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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome, everybody, to meeting number 105 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. Pursuant to Standing Order 83.1 and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, June 8, 2023, the committee is meeting to discuss the pre-budget consultations in advance of the 2024 budget.

The finance committee is honoured to be starting our cross-country tour and our pre-budget consultations in advance of the 2024 budget right here in Atlantic Canada. Yesterday we were in P.E.I., and today we are here in New Brunswick, in beautiful Fredericton. We're looking forward to hearing from our witnesses.

On our finance committee, we have members from right across Canada, but we do have a number of members with us today who are from Atlantic Canada. We have MP Atwin from right here in Fredericton, MP Thompson from Newfoundland and MP Stewart, who is also from New Brunswick.

For the other members, I'll allow you to introduce yourselves as we get into our questions. As I said, we're from right across Canada.

We thank you for putting your organizations and your names forward to be witnesses in this study. It is really helpful for our committee to hear your testimony and to provide some of the recommendations that we're looking to put into our report.

On that, as our witnesses who are with us today, we have, from Greener Village, the chief executive officer, Alex Boyd, and from the Municipality of Tantramar, Mayor Andrew Black. Welcome.

With that, Mr. Boyd, you can start with an opening statement, and then we'll hear an opening statement from Mr. Black.

Mr. Alex Boyd (Chief Executive Officer, Greener Village): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Greener Village is honoured to contribute to the vital discussions concerning pre-budget consultations in advance of the 2024 budget.

Greener Village is a community-driven organization dedicated to addressing hunger and promoting food security in the greater Fredericton area. We operate a class 5 learning kitchen, community gardens and greenhouses, a thrift store that provides resources to food bank clients, and such seasonal supports as income tax preparation and back-to-school support. Our mission also includes establishing infrastructure to divert food from landfills, supporting scalable

commercial food production, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with the import-dependent food supply chain.

We envision a future where locally produced, value-added food products contribute to a more resilient and self-sustained local economy. New Brunswick's food insecurity index is 22.7%, the second-highest in the country, with 30% of New Brunswick's children living in food-insecure households. Additionally, 30% of indigenous people in Canada grapple with food insecurity, an issue further exacerbated by the far-reaching impacts of climate change, which has disrupted all four pillars of food security among indigenous communities.

The origins of food banking trace back to 1981. The first Canadian food bank was in Edmonton, established in response to the economic downturn in the oil industry. Initially designed to address a temporary emergency need for food, food banks have since proliferated across the nation, providing food support to millions of Canadians annually through a network of over 4,750 agencies. In 2022 alone, 6.9 million Canadians, including 1.8 million children, lived with food insecurity. This marked a substantial increase from the previous year, a period characterized by unprecedented inflation. This number will continue to rise. As of September 2023, at Greener Village alone we saw a 35.7% increase in demand over the previous year.

A distressing paradox exists in Canada, and that's our significant amount of food wastage. Approximately 58% of Canadian produce ends up discarded, with 32% of that food waste being salvageable through rescue-focused food techniques like freezing and packaging. In Atlantic Canada alone, over 220,000 metric tons of food go to waste each year, enough to feed the entire Atlantic Canadian population for five months.

Food security extends beyond access to food. As a critical component of Canada's social services infrastructure, it also encompasses the improvement of structural and intermediary determinants of health, mitigating long-term negative health outcomes and their associated costs for the government. As the cost of living continues to rise in Canada, food banks have become a lifeline, a necessary component of current Canadian culture that is saving lives today.

In mid-2022, food prices experienced their most significant increase in 40 years, surging by 11.4%. This presents an alarming challenge for Canadians already grappling with the cost of living. Diverting food from landfill to food recovery has the potential to avoid 3.82 metric tons of CO2 emissions for each metric ton of rescued food. When we do the math, the 220,000 metric tons of food available for rescue in Canada this year equates to a carbon price of over \$56 million. By 2030, by the way, that number will swell to just under \$150 million.

With careful consideration, the impact of today's investments in food security will have exponential gains across all sectors. Specifically, food banks and other food charities stand ready to evolve in not only improving the help offered to those in need but also in improving their communities as a whole.

The main barrier to this evolution is adequate funding to create the infrastructure, staffing capacity and frameworks for project execution that underpin long-term success. The creation of an earmarked fund to support a national pilot program that's available to food banks would be the ideal way to drive food bank innovation, evolution and impact across the country.

Supporting food security initiatives is about not only ensuring access to food but also enhancing the overall health and well-being of our communities. To this end, Greener Village presents specific recommendations for categories under which food banks and food charities can apply for pilot funding.

The first category is specifically food security and sustainability: Develop and support initiatives that strengthen local food systems, divert edible food from landfills and promote autonomy and resilience for citizens and communities.

- (0910)

The second is tourism and economic development through the craft food industry. If we facilitate the creation of, and access to, food storage and CFIA and class 5 commercial rental kitchens, catalyzing entrepreneurship to promote craft food production, this will lead to the growth of scalable food businesses, job creation and the diversification of culinary offerings.

The third is to reduce dependency on food imports. We can invest in intraprovincial and interprovincial food transportation, warehousing and cold storage infrastructure to decrease food waste, transportation costs, greenhouse gas emissions and the reliance on imported foods.

Finally, the fourth is funding barriers. We can create capacity to streamline funding channels and help charities create social enterprises to make them more sustainable.

In conclusion, Greener Village urges the committee to consider thoughtful investment into the food bank network to help reimagine and recreate the impact that it could have for all Canadians.

These recommendations are seen as concrete steps toward addressing food insecurity, fostering economic development and promoting sustainability. By investing in these initiatives, we can create a resilient and inclusive economy that benefits all citizens. We eagerly anticipate further discussions on this critical issue.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boyd.

Now we're going to hear from the mayor of Tantramar, Mayor Black.

Mr. Andrew Black (Mayor, Municipality of Tantramar): Good morning, Mr. Chair and esteemed members of the Standing Committee on Finance.

My name is Andrew Black, and I am the mayor of the new municipality of Tantramar. I am also the president of the Union of the Municipalities of New Brunswick, and as such I have a board seat with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

Mr. Chair, I want to thank everyone for the opportunity to be here today as a witness leading into the 2024 federal budget on behalf of my municipality and its constituents and of municipalities across New Brunswick. I am here today to speak about two topics that have a direct impact on my municipality, but I want to make it clear that municipalities across New Brunswick and arguably across the nation are just as impacted by these topics as Tantramar is. I know I have maybe around five minutes, so I will be brief. The focus of my remarks is housing and public health and safety.

I will start with the housing crisis that is affecting Canadians across the country and that is felt deeply here in the communities of New Brunswick. I was first elected to council just over seven years ago, and from a municipal perspective, we were not talking about housing. In the last three years, that has changed significantly, with municipalities being on the front line of the housing crisis due to population increases over the COVID years, a downloading of responsibility for housing onto the municipal sector and the fact that our constituents across the province are crying out for locally elected leaders to take action.

Mr. Chair, it does not help the situation when two of the federal leaders voice opinions on housing, one saying that it is not a primary responsibility of the federal government and the other making comments that municipalities are gatekeepers to development. The absolute reality is that being responsible for housing in local government is unfamiliar territory for municipalities, and the file is more complicated than it seems, with a cursory glance and a quick comment doing nothing to help anyone understand that complexity. I will call out here today, Mr. Chair, that we need help.

The Reaching Home program is an essential component of the federal government's response strategy for chronic homelessness. This funding, including its dedicated rural and remote stream, should be scaled up and made permanent to address current needs and engage in preventive measures. Homelessness is not going away; it will be here for a significant amount of time, unfortunately.

The rapid housing initiative is a groundbreaking direct transfer to municipalities that has the potential to make substantial change happen, but it needs to be made into a long-term program with predictable funding beyond 2024 so that each RHI unit can provide funding for wraparound health and social supports and permanent operating funding to maintain affordability.

The housing accelerator fund is now open to municipalities, and it is most welcome, but to support Canadians in search of rental options, the federal government needs to optimize and invest in critical national housing strategy programs such as the national housing co-investment fund and the rental construction financing initiative to create more affordable rental supply.

Mr. Chair, everyone needs a place to call home, and having secure, safe and appropriate housing is an anchor in addressing other needs, such as mental health and addiction supports and food security for many people in New Brunswick.

The second topic flows from the first, and that is a new approach to safer and healthier communities. Municipal governments in places such as Tantramar are the closest to the people. They are on the front lines of Canada's unmet mental health needs, often providing essential services like social and community programming, supportive housing, community outreach, and substance and addictions support services. To add to the complexity of the issue, mental health challenges are often linked with the dual crises of addiction and homelessness, with municipal governments often needing to take the lead on community well-being. A lack of affordable and supportive housing, inadequate mental health care and the impacts of systemic racism on indigenous people and racialized communities are contributing to the mental health and addictions issues manifesting in municipalities of all sizes.

Mr. Chair, the federal government needs to develop a comprehensive national mental health strategy that addresses the interconnected issues of housing, homelessness and substance abuse while increasing mental health investments in communities through sustainable long-term funding.

Community safety is also deeply connected to how we police our communities. Municipalities in New Brunswick have complex and unique public safety needs, and local leaders understand those best. With crime significantly on the rise in New Brunswick and with the recent breakdown in communication regarding RCMP back pay and negotiations, the federal government must meaningfully consult municipalities about decisions related to the future of RCMP contract policing.

I want to add one more thing to my closing remarks, and that is an urgent call to streamline and simplify federal funding applications for municipalities, whether for housing, infrastructure, climate change or anything else.

● (0915)

Many municipalities, particularly small municipalities, do not have the expertise or capacity to even dream of applying for these much-needed streams. Those processes could be torn apart and rewritten for adequate and fast-tracked approaches to funding opportunities.

Thank you once again, Mr. Chair and committee members, for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mayor Black.

Mr. Boyd, thank you.

You know, we all come from different parts of the country—different shapes, sizes, demographics. I come from Mississauga, and members are going to be able to introduce themselves as they get into their questions and let you know where they come from.

