively impacted in their ability to provide quality parenting to their children. I see that today, because that's what our youth are saying in our report. Our youth are saying that they need to be heard.

These are not mere words. If you really look behind what they're saying and dig deeper, you'll find that they want to communicate. They want to build relationships. This is where we have discovered that we need to support our solutions, which are community-based and community-driven, to help support the families, and to help the youth have greater and healthier relationships with their parents.

I always have difficulty in trying to convey something that is so great. Words and rhetoric make it so difficult to really express and to be able to share with you that gap, as well as that particular issue you're talking about.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you so much for attempting to explain the generations of trauma that your people face.

For more questions, we now move to MP Romeo Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): *Meegwetch*, Madame Chair.

[Member speaks in Cree]

First of all, I have a quick question for Kendall here. I don't know if it's going to be a quick answer.

Chief Kishiqueb mentioned the priorities of youth in her community. Are these priorities similar in your community?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes, there are the youth. I've been working with the youth for about a year now and I've asked them what they want, and that's a recreational centre. A recreational centre would be nice. We'd need a swimming pool and the facilities that other places have that reserves don't have.

There are 7,000 to 8,000 people in our community. Why can't we have what other places have, like drive-ins? They have everything. They have a McDonald's. They have infrastructure that we don't have and that we should get as aboriginal people. Everyone on all of the reserves who don't have these should get the infrastructure. But for Pimicikamak, the youth are always asking for a recreational centre.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Chief Merrick, you talked about a major resource, the development of hydro in your case. I think over the years we've talked a lot about the environmental impacts of these projects, the economic benefits from these projects, but we rarely talk about the social and cultural impacts of these projects. I think you mentioned that briefly.

I come from a part of the country where there is major development as well, hydro-electric development in northern Quebec, and most of the time these social and cultural impacts trickle down to the most vulnerable of our people, the kids and the youth.

Can you talk a bit about the lessons that you've learned and how we can benefit from those lessons for the future for other communities? I was recently back in my community and went to the lake where I was born. I was born on the land. I know a lot of non-indigenous people cannot necessarily relate to how I relate to my territory, how I relate to that lake, and how my parents related to that place, and my grandparents, for thousands of years.

There are mental impacts when you destroy part of the territory. Can you speak a bit about the lessons that your community have learned from major development and how that experience can help us in the future?

Chief Catherine Merrick: Thank you for that question.

With regard to the destruction of a land where our people, our ancestors, have grown, we have to protect our lands and our waters. That is one of the fundamental things that our elders have taught us to do.

Within our time, we have seen the destruction of our lands and the ways of our people. To this day, we rarely have any trappers who go out on the land to sustain their families, to provide for their families in that way. Now we have the social impacts of all of that. Where the man was responsible for his family and able to provide food and provide clothing, that has been taken away.

Eighty per cent of my nation is unemployed. In the fundamental agreement that was signed 40 years ago, it states that it was to eradicate mass poverty for my people. Today, we are the poorest of the poor. We should be one of the richest nations in Manitoba from the results of the electricity that is provided to the United States. We should not be poor.

Our people should be very proud of who they are as aboriginal people, but we're not, because we don't have what this young man, our young leader, has explained here, such as the wants and needs of our people for recreational facilities. These are the things that every community should have. Every community should have recreational facilities. Every community, every nation, should have libraries.

Those things that are taken for granted in urban centres, we don't have them. There are communities that don't even have water in this good country of ours that we call Canada. We haven't asked for anything over and above what any other Canadian has or that any other Manitoban has or asks for as a Manitoban. We have to beg all the time for the things we want. That should stop. It should stop today.

• (0930)

The Chair: *Meegwetch.*

We'll now go to MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much for coming today and presenting this testimony.

We've heard this heart-wrenching testimony from a number of different communities that have come to testify on this issue.

I want to pick up on something that MP Viersen said earlier about the role of parents. I found that the question was a bit—no offence—

simplistic, from the standpoint that we've talked about residential schools, the generations of destruction of the cultural and historical heritage and the literal ripping out the souls of indigenous peoples, and the breakdown of the family unit itself, the nuclear unit of the family. If you've taken children away and raised them in residential schools, how do those children become parents when they've not had parents themselves?

It's not simplistic to say that, yes, parents need to be a part of the education system, but I think it needs to be a more holistic process. Yes, they are a component, as elders are a component, and as educators are a component, in that they all need to be a part of education.

Would you agree with that, Kendall, Catherine, and Kathy?

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes, I agree with that, because our elders are very important to us. As youth, we learn from them, and we ask them for guidance. I agree.

Mr. Mike Bossio: You all need to come together to try to reconnect your cultural heritage—

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes.

Mr. Mike Bossio: —because it's at the root of so many of the issues around identity and hope, and it's just an integral part of who and what you are. If you don't know who you are or what you were, how do you become what you need to be? Would you agree with that?

• (0935)

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Yes.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you.

We've heard this many times, and it's something that we have tried to draw out, which is that it needs to be community-driven. The solutions need to be community-driven. Priorities need to be community-established.