I come from a municipality of more than 800,000 people, the sixth-largest in Canada. However, I think we're all grappling with the same issues, those of housing and affordability and many of the issues that both of you have brought forward. As I said, we're looking forward to your answers to the questions from the members, so thank you.

On that note, we're going to move to our rounds of questions.

In the first round, each party will have up to six minutes to ask questions. I do ask you, members, to introduce yourselves and say where you're from before you get into your questions, and I'll provide time for that.

We're starting with the Conservatives.

We'll begin with MP Duncan, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to our witnesses. Thank you for joining us this morning.

My name is Eric Duncan. I serve as a Conservative member of Parliament from eastern Ontario, in the city of Cornwall and the significant rural area of Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry and the community of Akwesasne.

Mr. Mayor, I'm going to start with some questions for you. I use to be a mayor in my previous life, so I think that we can relate on a few things and speak the language a little bit. I noted your comments in the introduction, and I would say a couple of things. I just want to get your feedback, perhaps, on a few parts.

We have a lot of gatekeepers at the municipal level. Having been there and done that, I would say that for rural municipalities, perhaps at different levels, getting infrastructure investment—water and sewer—ready to go and having investment for development would be a challenge. We have a lot of cities right now. When you look at transit projects, they aren't building density around there. Look at the city of Vancouver; to get a building permit, in government and permit fees, you're looking at \$600,000. This is for a permit or a unit before a shovel goes into the ground for an individual.

I do think and have said, having been in municipal politics before, that there are three acronyms to remember in the line of work that we do when dealing with getting things done and making decisions on site plan control and then zoning. We have NIMBY, which everybody knows: “not in my backyard”. However, I introduced two others at the council table back in the day; I stole them from others. One is CAVE: “citizens against virtually everything”. Then sometimes you have BANANA: “build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything”.

Being able to get development projects moving forward in site planning control is a major issue. I will note, in the plan that Mr. Poilievre has in his private member's bill for building more homes, not bureaucracy, that it's actually with rural communities across the country, including the ones I represent in eastern Ontario. There would be no penalties for not meeting targets but actually only bonusing for those that actually meet targets and exceed them by doing that, by removing processes that exist there.

My question is on the federal programs. You referenced the housing accelerator fund. That program was announced two years ago. Can you tell me if you've even had a successful application or shovels in the ground in your municipality pertaining to that program?

• (0920)

Mr. Andrew Black: First off, thank you for the CAVE and BANANA acronyms. I will be using those as much as possible.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Oh, oh!

Mr. Andrew Black: The answer for my municipality is no. Don't get me wrong, though. I think the housing accelerator fund is a significant funding opportunity for municipalities.

The reality in my community—and in many, many communities in New Brunswick—is that in order to access that funding, you are required to have a housing needs assessment. If you don't have that, the application is really not even looked at. Again, larger cities may have the capacity and the money to throw at a housing needs assessment. Most small municipalities do not have that.

I realize that you don't want to give money to municipalities for housing if you don't have some idea about what they need. However, it is a little prohibitive. It certainly is for my community, and it is for many communities across New Brunswick. There have been some successful applications within the province of New Brunswick that I'm aware of. There are things happening within the province, so we're trying to get a bunch of municipalities to do housing needs assessments all at once so that we can have access to that important funding stream.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I said the housing accelerator fund, and maybe in some other programs. Where I'm going with that is here we are, two years into the program being announced, and the third announcement was just made yesterday. I just looked at the third news update. It's the third in the entire country.

The point is that it's taking an accelerator fund to accelerate housing two years on. Applications aren't even being approved and shovels aren't in the ground. Likely, with the climate we have here in the east coast, you won't be putting shovels in the ground until

next year at least, but again, that depends on permitting, availability and so forth.

The point is that when we have these programs, it's A for an announcement all the time and an F for follow-through.

I take your point about paperwork in terms of what's needed. Today, in the midst of the housing crisis in every part of the country and having to do a study to prove the housing need, the irony is that it's probably quite broad everywhere, such that any form of housing would be welcome—obviously, in different forms and numbers in different communities, but having to do a study is just one of those extra added layers.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is a federal agency. I hear a lot of complaints from municipalities about added costs and timeline delays in doing that. I go back again to many municipalities lacking examples of being able to take federal programs and bring them down.

Could you advise the committee here on what applications have been successful in the region in, say, the last three or four years, as the housing crisis has been in its aggressive form?

Mr. Andrew Black: I would say the CMHC has been supportive in reaching out if a municipality like mine, for example, has some questions around how to do housing and how to help developers. There's been support in that way.

From what I've heard in my municipality and in some others in the province, a lot of the CMHC stuff has been helping developers. Maybe it's not particularly helping non-profits or having a direct impact on municipalities building housing, but certainly it has been helpful for some developers.

We have a \$15-million dense apartment building going up in our community now. The ground has been broken, which is wonderful. That developer accessed the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Now, I will say that the developer has worked with the CMHC before, so there's a precedent there, and it is easy for him to access that. I wouldn't say that it's exactly the same for every developer.

I hope that answers your question.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Duncan.

Thank you, Mayor Black.

Now we'll go over to the Liberals, and we're starting with MP Thompson.

Ms. Joanne Thompson (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you.

Good morning. I'm Joanne Thompson, the member of Parliament for St. John's East. I'm delighted to be in Fredericton today. I'm actually quite pleased to speak to both of you.

I may start with you, Mayor Black, and Mr. Boyd, I certainly want to circle to you.

I spent many years in the not-for-profit sector in housing, homelessness and wraparound health care support. I have to shout out that during COVID, when we were absolutely struggling for support, there was a centre in Fredericton that was absolutely phenomenal with the information it was able to provide to me on emergency shelter at that time.

I'm very familiar with the concerns that both of you have expressed, but I'll stay with you now, Mayor Black. It's almost as though we're speaking about the same place, even though they're clearly different provinces.

One of the concerns I have when we oversimplify and politicize this issue is that we really take away from the complexity of the current housing crisis, as well as the link—I thank you for making that link—to the health determinants and mental health addictions, which we know are challenging. COVID has created another space in terms of the drugs that we're seeing and the mental health crisis. If there was a simple fix, I don't think we'd be having this conversation today.

One of the things I learned very clearly in my years in this sector was that layers of federal-municipal and provincial-municipal collaboration are needed to move projects forward, and there's the community sector as well. What I haven't been able to find is a really smooth, collaborative spirit among all of those sectors.

What I continue to be challenged by is the lack of understanding that this is a continuum of need from what I call the entry point to the point of self-actualization, where you have market participation in housing. I think there are seven entry points. Some say nine, but let's say there are seven entry points in how we match an understanding of actual numbers within a province for housing needs.

Why are we still—and I believe we're in a crisis point with this—struggling with separate municipalities and provincial governments in one place? We're losing that coordinated response.

What's your sense of that, and what is it that we can do to pull it together? To tackle the problem, you have to have a comprehensive solution. Other than that, we're going to continue to apply band-aids.

● (0925)

Mr. Andrew Black: Do I have 20 minutes to answer that question?

As you say, it's complicated. I think part of the problem is in communication. Communication is always an issue, but communication between the three orders of government can sometimes be prohibitive, especially when you're talking about potential funding opportunities that would trickle down to municipalities.

It's not to say that the province doesn't have a role to play in funding opportunities, but oftentimes, if federal funding goes to the province and then it gets doled out to municipalities from the province, it bundles up the process. It makes it difficult sometimes. It has certainly been the case in New Brunswick, especially around infrastructure funding, for example. That has been problematic in the province of New Brunswick for the last little while.

Communication is one thing, but it's the complexity of the issue. In housing, or if you're talking about public health and safety, these

aren't quick fixes, and it's difficult to know exactly how to approach those issues strategically and then through those three orders of government.

I don't know how to answer that question adequately, but I think the communication piece is an important one. Maybe if there was a funding opportunity that came directly from the federal government to municipalities, rather than through the province.... I know sometimes it has to happen, but anyway....

Ms. Joanne Thompson: On that note, I tend to agree with what you're saying, but I want to put it in the lens of accountability. I think we're missing data. I don't know that you can fix what you don't understand. I know there have been huge amounts of funding around data collection in the homelessness sector, yet we don't have that. We don't have the comprehensive understanding of what I call the current state.

How do we build that outcome metric that is able to determine that indeed the funding is going where it was intended and is able to evaluate the progress we're making?

● (0930)

Mr. Andrew Black: Again, that's a good question.

I would have to agree that data is incredibly important. I'll try not to get into it too much because I know I don't have a lot of time, but we have regional service commissions in the province. They're a level of government that's not a level of government. They're responsible for various mandated services. One of them is social community development that is looking at a Housing First approach at a regional level with municipalities being involved. Without any data to support the work that we do, we could be throwing money at issues that may not be an issue or that are being dealt with in a different way.

I think data collection is incredibly important. I don't know what that looks like, but I think, from a regional perspective and a provincial perspective, down to the local perspective and then federally, some stronger data collection and a coordinated effort would be appreciated.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: I'll circle back later.

The Chair: We'll have a number of chances, because we're going to go through a number of rounds here today.

We'll go over to the Bloc and MP Ste-Marie, please, for your questions.

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Mayor and Mr. Boyd. I'll be speaking French, so I'm glad to see you have your earpieces in.

I also want to say hello to my fellow members, including Mr. Stewart, who was on the Standing Committee on Finance for a good while. It's nice to see you.

Hello as well to Ms. Atwin, whose riding we are in today. Thank you for having us. Fredericton is quite a lovely city. It's a pleasure to be here.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. Boyd.

First, I'd like to hear your take on the situation. We can see that the level of poverty has grown since the pandemic. Inflation is high. As the other witness pointed out, and both of you said this, more and more people are experiencing mental illness and distress. On top of that, even when people have jobs, some families aren't able to make ends meet without help.

I'd like to hear more about the circumstances the people you work with are facing.

[English]

Mr. Alex Boyd: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for that question.

I think the challenge we're seeing is that there has been an increase in both the depth and breadth of food insecurity, meaning that we are seeing significantly more people in our community who are relying on our food bank to make ends meet. That means that this year, until the end of September, demand has been about 35.7% higher than in the previous year. The previous year it was a bit more than 34% higher than in the year before that. Those sorts of increases year over year are challenging. Maybe a better word would be "frightening", because that's a very large increase in overall demand.

What we're also seeing within that demand is a depth issue, meaning that we are experiencing about one-fifth—17%—of the people who we have conversations with reporting a net negative income for the month before they've made any consideration for having to purchase food for the month. What they are on is a destitution track. If that trend continues for that family, they will end up without a home; they will end up with nothing and they will end up I don't even know where, because there are not a lot of resources for whole families who are in that position.

We are seeing people with mental health challenges, with addiction issues and all of those things, but we have a lot of families who, at this time two years ago, were living paycheque to paycheque but were doing okay. Now, when prices rise by double-digit percentages very quickly, they are no longer treading water; they are now fully under it. That number is continuing to climb.

We're seeing higher-than-ever percentages of people who have full-time employment accessing the food bank simply because they can't keep up with inflation. Their wages aren't keeping up with inflation, and they're just not able to make ends meet.

Certainly it's a challenging time for the food bank network all the way across the country. I've had multiple conversations with colleagues as far west as Vancouver and those in Mississauga. All the way through, the food bank network is seeing the same thing: a significant increase in demand and a significant increase in the number of people who are severely food insecure.

• (0935)

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: I was going to thank you, but the situation is so bad that I'm shocked. I'm glad to find out what's happening, but I wish this wasn't the reality.

You gave a figure that really shocked me. You said that, for the past two years, demand for your food bank's services had gone up

34% and 35% annually. If my math is right, that's a total increase of 80% in two years.

Has your organization's funding gone up by 80% to keep pace with the 80% increase in demand?

[English]

Mr. Alex Boyd: I wish I could say yes, but the reality is that the answer is no. What it has meant for us is a significant increase in investment in staffing, in food and in facilities to be able to continue to meet that demand. It has led to our needing to accomplish more fundraising. We've had to become much more intentional in speaking with our community, in approaching large funders, in writing grant applications and in approaching foundations. What it's meant is a significant increase in workload for my staff overall to try to continue to secure the resources we need to make sure that no family goes hungry.

At the end of the day, if a family has come to the food bank and they need help from the food bank, our responsibility is to make sure that they walk out of the food bank with the resources they need to take care of their family. If that means that we have to invest more money to buy food because the food donations aren't as strong as they were or we have to spend more time doing fundraising so we can make sure that we have the resources to do that, that's what we're consistently doing.

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you. I commend you and your entire team. You are absolutely making a difference in people's lives. The work you're doing is very important.

In Quebec—in my riding, for instance—organizations like yours are recognized by the Quebec government and receive funding to support their mission. What they struggle with is accessing more funding to keep up with inflation every year.

Do you receive similar support from the provincial or federal government, to help you carry out your mission?

[English]

Mr. Alex Boyd: Yes. There is a small grant available to food banks from our provincial government to help cover operating expenses. Unfortunately that grant, for us, equates to less than 5% of what we need to operate—not even including the food donations side of things—so it's certainly not the government's help that enables us to continue to operate.

What I mentioned in my opening remarks is that many food banks are saying they know this problem is unsustainable. We're not going to be able to continue to meet 35% increases year over year, so we have to evolve and adapt. The challenge with evolving and adapting is that it requires even more investment from the agency.

At times, government funding is hard to navigate, and there isn't necessarily a pocket of money available to say, "Hey, food charities: Apply here, and this will help you to develop," so what we do is chase agriculture funding, because it's somewhat applicable. We're trying to make ourselves fit into these buckets of funding that are available, but it's very challenging to be able to unlock those. When we can't unlock the government money, it's hard to unlock the private philanthropic money that we're working on as well. It's certainly a challenge from a funding perspective for food banks.

I'd say of our \$1.5-million budget, almost 80% is private donations from people in the community who say, "We don't want hungry people in our community and we're going to support agencies that are doing something to make sure it doesn't happen." It is a critical time for the food bank network overall and for our agency to have government support and government teamwork at the table.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie.

[English]

We'll now go to the NDP and MP Blaikie, please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think I have the distinction of being the westernmost MP at the table today, although I come from the geographical centre of Canada and the northeast corner of Winnipeg.

I want to ask Mr. Boyd this question. Yesterday we were in Charlottetown and we heard from the guaranteed basic income coalition. We've been talking a lot about resources available for families. I know you're very busy and preoccupied with directly serving members in your community, but if you had some time.... Within the sector, folks are talking about a guaranteed basic income and what it might mean for folks to have access to those kinds of resources.

Do you support the idea of a demonstration project on Prince Edward Island?

● (0940)

Mr. Alex Boyd: Thank you for that question. It's a question that comes up a lot in our sector.

I sit on an innovation committee for Food Banks Canada, where we're trying to dream about what the food bank network will look like. We're about 40 years in from when most food banks were created in the early eighties, and we're asking what it will look like in 40 years.

That is a topic that comes up consistently. If people had more resources available, they would be able to spend those resources to get the things they need. It is part of the solution, but it's not the solution in its entirety. Food insecurity has existed for almost as long as humans have existed, so we need to have a robust thought process on how we address it. Certainly in part of it, food education has to come into it, as well as taking care of the food we've created.

We're working on a project right now to create a food rescue centre, specifically because we are wasting so much food that we've

spent the resources to create as a society. We've had the farmers spend the fuel to plow the fields to plant the food, and then because the market is soft or because there's no way to get it from point A to point B or there's no one to take it, we say that we'll just plow it back into the ground, but we've already spent the resources to use it, so we need to find a way to capture those resources. There's zero reason to throw food away if there are people in our community who need food.

I use the word "criminal", and I use it wrongly. Admittedly, it's not criminal, but there's something morally wrong with our saying that we're willing to just throw food out en masse when we have people in our communities who are struggling to feed their children. We have to look at things very broadly when it comes to food insecurity. Income is certainly a part of that conversation.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: I want to come back to the question of food waste.

When I was in high school, I had a teacher who had done some work in Bolivia. One of the stories he told that really made an impression on me was of crowds of families who didn't have access to food in any meaningful way, watching as they poured gallons of milk out in the street into a drain. They were doing it in order to support milk prices for those who could purchase it.

I wonder if you can speak a bit to some of the ways in which food waste is created in order to support higher prices at the grocery store and higher profits for grocers.

Mr. Alex Boyd: That's an excellent question. I don't think our system is quite so blatant with it, but I'm sure the same sort of thing does exist in some fashion.

We are much more concerned about the beauty of food, the presentation of food and the price of food than we are about the health and the accessibility of food for the people who need it. Many times, because of a lack of labour, they can't glean the field. Food is left in the field to be ploughed under or to rot. Then we have children having to access food from a food bank because they don't have enough.

I really can't speak to the economics of whether grocery stores are doing that on purpose to create profit. That's not really my level of expertise. What I do know is that there's a surplus of food that's available and going to waste. We need to consider how we can get that food back into the system in a way that is specifically designed to help the people who are most in need. If we do the right things and in 20 years we've significantly reduced food insecurity, that need won't change. We'll still be looking at how we can reclaim that food and get it to the people who can use it. Maybe they can pay at that point. That's fine, as long as we're not wasting the resources we create. There's no reason to create resources and then waste them. That just doesn't make sense to me.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Mr. Chair, how are we doing for time?

The Chair: You're still good. You have about a minute and a half.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

Next, this is not so much to say that it's being done in that very intentional way that we saw in Bolivia, or that my teacher was talking about, but I think for me it raises this question: What is the role of government and the public sector to try to set up a system that reclaims food waste and makes it available for folks, when we know that the people who are doing it for profit want to sell those really beautiful tomatoes at a high price in order to make a margin and might be concerned that, over time, if the ugly tomatoes are out there and people are buying them at a cheaper price, people won't be coming into their grocery stores to buy those better-looking and more expensive tomatoes?

What role does the public sector have to play in establishing that secondary market instead of leaving it to those who benefit from the primary market?

● (0945)

Mr. Alex Boyd: That's a wonderful question, Mr. Chair.

I think we can learn from other governments that are progressive in the world. France would be a good example in terms of what they've said: You can't throw out food, because it doesn't look good. They've kind of removed that as an option. I think I read that Brussels recently passed a law saying that grocers cannot throw food away. They have to find an avenue for food that's not waste.

Certainly there is no smooth and easy answer to say, "Hey, this is how we can immediately start to reclaim that food." That is why, in my recommendations, I've advocated investing in the existing network. We've built a food bank network, which I'm part of, over the last 40 years. It has capacity. It has intelligent people. It has innovation in mind. If we can equip them to utilize those things, then they will apply it to the problems they see in their local community.

With what we're seeing in Fredericton, food waste is a big part of what we're working on. We see it as a need for New Brunswick. That may not be the same in your riding. It may be very different. If they can apply for funding to help them to meet the needs they are seeing locally, then we'll start to fill the gaps. After we fill the gaps, then we'll start to spread out. The gaps will get smaller and smaller the more we fill them. It will become Swiss cheese with smaller and smaller holes until the whole block is full, but we can't start where we are, because right now there are more gaps, and there's nothing to paste to.

We really need to look at how we can make legislation to make it harder for people to waste food. We also have to create the capacity so that the wasted food has somewhere to go. Otherwise, what happens?

The Chair: Thank you, MP Blaikie.

We will now move to our second round of questions, members and witnesses.

MP Stewart, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Jake Stewart (Miramichi—Grand Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for being here today.

One thing I picked up in the last little piece was the part about the grocery stores. I think one of the downfalls we've had from gov-

ernment is that when you subsidize very wealthy grocery store chains and give them the money to buy brand new freezers and refrigeration when they have record profits, it's a terrible decision on behalf of the government. It does nothing for food pricing. We have seen 6.9% food inflation as of August, and it was 9% before then.