Kathy, you brought this to the fore as well in your conversation. When we're talking about the lack of resources around mental health, is it just a lack of dollars or is it also the lack of human resources themselves and the availability of human resources within the communities themselves that are really at the crux of the situation?

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: It's all of that. It's the lack of funding resources to be able to employ more resources to deal specifically with the situation and directly with people. I think we focus so much on community-driven solutions. There are a lot of solutions that are unique to each community. I speak only in terms of solutions that we see and that we're advocating to have for our community.

Another barrier to that is having to go through multiple barriers when you have to access off-reserve and external resources. For us those include transportation and travel. As well, when you utilize external resources, there's lack of sensitivity with regard to the dynamics and the environment that the client comes from. For example, when a youth is taken to a hospital because they're threatening suicide or have obviously attempted suicide, a lot of times they see a general practitioner and maybe a social worker in the emergency unit who have no idea about the dynamics of the place this child came from, which they're going to be released back into. There's no connection, and there needs to be greater communication with regard to safety plans for when a child is returned.

In most cases when a child says they're fine, the doctor will say, "We're releasing the child back into the community."

Mr. Mike Bossio: A big part of it is long-term funding so that you're not just going to crisis funding every time you end up in a crisis situation. You were talking a lot about community co-management and community teams that would come together to help manage mental health on a long-term basis. If you had long-term stable funding, you would be able to once again have that internal mental health resource to the community. It could then propagate that knowledge out to the rest of the community so that there could be a community-based approach rather than relying on one individual who is going to become burnt out as you said.

Chief Kathy Kishiqueb: Yes. When you are dealing with crises, for probably the first year, you're looking at just trying to put a lid on the crisis. In the second year, you're probably looking at entering into medium-term solutions and starting to implement long-term solutions. If you have resources to support that, you're bringing a lot of continuity into the community. When resources are limited, that continuity stops until another crisis hits, and then you're back to square one.

● (0940)

Mr. Mike Bossio: So it comes back to what Catherine was talking about as well, that if you had the long-term stable funding that would have resulted from the dam project, the hydro project, then you would also have the opportunity to train your own people internally so you wouldn't have that 80% unemployment rate.

Would everyone all the way around agree with that?

Chief Catherine Merrick: Yes, that's true. We just want to be sustainable and to be a people who will be able to help themselves, through the elders and through the love of the land. I can't stop saying that this is where the healing is going to come from for our young people, if they go back to the land to be able to feel that connection to mother earth, that connection to the water.

We cannot stop saying that our young people have to protect the water. As we all know around this table, water sustains who we are, and we have to be very protective of that. We have to be very instrumental in how our children can go back to the land—live off the land and learn off the land. These are fundamental things that we need to do for our young people.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: We are at the end of the first round of questions, but we have a representative from the youth council who has a short

presentation. He is holding an eagle feather. He was hoping to be able to present. We ran out of time. I'm wondering if the committee would feel open to allowing him to present his words onto the record.

Are we good with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to turn it over to Kendall. You have something to say, and I'll give you an opportunity to go ahead.

Mr. Kendall Robinson: Thank you.

Good morning, members of the panel, Madam Chair, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Kendall Robinson. I am a member of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation. I work and reside in Cross Lake, Manitoba.

If it is okay with the panel, I would like to explain why I am holding this eagle feather today at this gathering. This is an eagle feather that the late Elijah Harper, formerly a member of Parliament, gave to my late grandfather Etienne Robinson when he was chief of our nation some years ago. I hold it to honour the memory of the youth who have fallen at their own hands in recent times across the nation, including the youth we lost in our own community. We are speaking for them today. I am thinking of them today; I am thinking of their families; and I am thinking of their communities.

I am a member of the youth council of the four traditional councils of Pimicikamak. During the afternoon I work as an educational assistant at the middle years school. In the evenings, I organize recreational activities for the youth as a youth activities coordinator. As a member of the youth council, I also assist with youth activities in the community. In my spare time, I am a wrestling coach for Team Manitoba and also for our local high school. Team Manitoba will be competing in Toronto in July in the North American Indigenous Games, which our youth are all excited to attend. I graduated from the Cross Lake cadet program some years ago.

I am pleased to appear today, along with our chief Mrs. Merrick and Lisa Clarke, as a witness and presenter to this important panel that is studying ways to prevent suicide in our indigenous communities.

As you may have heard from our chief, our nation declared a state of emergency last winter after facing a rash of suicides. I was reassigned in my community to help with the youth intervention programs that followed and to work strictly with the youth in the organization of recreational activities. This is my 12th month as a youth activities coordinator.

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the panel.

Meegwetch.

● (0945)

The Chair: You did well. Thank you for putting your words on the record. We're honoured that you came all the way here.

Committee, we are moving into the second round. We've basically ended our time allocation.

We have a request from a member of the audience to take a photograph. I understand that when we're in official sitting, this is prohibited. We must suspend.

Do I have permission to suspend, so that we could get our photo taken? And then we'll go in camera for committee business.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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