I'm sure at the food bank end of it, Mr. Boyd, where you work, you must have seen a total influx in the last couple of years. I'm wondering if you could just touch on the demographics you are seeing and on how that has evolved over the past maybe two or three years.

Mr. Alex Boyd: Thank you for that question.

The reality is that the demographic is switching. We see in our general scheme that we're now up to over one-fifth who are full-time employees. They've done everything fairly well: They've secured employment, they're working hard to feed their families and they're still not making it.

For food banks especially, it's a double whammy, because the demand is increasing, but our food prices aren't the same as they were two years ago. The can of soup that we could get with our relationship and was 49¢ two years ago is 99¢ today. Not only do we have a demand challenge for food banks; we also have a price increase in providing that. When milk goes up by 5¢ a litre, everyone goes, "Oh man, 5¢ a litre—that's awful." Well, we buy at least 4,000 litres every month and sometimes more. That demand increase has a big impact.

The number of children we're serving is slightly up—32% to 33%. As we see more working families, we're probably going to expect that to continue to rise, because working families often have children at home, and they're struggling. We're also seeing an increase in our number of seniors, of people who are living on a retirement fixed income and are finding that the resources do not stretch as far as they used to stretch, which is very difficult, obviously, for someone who has worked their whole life, had a good career and is in retirement. They're not really needing to go back to work, but they're feeling that they're having a hard time stretching things. We are seeing demographic changes, and we'll probably continue to see that as long as the inflation levels stay as high as they are, because it's just a challenge to deal with.

● (0950)

Mr. Jake Stewart: I appreciate that response, Mr. Boyd. With inflation, I think the government has been inflating the prices, which basically takes the goods we need and puts up the cost of them.

I want to tell you a story I heard from the leader of our party not long ago. It's from a place called Manotick, which I believe is in his riding in the eastern part of Ontario. They're synonymous for tomatoes. I'm not an expert and I don't know if they're the baby tomatoes or what kind they are, but I know that it became.... This town has a company called SunTech. It's a very big company and it's one of the large industries in the area. With the cost of doing business, with all of the multiple carbon tax increases and the inflation over the last couple of years, it actually became cheaper for Manotick to truck or ship its tomatoes in from Mexico.

Here's a Canadian town and a Canadian company that has vast experience in growing tomatoes, which is very important, and because of the cost of doing business, it's cheaper to get them from Mexico. That is a sure sign of the carbon tax weakness and the inflated prices weakness of the last couple of years.

As you know, I represent Miramichi—Grand Lake, an extremely rural riding. It's a riding where the Internet mobility service is 25 years behind places like South Korea. Most of our industry was forestry. Most of it is gone. There are definitely some addictions and some mental health issues. There are people out on bail who should be in jail; we have a number of people like that, and it's a revolving door.

I'm just wondering.... With respect to Greener Village, you mentioned seniors. I wanted to drill down on that. I'm noticing in my constituency that the seniors are really struggling. In my riding, there are a lot of seniors; that's the largest population. I live in Blackville. It's a little English community. It's a kind of satellite for the city of Miramichi, I guess, these days, and I'm seeing senior citizens who are struggling worse than I've ever seen. They're making decisions.... They can't pay their hydro bills. They're buying very unhealthy food because of the cost of food. Can you elaborate on what you're seeing with the decisions that people are making based on food?

Mr. Alex Boyd: Thank you for that.

It's really hard to speak about it because it's challenging, but one story I will share because it's poignant. A senior citizen mentioned that they're halving their medications: "The choice was rent or the cost of the medication that I'm taking, so I'll just take half the dosage, and that way I can stretch that prescription twice as long." I think we all know that's not how medicine works. You need to take the dosage that you're prescribed for it to have the effect that it's supposed to have.

For people who are in that position, this is an extremely difficult environment. If you're deciding to halve your medication, that means you are in a very difficult position financially. I think that to stay alive people across our country are making extremely difficult decisions, decisions that they shouldn't have to make in the country of Canada. With our bounty, with the blessings that we have in our environment and the ability to grow more food, it shouldn't be existing that way, but it is.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're going to the Liberals. Go ahead, MP Atwin.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, everyone, for being here.

It's very exciting to have a committee meeting in the city of Fredericton. It was just a short drive for me to get here this morning. I really appreciate my colleagues' coming and participating in such important conversations.

Alex, I know that you and I have had many a conversation as well. I'd love to use my time to just allow you to share more about the incredible things that Greener Village does and how we can help you do what you need to do to expand. I know that there have

been several funding applications that I was so happy to support and do all I could for. However, they were unsuccessful.

Really, for me, with regard to pre-budget consultations, we need to build in something that helps food banks achieve those very innovative, incredible and creative goals that we're seeing. Could you just speak to, for example, how much your program supports newcomers in the Fredericton region and the extent of your innovative plan to support indigenous and rural committees? Just speak on that value-added piece and describe how an investment in food banks is really an investment in so many other spaces in our community.

Mr. Alex Boyd: Thank you for that.

Mr. Chair, the—

A voice: I have a point of order.

• (0955)

The Chair: There is a point of order.

MP Duncan, we're just going to suspend for a second because our interpretation services are down at this time.

Now we're back.

MP Atwin, you had just posed your question to Mr. Boyd, I believe it was.

Mr. Alex Boyd: How do you, in just a few short minutes, explain the scope of what organizations like Greener Village do?

Greener Village very much started as a food bank providing food services and cans of food and helping people who were in need. That was in 1983. We have actually made the evolutionary jump one time, and that's when we bought a new property in 2012. It's a 20-acre property. We have greenhouses and growing operations there where we teach people how to grow their own food. We have a class 5 learning kitchen with a Red Seal chef who's employed by our organization full time to teach people how to use their food effectively and how to make food that tastes good, that's economical and that's healthy. You can have all three, but you have to instill time and know-how to make that happen. It's not just automatic.

When we moved to our new facility, we turned our clothing bank, which use to be piles of clothes on tables that people could rummage through, into a thrift store where clients get gift cards. They are able to shop with a gift card, and the general public can shop. This helps us to generate revenue through social enterprise to help facilitate and support our organization.

We've made that leap from an old model to a new model. It was a lot of sleepless nights. It was a lot of worrying about how we were going to push it forward, how we were going to keep the funding going, how we were going to make all these things work. We did it largely alone. We didn't have significant government support to do that. We just did it.

Today we stand on the verge of another evolution for our organization. It's not that we will change and stop doing the things that we're currently doing and doing well; instead, we're adding something new, the food rescue that I mentioned several times. We're currently in the early stages of a significant fundraising campaign to raise money to build a food rescue centre. If there's a food donation of volume, that's very hard for small agencies to deal with. Imagine, if you will, a tractor-trailer load of carrots that comes in all at one time. There are only so many carrots that you can give to food bank clients before they say that they don't need a 50-pound bag of carrots. A tractor-trailer load of carrots would mean that you would have to give away a 50-pound bag to every client for about a week to move them out the door. That's problematic.

What we're saying is that we can create a centre that can receive those carrots, process them, steam them, freeze them and repackage them. Then we have a frozen product that can continue to work for us for six months, eight months or nine months. In that way, we're giving a two-pound bag of carrots to each family who visits for a very long time. Additionally, we can then feed the food bank network in New Brunswick, which has 65 agencies in it. We can back-feed those frozen carrots into the network so that those carrots don't just help Greener Village, our agency, and the 5,000 people that we support; they also support other agencies throughout the province.

The reality is that food banks want to do this. Because of our place within our communities, the people that we serve and the relationships that we build with our client base, we realize the needs that are in the community and how we can develop. The challenge becomes how to get the funding.

What I hear from funders repeatedly when I go to tell them about our project is this: "Where's government? What is government doing to support this? We think this is a wonderful idea, but have you had any commitments or conversations with the federal government? Have you had any conversations with the provincial government? Have you had any conversations with municipal government?"

At this stage, we've had conversations with everybody, everybody who would listen. The municipal government is the only one that has come forward with the actual support.

● (1000)

The Chair: Thanks for that. You'll have more opportunity to expand.

Thank you, MP Atwin.

Now we're going to the Bloc and MP Ste-Marie, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have a very informative panel.

Before I go on, Mr. Chair, can you tell me whether I do, indeed, have two and a half minutes?

[*English*]

The Chair: We're very liberal with our time today.

Voices: Oh, oh!

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Very good.

Mr. Black, I was quite interested in every aspect of your presentation. I hope to cover a number of them, but I'm going to start with the end.

You pointed to the need to streamline the funding application process for federal programs overall, given how much capacity it requires of small municipalities. It feels as though programs are becoming more complex so that fewer applications are successful.

Can you share some of the challenges you run into?

[*English*]

Mr. Andrew Black: Through the chair, thank you for the question.

I guess the housing accelerator fund was one of the most recent ones, and I've already spoken about that. It's restrictive because of the housing needs assessment, but the application itself is also hugely onerous. It is difficult to complete.

I've had this conversation. Again, through the FCM, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, we have advocacy days in Ottawa. Those are hugely successful. I met with a couple of MPs there. One of the conversations we had was around potentially two different funding streams, maybe with funding applications for smaller and rural communities and then a funding application for a city. You don't want to differentiate between sizes of municipalities—we're all municipalities and we all do the same work—but again, there's the question of that capacity level for smaller municipalities to be able to do funding.

We have a robust staff. We have a fair number of managers in our departments within Tantramar. They do good work. They do funding applications all the time, and some are easier than others, but there are municipalities within this province and, I would guess, in provinces across the country, where you have a CAO, a chief administrative officer, who maybe is also the clerk, and that's about it. Maybe some of that funding work falls onto municipally elected officials. Chances are that they don't know how to do funding applications.

Having greater access to applications and simplifying them would help municipalities greatly. The housing accelerator fund is the most recent example, though.

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: CMHC administers the housing accelerator fund but doesn't have a history of delivering that type of programming. You alluded to that. With CMHC being put in charge of social and affordable housing programs, I worry the agency lacks the capacity it needs and, for pragmatic reasons, will have to focus on applications from major urban centres. Since their applications involve larger housing projects, CMHC would be able to allocate fewer resources to support the construction of housing. That could mean that smaller municipalities are overlooked.

Do you share my concern? From your comments, I assume you have a good level of support from CMHC. What are your thoughts on what I just said?

[English]

Mr. Andrew Black: Well, I guess I'm not sure if that's the case. I don't know if larger cities tend to get looked at over smaller communities by the CMHC, but I would think that larger cities would be able to submit more applications, and their applications may be more complex.

I know that municipalities do get kind of sidelined waiting for funding applications to be approved. There have been times in the past in Tantramar—not so much with the CMHC, but in other funding applications—when they had to come back to us for further information, mostly around infrastructure funding. That, of course, delays us in being able to do the work. In the case of housing, it would be the same thing.

Especially when we're in a crisis right now, maybe being able to have capacity through the CMHC—maybe they would have more bodies doing the work—would increase the speed at which applications could come back, and maybe the funding would then come to municipalities to be able to build the houses people need.

• (1005)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie.

[English]

Now we'll go to the NDP with MP Blaikie.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

Mayor Black, I want to continue along similar lines. I'd say we heard in the last block the negative side of the issue. I don't mean that in any kind of a pejorative sense, but just in terms of the problems you encounter.

I wonder if you might be able to describe what you think a funding model that would empower municipalities to move forward on projects more quickly might look like, either in terms of a direct relationship with the federal government or through whatever you imagine being a more efficient model for getting those funds into communities and getting units actually built.

Mr. Andrew Black: Through the chair, that's a good question.

With respect to the housing crisis, I don't want to say it's new. The housing crisis is a bigger issue now than it was in the last few years, or was, as I said, seven years ago.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: It's been a long time in the making.

Mr. Andrew Black: In the municipality of Tantramar, I've created a mayor's round table on housing. We've had two meetings—we've met only in the last two months—to bring in non-profit organizations working in the housing sector to discuss this very issue.

What is the municipality's responsibility for housing? Are we landlords? I know municipalities do that, but not every municipality has the ability to do that. In my community, I think a funding application, from a municipal perspective, would look at supporting non-profit housing. Within our community we have non-profit housing developers who are looking to build a significant amount of housing. They, again, have to go through funding applications. It's not private investment; they're trying to generate the money they need to be able to do this work.

A baseline would be for municipalities to maybe be the go-between among the orders of government to be able to get that funding and then partner with non-profits to be able to do that work.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: We heard reference earlier to the Conservative leader and some of his thoughts on housing. One of the things he's proposing is to take resources out of existing funding for municipalities that don't meet a certain target for new units, like the GST rebate and the gas tax.

When municipalities are already struggling to deliver housing, do you think that reducing their resources would help or hinder their efforts to build housing in their communities?

Mr. Andrew Black: It's a good question.

I think it would hinder, certainly. I think the housing issue from a municipal perspective, as I said, is so complex. We have been pushed into this realm of dealing with housing where we've never had to before. In New Brunswick, the same thing goes for health care. We've been pushed into this environment that is not really our responsibility.

Because it's so complex and because municipalities currently don't have the capacity to be able to build housing units and we're still trying to struggle with what our position and our role and our responsibility are with private development and non-profit development, it seems a little too early to be taking resources away.

If we all knew what role and responsibility we had to play within housing as municipalities, then maybe there would be a higher level of accountability for us to demand to build housing, but at this point it's still too early to tell what role we play. To take access to funding to build housing away from municipalities would be hugely detrimental.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Blaikie.

We'll now go to the Conservatives and MP Duncan for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. You couldn't have timed that any better to clarify the comments of Mr. Blaikie.

It is for big cities that are not meeting targets. They are setting plans or passing resolutions and having all these ambitions, but the actual follow-through is not going there. Again, I'm happy to promote the merits of our leader Mr. Poilievre's private member's bill and to say that those penalties will happen to large cities that have targets.

I can assure you that your municipality would not fall into that. Rather, what we would do is that rural communities that are leading with that would be bonused for those that have targets and exceed them, that are building and adding to the housing portfolio and the need for 3.5 million homes, according to the CMHC. That means we have to triple the current number of housing starts that we had last year. As a point, now we're actually seeing housing starts decrease, not triple like they need to, just to meet demand. I wanted to note that for the record to make sure for a second time that we're clear on that and that there's no misinformation.

Mr. Boyd, I appreciate your presentation. The statistics you've provided have been very helpful in understanding the seriousness and the depth of the challenge you've been facing and seeing on the front lines of what you and your staff have been doing. I want to give you a bit more of an opportunity to speak.

I think one of the things we deal with in public life and in policy is that stats are important. I think humanizing some of those stories is equally important. In terms of some of your exchanges earlier, are there some stories or examples that come to mind? You mentioned the senior with medications. I'm going back to a family with two parents or a single parent with children who is going from paycheque to paycheque. Could you talk about this? Obviously I'm not naming names, but these stories that humanize this are very important. It's about the severity and magnitude of where we're at in terms of the cost of living crunch in Fredericton.

● (1010)

Mr. Alex Boyd: Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yes, there are so many stories that have a sort of gut punch when you hear them, but there is also so much hope and beauty in stories as well. I'll share the story of a young lady who actually sits on my board of directors, who was a single mom of two kids and was working two jobs and still couldn't make ends meet. She would leave her job at lunchtime, tell her boss she was going for lunch, and then she would drive to Greener Village to get food assistance, because that's what she needed to do to survive.

As she did that, she also was going back to school and furthering her education. She was able to achieve a degree and upgrade her job significantly, and she was able to earn a second degree while she was at that new job. Now, she's in a job where she no longer needs the support of Greener Village. She doesn't need a food hamper from Greener Village in order to take care of her and her kids. Instead, what she's doing is telling her story.

You can see her story on our website and in our newsletters, saying that this is how the support that we give people.... It doesn't solve the problem for them, but it does keep them alive. It sustains them while we have an opportunity to seek deeper help for people so that they can get back up on their feet. In her case, she comes to an event where she speaks and tells her story, and there's not a dry eye in the room when she tells her story about how the food resources she received kept her going, how they kept her kids going and how that made sure they had the food they needed for school.

A funny thing we do with a local pizza company, one of those a hot-and-ready types of things, is that they give us their pizzas when they're done, and we're able to turn around, put them in the freezer and then give them out to clients. One story she tells is that after she had to go to the food bank, she had the pizza in the box from the store and she was able to heat it up and give it to her kids. Her kids never knew the difference. To them, it was pizza night, like any other pizza night. She tells that story and says, "Now, whenever I go to buy pizza for my kids, I buy it from that store." She tells that story and the tears are running, because food and security are human. It is emotional. It's hard to speak in a committee like that. I don't want to get emotional here, but the reality is that it's people's lives.

We do boil it down to the statistics. It's important to know the statistics and understand the demographics. It's also critically important to see the humanity, to see the newcomer families who are in Canada for their first winter. They're not expecting the car to cost what it costs or what it costs to buy parkas or all of these things, because they didn't know what Canadian life was going to be as an experience for them. I would say, "I don't know how to make this all work, and I don't even know how to find the resources." I agree with organizations across the country, like Greener Village, that come beside people at their darkest moments to give them a helping hand. We want to walk beside them for as long as they need us. That's what we're here for. I could spend the rest of this committee talking about the stories of people who are impacted, both by the food bank support and by the educational support.

How much time do I have?

● (1015)

The Chair: We're out of time, but we thank you for sharing that very human story. Thank you.

Thank you, MP Duncan.

Now we go to MP Atwin. Go ahead, please.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

I shudder to think what our community would be like without Greener Village, and you can tell story after story, for sure.

My two big requests around pre-budget consultations are absolutely supporting food banks and having a national school food program.

If a successful program were to be rolled out, I'm just wondering whether that would alleviate some of the pressures you are seeing at the food banks.

Mr. Alex Boyd: I would say there would be better support for children. I don't know that it would alleviate the need for the food bank, but it certainly would make sure that kids weren't hungry in schools.

Greener Village is also involved in school food. We work in partnership with Food Depot Alimentaire in Moncton to provide breakfast programs to 18 area schools where we provide fresh fruit, snacks, milk, eggs—breakfast materials. The food bank network is very involved in school food as well, so we would certainly encourage better school food support.

In reality, we all know how important education is. If anything is going to solve the issues of income inequality and food insecurity in our society, education has the best chance to actually accomplish that for people. We need to invest in our kids' education in a meaningful way so that not just kids who come from homes that are doing well but also kids who come from homes that aren't doing well are going to be able to benefit from that education.

You can't benefit from education as well if you are underfed. The brain is a muscle. It needs energy to operate, and if you're not feeding kids a good, nutritious diet, then they're coming in already hampered. We definitely need to invest in that in a meaningful way, because that makes a huge difference.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: I also can't highlight enough that it is a social determinant of health to have access to healthy foods, so there are downstream benefits as well.

I'll move quickly, with the time I have left, to the issue of housing.

MP Duncan, you mentioned the housing accelerator fund and perhaps the lack of success, to your mind. I'd really like to highlight again this difference between rural and urban, because here in Fredericton we have absolutely been able to benefit. We have record development here in the city of Fredericton: 938 new units were approved in 2022. There are 425 and counting here for 2023. We have the 12 Neighbours Community program, which has been this incredible success with tiny homes. It's just revolutionized the supports and wraparounds and peer support that we're seeing, as well as the continuum of care. There are success stories out there.

Mayor Black, I'd like to get your opinion and your thoughts on Bill C-56, which puts in place the idea of removing the GST on purpose-built rentals. Would that help support your community in any way in kind of incentivizing that new development?

Mr. Andrew Black: I think it would.

I also want to point out that the southeast region in Moncton also has had huge success with the housing accelerator fund, so I don't want to make it seem as though nobody can access it. However, the reality is that it's very small. I would even call us a “have” community. We have a university, so we have a sizable budget. Even for a “have” community like ours, a small community, it is difficult with the housing accelerator fund, but Moncton has also had significant growth, which is great.

Yes, removing the GST would certainly help in our community and other small communities as well, but again, just knowing what role and responsibility municipalities play in the housing sector is difficult. I'm not sure if the federal government can solve that problem. Maybe what's needed is for provincial and maybe municipal associations, like the one on which I serve, to have discussions with municipalities to get them to understand what role they need to play in housing development, but anything that would increase housing stock in general—affordable housing would be even better—would be greatly appreciated.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: I'll just turn quickly to the public safety piece.

I am the member for Fredericton, but I also come from Oromocto, which is a smaller community that has certainly seen an increase in crime, in substance use and in multiple issues.

You mentioned the RCMP back pay negotiation issue and the need for better communication. Is there anything you can point to that would equip municipalities to deal with this kind of mounting crisis?

• (1020)

Mr. Andrew Black: Really quickly, since we probably don't have a ton of time, I'll just say recruitment. In the province of New Brunswick, the current Minister of Public Safety and Justice wants to have 80 new RCMP officers in the province by the end of 2025. All the mayors of the southeast region met with him last Thursday, and the question I asked him was, “It's wonderful that you want to have some extra police officers for visibility and crime reduction efforts, but how confident are you that you're going to be able to recruit?” People don't want to go into the RCMP anymore. The Mass Casualty Commission report out of Nova Scotia has shed some light on maybe a longer time in Depot. These are factors with which maybe the federal government would be able to help.

Again, across the country RCMP issues arise, particularly around recruitment, so we need better conversations with municipalities when changes are made to the RCMP contracts, but recruitment efforts are going to be especially significant over the next few years.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, MP Atwin.

I'm just looking at the time, members. We won't have time for a full round, but we do have enough time for each party to have about two minutes to ask a question or two to our excellent witnesses.

We'll start with the Conservatives and MP Duncan.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Boyd, you spoke well about food inflation and the increased costs there, but could I get you to elaborate a bit more on some of the stats or, as you say, stories on housing costs?

We know that housing prices have doubled in the country. Mortgages have doubled, and rents have doubled as well. Again, that is a percentage of a family's or a household's income and the pressure it is facing. I know a lot of the stats say that ideally 30% of someone's income is for housing and shelter, and we're seeing now in many cases or regions that being doubled, so that people are spending 60%, 70% or more.

Can you talk about that from what you've seen here in the region and perhaps give us some context for that while we're here?

Mr. Alex Boyd: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's a huge issue. Housing is an increasing percentage of everyone's expenses monthly. Income hasn't risen by a similar percentage, so people who are struggling now have to struggle with whether they should buy food to feed themselves or try to keep a roof over their head. Very often, the roof over their head wins that debate, because the thought of being homeless is one that is very difficult.

Low-income people especially—people on social assistance, for instance—can't even find a room in a rooming house for 30% of the social assistance rate. It's impossible. There is no availability of any housing that makes any sense for someone unless they can get on the New Brunswick housing list, which will give them subsidized housing. There isn't. You could not find a cubbyhole for 30% of the social assistance rate, so for people who are in the most dire situations for housing, it's a complete scramble to find whatever they can find and to couch surf. We know of people who access our food bank who are living in tents, not because they're not working but because there's just no possibility for them to find housing, so they have a tent in a wooded area and they're saying they don't know when they'll ever be able to find or afford housing.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, MP Duncan.

Now we'll go to the Liberals and MP Thompson.

Go ahead, please.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I want to thank both the witnesses. This has been incredibly helpful and certainly important work in the sector. I absolutely follow what you're saying and thank you for the work you do.

I have two quick questions. I'll start with you, Mayor Black, and then go to Mr. Boyd.

In your town—I know it's a university town and it's very beautiful—do you have an understanding of the numbers with respect to what we spoke about earlier, being able to quantify the needs of the students or the individuals who are couch surfing, with respect to supported housing, to affordable housing, to market housing? Is there a number so that the housing response is able to tie into actual need?

Mr. Andrew Black: No. The easy answer is no. We know we need housing built because we have people crying out, sending emails, or posting on social media or whatever, saying they can't find any place to live.

Student housing is something altogether different. The university has its push to build residences, and there are opportunities to have off-campus housing as well, but as soon as you move a student off campus into housing in the town, it takes away an opportunity from someone who lives in the community, and we're all in the same community. I get it.

Anyway, no, there is no firm number on the housing need within our community. There's also not a firm number on how many are unhoused, because a lot of people, particularly in rural communities, are couch surfing or maybe have a tent somewhere, and it's difficult to know what that number is, as opposed to a city rate for people living on the street, where you can get a better count of the unhoused.

• (1025)

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I will argue that in the cities we still don't have those numbers, which is problematic.

Mr. Andrew Black: Sure.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: I'm sorry. I'll have to ask you more later. Thank you.

The Chair: You're out of time, MP Thompson.

We are going over to the Bloc and MP Ste-Marie.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Like Ms. Thompson, I really want to thank both of our witnesses. We are taking a lot of notes because their comments have been very helpful.

Mr. Black, during your presentation, you talked about what a difference the CMHC-administered rapid housing initiative could make. You said the government should make it a long-term program with predictable funding. Why are you recommending that?

[English]

Mr. Andrew Black: I guess it depends on what the word “permanent” means. “For the foreseeable future” may be the better term because, again, the housing crisis is not going to go away quickly. In fact, I would argue that it's probably going to get worse because we're just not building enough housing.

The rapid housing initiative has been great. I will say there are some communities.... In particular, there's one in Cape Breton, although the name is escaping me right now, that got \$11 million in the rapid housing initiative, and it ended up costing a significant amount of money to be able to use the funding to do the housing. They got the money and said they didn't have the capacity to be able to even understand what to do with this money.

There are some things to iron out in there, but for the foreseeable future, I think it would be important to have that, because the housing crisis is not going to go away. The funding that goes directly to municipalities is hugely important.

I'm trying to be quick.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Ste-Marie.

Now we go to the NDP and our final questioner, MP Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

My question is about the housing needs assessment, because I can appreciate why that's a barrier to municipalities with smaller resources and I can imagine that municipalities would love to have that information, just as as the federal government or the CMHC might enjoy having it.

I wonder whether you think there's a role for the federal government to work either with CMHC or with post-secondary institutions that are training students and doing this kind of work to try to facilitate proactive housing needs assessments for communities across Canada, so that this information is already at hand and is not something that municipalities have to scramble to create when they're preparing an application.

Mr. Andrew Black: There are two things. Because there's a recognition from the federal government and the provinces and municipalities that housing is an issue and in crisis, the housing needs assessment is hugely important. It needs to happen in order for funding to be put appropriately into communities. I think there may be a role for the federal government through the CMHC.

The other thing I'll say is that housing needs assessments are currently done by a bunch of different organizations. A municipality could reach out to a company to do it, and another municipality would reach out to a different company. The data that's collected may be the same, but it wouldn't be uniform. Having uniform housing needs assessments done within the municipalities and then regionally, provincially and federally, I think, would be advantageous.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Blaikie.

On that, on behalf of the committee members, the analysts, the clerk and the interpreters who are doing a tremendous job—we are in, I think, the only bilingual province in all of Canada—we want to

thank the witnesses for their testimony. You have been excellent, and we thank you for sharing all of your information and the experiences that you are encountering here in the community. That information will inform our pre-budget consultation for budget 2024.

Thank you very much.

On that, we are going to suspend as we bring in our second panel, which I'm sure is going to be just as excellent.

Thank you, members.

• (1025) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1040)

The Chair: Welcome, everybody.

We're back with a second panel of witnesses here in beautiful Fredericton, New Brunswick, at the Standing Committee on Finance. We're doing pre-budget consultations that will inform budget 2024. We're looking forward to hearing from our second set of witnesses right now.

I'm Peter Fonseca. I'm the chair of the committee. I'm a member of Parliament from Mississauga. The other members will introduce themselves as they get into their round of questions and speak to the witnesses.

First, from the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, we have Maria Richard, first vice-president. We also have, from the Société Nationale de l'Acadie, Martin Théberge, president of the board of directors.

Welcome to both.

We'll start with you, Ms. Richard. You have five minutes for an opening statement. Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Ms. Maria Richard (First Vice-President, New Brunswick Nurses Union, Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions): Good morning. My name is Maria Richard, and I am the first vice-president of the New Brunswick Nurses Union. I am here today on behalf of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, or CFNU.

The CFNU brings together nine provincial nurses unions from every province except Quebec, as well as the Canadian Nursing Students' Association. As Canada's largest nurses organization, the CFNU is the voice of 250,000 front-line nurses and nursing students. We work tirelessly to protect the quality of health care for patients and our public health care system.

[English]

Canada's nurses face an extremely dire daily reality. Currently in New Brunswick, we have approximately 1,000 nursing positions vacant. For a nursing union that represents 8,500 members, this is a huge vacancy rate. At the same time, nurses are being asked to care for more patients. Retention of mid-career and late-career nurses in the province is a problem.

Nurses are tired of working overtime and being short-staffed. We know that they are leaving public health care at alarming rates. Why has New Brunswick seen an increase in the use of agency nurses in the past years, something that has never been the case for our province? It's because the retention of nurses is suffering. Not enough nurses are being hired. Nurses are burnt out and leaving the profession. Something has to give. According to a nationwide survey conducted earlier this year, four in 10 nurses intend to retire, leave their jobs or leave the nursing profession entirely.

• (1045)

[Translation]

No single province or territory can steer this ship on its own—federal leadership is needed. Budget 2024 provides a unique opportunity for the federal government to build on its historic investments in our health care systems in 2023, with targeted and strategic supports that are urgently needed to address the nursing and broader health worker shortage crisis.

In its brief to the committee, the CFNU outlines six recommendations for the 2024 federal budget. In the interest of time, I will simply list each of them, but I would be happy to elaborate on them during the discussion with the committee members.

[English]

Canada's nurses recommend that the federal government introduce a tax credit for nurses and other health professionals that incentivizes the retention and return of health professionals to the workforce.

We also recommend that the government provide funding in the amount of \$8 million over four years through the Public Health Agency of Canada to tailor and pilot an Internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy program for nurses.

We recommend as well that the government work with the provinces and territories to set legislative limits on consecutive hours of work for nurses.

We recommend that the government include measures in the bilateral health agreements with provinces and territories that phase out private nursing agencies from provincial spending, ensuring federal investments aren't wasted on private agency profits.

We recommend that the government earmark \$10 million in funding to establish a health workplace violence reduction plan that includes key recommendations from the parliamentary health committee's study from 2019, including a national public awareness campaign, a pan-Canadian framework for the prevention of violence in health care settings, targeted funding to upgrade violence prevention infrastructure and training, and appropriate training of prosecutors and public safety personnel to enforce Bill C-3.

Finally, we recommend that the government lead a national nursing retention strategy in partnership with provincial and territorial governments that advances proven retention, return and recruitment initiatives, including adopting safe staffing measures, expanding nursing programs and supporting students with mentorship and paid preceptorships, supporting nurses across their careers through initiatives such as bridging programs and flexible schedules, and expediting registration and workforce integration for internationally educated nurses through an ethical framework.

Thank you. I look forward to receiving any questions or comments on our recommendations.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Richard.

[English]

Now we'll hear from Monsieur Thériège.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Thériège (President, Société nationale de l'Acadie): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for having me.

I'd like to start by saying a few words about who we are. The Société nationale de l'Acadie, or SNA, has been the voice of Acadians since 1881, making it the oldest organization in Canada's French-speaking community. SNA has a unique mission. Not only does it represent a linguistic community, but it also promotes and protects the rights and interests of a distinct population: the Acadian people. SNA brings together Acadian organizations from the four Atlantic provinces, as well as associate members from around the world.

Keeping alive and nurturing an entire people without state institutions is no easy feat. It takes considerable human resources, community support and, of course, funding.

Let me be clear: SNA is very concerned about the lack of federal support for its mission, the only one of its kind in the country.

With that in mind, I have three priorities to share with you today.

First, I want to discuss funding for National Acadian Day.

Through the celebrate Canada program, Heritage Canada funds activities to mark four major celebrations in Canada: National Indigenous Peoples Day, Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day, Canadian Multiculturalism Day and Canada Day. National Acadian Day is not one of them—despite being a unique opportunity to express our pride and our place from coast to coast to coast and to celebrate the Acadian people, their determination and their courage. The day is also an opportunity to reflect on our motto—in unity, there is strength—a value central to our history and our future.

At our urging, in 2019, Canadian Heritage began providing funding for National Acadian Day, as a pilot project under the celebration and commemoration program. The funding was not renewed in budget 2023. This financial assistance supported community activities highlighting Acadia right across the country, including in Quebec and as far as the Northwest Territories. More than 200 community celebrations have been held since 2019. In 2022, a total of 67 communities throughout the country received funding. Thanks to this support, small communities and predominantly English-speaking communities that could not afford to celebrate National Acadian Day previously were able to do so.

What's more, CBC/Radio-Canada provides additional funding of approximately \$135,000, depending on the year, to pick up and broadcast the official show. Producing a show of this scale for national broadcast by CBC/Radio-Canada would simply not be possible without the financial support Canadian Heritage provides, which has a leveraging effect when it comes to other backers.

We strongly urge the government to make this funding permanent and include it in the next fall economic statement as well as in budget 2024. To that end, we are calling on Canadian Heritage to recognize funding for National Acadian Day as part of the celebrate Canada program.

Second, I want to talk about funding for Acadia's international mission.

For more than 60 years, SNA has been active on the international stage, working to bring together members of the Acadian community all over the world and securing a place in international bodies. Those include the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, which we have been part of since 2005, as an international non-governmental organization, and UNESCO, where we have been present since 2021.

We have extensive international experience. Take, for instance, our bilateral agreement with France, which every jurisdiction in the country has renewed since the 1960s. It's worth noting that this is the only bilateral agreement the French government has with a stakeholder that is not another government. We also have bilateral agreements with Belgium and the Wallonia-Brussels community, and a relationship with Louisiana Cajuns. Wherever it may be, we exemplify a people without a state who have a strong civil society, pioneers in community governance, youth leadership and identity-building, and a community with excellent tools for sharing its experience and know-how with the world.

The work we do and the tools we have developed to promote our culture and artists, and encourage francophone immigration and

mobility among our youth are unmatched in the country. Nevertheless, the federal government fails to recognize our work and provide resources to support it. We had hoped that the government would duly recognize our civil diplomacy efforts in the new action plan for official languages, but we were sorely disappointed.

That is why we are here today, reiterating how important it is for the government to recognize the unique nature of the Acadian people and include funding in budget 2024 so that the voice of the Acadian people, SNA, can carry out its international work. We are calling on Canada to develop a civil diplomacy strategy that recognizes the Acadian community's unique nature and expertise in this arena. Targeted investments to showcase Acadian artists on the world stage and to support the international mobility of our youth would be transformational, in our view.

● (1050)

Third, I would like to address the issue of funding for Acadian organizations, so I will conclude by talking about all the organizations that, like the SNA, are dedicated to the development of our Acadia.

Dramatic increases in the cost of living and inflation have put a strain on our already modest budgets. This situation, which affects all sectors of our society, makes our work increasingly difficult and has a negative impact on our employees and volunteers, who are constantly being asked to do more. We are therefore asking for an increase in core funding for our organizations to correct this imbalance.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention. I hope you will see that this is about recognizing the Acadian people, but also about the fact that the initiatives we are putting in place are beneficial to Canada as a whole, to its values and its own actions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Théberge.

[English]

As we move into our first round of questions, I did introduce myself and I'm going to ask the members to reintroduce themselves, as this is our second panel of witnesses. As I said, with just two witnesses, we have time for you to be able to expand and elaborate. We'll give a fair amount of leeway to the amount of time that we usually give to the different parties and members.

With that, we are starting with the Conservatives. As I said, there is leeway.

MP Stewart, you have six minutes.

● (1055)

Mr. Jake Stewart: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, both of you, for being here today.

My question is for Mr. Théberge.

I am wondering about your annual budget. Could you tell us what your annual budget would be?

Mr. Martin Th  berge: Our annual budget varies a lot, because it's mainly based on projects. Our base funding is at \$363,000, if I remember correctly. Then the rest is all projects. With that \$363,000, we manage to have three members of a very strong team. How do you say it—"small but mighty"? That's our team.

Then we have been able, through the years, to raise funding through projects and different initiatives to have a team of up to 10 people. That, in itself, is almost a full-time job for one person—to just do grant applications and the reports that come from it and whatnot.

Our yearly budget will vary; it's around roughly \$1 million, maybe a little more. However, the core funding is at \$363,000.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Okay.

You mentioned Acadian artists.

Obviously, the government has passed laws that basically censor things on the Internet. It wants to control what Canadians see online, what they say online, what they hear online. Earlier, before that bill went through... I mean, I was a musician and a singer. As for my children, some of them are musicians and some of them write music as well, as I did. In the early goings, some of the musicians I knew thought it would be good. That was in the early goings. However, near the end, they were really disappointed. Some of them are influencers, too. They run podcasts and such. Some of the musicians in particular that I was speaking to...

Have you had any conversation with those in your membership who are concerned? I mean, clearly one of your top priorities is Acadian artists and the promotion of them, which I think is extremely important. I agree with you 100% on that. I'm just wondering whether you have had any feedback from your normal Acadian membership on the censorship on the Internet with respect to their artistry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Th  berge: I will speak in French, because there are technical terms that I am less familiar with in English.

I can't speak specifically to the situation of artists in Canada, because our work is really more export-oriented, meaning, artists who go outside the country. However, there is a continuum. For example, a local artist is invited to play guitar at a sugar shack event, and then ends up touring provincially and later nationally. A number of organizations support these people, and their representatives will be able to speak to the situation better than I can. For our part, we take over when professional artists are ready to export. We collaborate with festivals in Europe, Louisiana and elsewhere. Our job is really to promote and export the artists and their cultural products. That's what we're working on, but our funding is decreasing.

For example, the R  seau atlantique de diffusion des arts de la sc  ne, or RADARTS, organizes the annual FrancoF  te en Acadie. We usually manage to raise money to bring in international delegations, who in turn buy shows to present in Europe. However, their funding is also decreasing. As we often say in French, it's like melting snow in the sun. That's what's happening. The entire continuum is affected.

I can't answer your question exactly, and I apologize for that.

[*English*]

The Chair: You have about two minutes left.

Mr. Jake Stewart: Thank you.

I appreciate your answer and clearly I understand. To promote the local artisans whether they're going on the road or doing a local performance or abroad, I get that. It's extremely important. I get what you said on funding. Clearly, funding for the arts is always important. I agree 100% on that, and I can only imagine how important it would be to the Acadians as well. I'm just saying that the censorship legislation will make it more difficult for Acadians to promote their art on the Internet.

Government funding may come and it may not come. You may get more support. You may not. Clearly, so far you're not, but I'm saying that the promotion of their art will be restricted more because of these new Internet laws, and I think that's going to be very restrictive for artists. I just wanted to point that out.

I also wanted to say that I have the privilege of representing Acadians in Baie-Sainte-Anne, Escuminac, Neguac, Rogersville, Lagac  ville and Hacheyville.

I think Rogersville has a new name. I have to get it right: Nouvelle-Arcadie.

I appreciate you being here today. I'll probably have some more questions in a bit.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1100)

Mr. Martin Th  berge: I have taken note of it. I'll follow up on this as well. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, MP Stewart.

Now we'll go to the Liberals with MP Thompson, please.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

Again, welcome to both witnesses. I'm Joanne Thompson, the MP for St. John's East.

I have to start with the nursing union, because I began my career as a nurse and went back to it. It was part of my community work quite a number of years ago. I speak regularly with nurses in the province. I've been very active in trying to support certain community collaborative approaches, but nurses are the backbone of much of that work.

Thank you for the recommendations. Actually, I think they're incredibly helpful. The level of preparation is no surprise.

I want to give you the time to speak in more detail about all the priorities, probably, but also about the understanding that with the health transfer, which is quite spectacular, the federal government was able to work an arrangement with provinces and territories around accountability with regard to how the transfer of funds will be allocated. Within that context and the understanding that ultimately the delivery of services sits with the provinces and the territories, I'd be interested to hear your thoughts, please, on the real role that the federal government can play around that accountability and ensuring that there's particular focus in the funds on nursing and health care.

Ms. Maria Richard: Well, for sure I think the magic word is “hear” and the most important word is “accountability”. We cannot have an agreement that has no accountability on the province side.

We talked in our brief about steering the boat; the federal government has to steer that boat. To be perfectly honest with you, if we leave it to the provinces, it's going to be a hodgepodge of God only knows what. The thing is that in our recommendations, one of them is not more important than the other, but I think if we're....

I just arrived on Sunday from an international conference in the United States. The problems are the same across the world. There's a nursing shortage, and this nursing shortage is directly related to retention and recruitment. In the States and other places where it's private for-profit health care, they have a unique situation. They're telling us in the United States that they don't have a retention problem. They know they have a million nurses who are not working in the system because the private for-profit industries are keeping them out of the system.

In Canada we're seeing a retention and recruitment problem that is causing, for current nurses, what becomes a domino effect. Nurses are overworked. They're asked to stay. In New Brunswick and across Canada, we have nurses who are working 16- and 24-hour shifts. There needs to be a balance. The federal government can work on controlling this by putting in some incentives and restrictions on work hours. We see it in the civil aviation and transport industry, where the federal government has put in some restrictions. It works for them.

My husband is a trucker. After 13 hours of work, he has no choice; he has to stop. The truck is computerized, and at one point, the truck will stop, so if my husband is a trucker and he has to stop, how can we explain that nurses are working 16- and 24-hour shifts? They're supposed to be working safely. They're supposed to be giving optimum care to patients. We know that the more nurses work and the longer they work, the more it has an effect on their work injuries, on their own health and on the safety of patients' care.

We know that in Canada, medical errors cost an estimated \$2.75 billion in additional costs every year due to errors. Are all errors caused by nurses being overworked and tired? No, but there is a correlation. We know that nurses' fatigue is related to work-related injuries. That costs \$989 million annually. We're at a point in Canada where we need to implement safe hours of work. When we look at other jurisdictions across the world, there is a direct correlation between the nurse-patient ratio and optimum health care. Patients are not staying as long in the hospital, which means there's a cost savings, and the quality of care is better.

We talked about our recommendation for tax benefits for nurses and other health professionals. Nurses have told us that they would stay longer if they were paying less income tax. We're encouraging the federal government to look at incentives. We have commissioned an accounting firm to provide recommendations on the design of hypothetical federal tax incentives. The firm is almost done. We will be sharing that with the committee.

There are other recommendations, such as mental health support for nurses.

• (1105)

Nurses were already working short before COVID. What COVID has done to nurses and health care professionals.... Nurses need mental health help. The information we have is that one in 10 nurses, if not more, is dealing with mental health issues.

I'm sorry. Being a nurse means you get emotional.

Right now, the fact that nurses are working short all the time, and so much, means they're having to deal with the moral and ethical dilemmas of doing their job. They're going home routinely, if not every day, feeling like they've not given the care they were trained to give, and it's taken its toll.

We're going to get through this. I'm going to get through this.

We're recommending that nurses get mental health support. The Public Health Agency of Canada has expressed a strong interest in partnering with CFNU and the research team behind the Internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy program called PSPNET to tailor it to nurses. This program has already been set up through a \$10-million federal investment for Public Safety Canada staff.

We commend the government for supporting the mental health of public personnel, but we call on it to help with support for nurses, who exhibit equal and higher rates of mental disorder symptoms.

The big thing right now in New Brunswick—

The Chair: Madame Richard—

Ms. Maria Richard: I'm so sorry. I could go on....

The Chair: We are allowing for a lot of leeway with time, but I'm sure other members will have many similar questions, and you'll be able to expand upon them.

Thank you, MP Thompson.

We'll go over to the Bloc and MP Ste-Marie, please.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Ms. Richard and Mr. Th  berge. Thank you for being with us.

Ms. Richard, your testimony is very moving and reflects the situation everywhere. What nurses are going through is appalling. Overtime is mandatory in Quebec. Nurses work for hours and hours. Our hearts go out to them and to you. We want things to change.

My questions are for Mr. Th  berge.

I'm the member for Joliette, a riding northeast of Montreal, in what's known as New Acadia, a territory made up of four villages: Saint-Liguori, Saint-Jacques, Saint-Alexis and Sainte-Marie-Salom  . The inhabitants of these villages have very deep Acadian roots. Many have the last name Richard, Gaudet, Cormier, Leblanc or Landry. In fact, former Quebec premier Bernard Landry was from Saint-Jacques.

It is a pleasure to meet our witnesses today and hear what they have to say.

Mr. Th  berge, I can't believe that National Acadian Day isn't part of the celebrate Canada program and isn't recognized as a national holiday. At least a pilot project was launched in 2019, but it wasn't renewed in the last budget.

Did the Minister of Finance, the former Minister of Canadian Heritage or the new Minister of Canadian Heritage explain why the pilot project wasn't renewed? Is it because your nation no longer counts?

Mr. Martin Th  berge: I will answer by asking the following question: What would happen if the same thing occurred to the people of Quebec?

We have indeed done a lot of work.

For example, there was a letter campaign. As I mentioned, 67 communities received funding last year. They sent more than 20 letters to the new Minister of Canadian Heritage. Among the organizations that sent letters were the Association francophone des municipalit  s du Nouveau-Brunswick, which carries a lot of weight, as well as other municipalities. So the letters weren't just from community organizations. They are very important; I'm not saying that one organization is more important than another. It's just to illustrate the range of organizations that received funding last year and answered the call with over 20 letters.

There's also an online petition. I didn't check the number this morning, but I know that it has more than 400 signatures.

This clearly shows the community's desire, the Acadian people's desire to get this funding and see it continue.

I think one of the challenges with the pilot project is that it was under the celebration and commemoration program, not under the celebrate Canada program. That's always been kept separate. That's why we're asking not only that the funding be renewed, but also

that it be incorporated into the celebrate Canada program, in order to make it permanent.

As for the reason, the officials tell us that they have no idea. All they know is that the funding has stopped. Several MPs we spoke to have told us that it was simply a program review after a pilot project. In any event, the result is that this funding is not in next year's budget. Personally, when I don't have the money to go to the movies, I don't go and I don't plan to go. The Congr  s mondial acadien will be held next year. During the year when this congress is held, artists are in high demand and much more is happening. Not having access to funding will make the process even more difficult, and there will be much more impact. Planning a festival or event on the scale of National Acadian Day takes place 12 to 18 months in advance. Right now, there's no money in the budget, which prevents us from doing the planning. If we were ever granted funding, we'd have to do the planning at the last minute, which would reduce the impact of the event.

This isn't just for communities in Acadia or the Atlantic provinces. For three years, National Acadian Day was celebrated in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. It was also celebrated across Quebec. For example, I know that New Acadia received funding. So that has an impact on Canada as a whole.

It was indeed a great challenge not to have received confirmation of the return of this funding at the end of the pilot project, despite all the work we had done.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you for that information. Rest assured that the committee will do everything it can to bring this request to the attention of Pascale St-Onge and Chrystia Freeland and her team. The situation is unacceptable.

The second important point you raised was the international aspect. Why is it important for Acadian artists, both men and women, to have visibility on the international stage?

Mr. Martin Th  berge: You have to understand that this is one angle of approach, but that there are a number of others.

As I mentioned, the agreement between France and Acadia is the only bilateral agreement that the French government has with an entity that is not a government. We are the only ones with whom it has such an agreement. The next version of the agreement, which should be signed very soon, will have my signature as president of the SNA board of directors, rather than that of a prime minister or a minister.

This has been said many times, but I think we need to take the time to think it through: The artist is a key ambassador for speaking about our culture and values, as well as for bringing a sense of the imaginary and exotic to our space. When an artist appears on the international stage, it's not just the artist and their work that are presented, but the whole people or country they represent. It's important to keep this in mind. It has an impact on recruitment, on immigration and on the economy, since people tell themselves they should come visit our country.

The impact is huge and goes beyond the few thousand dollars you can give an artist to pay for things like their plane ticket. After all, plane tickets are far too expensive, so obtaining this funding can be a determining factor in deciding whether an artist will tour France or not. Let's not forget this aspect.

• (1115)

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

We'll now go to the NDP and MP Blaikie, please.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Th  berge, earlier you talked about a budget of about \$1 million. Approximately how much of that funding came from the celebrate Canada program?

Mr. Martin Th  berge: I would like to add a nuance: The Soci  t   nationale de l'Acadie has not received any of that funding. We have done the work of promoting and advocating for that funding to be available for the communities.

That said, the annual envelope is \$500,000, and it is divided in two.

The first \$250,000 is allocated to an organization to organize the official celebration of the National Acadian Day. When we think of Quebec's national holiday, we think of the show on the Plains of Abraham. It's the one that is televised every year. In Acadia, we want to showcase each of our communities, so the celebration takes place at a different location every year. This year, it was in Bouctouche, last year, in West Pubnico, and the year before, in Moncton.

In addition to the \$250,000 from Canadian Heritage, the department also provides its own resources to meet the needs in terms of technicians, camera operators, the whole management team, trucks and so on. That accounts for between \$115,000 and \$135,000, depending on the year. In the case of the 2022 show, the organization that organized it, the F  d  ration culturelle acadienne de la Nouvelle-  cosse, subsequently requested funding from the provincial government and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. Last year, for instance, the show cost about \$700,000. So there is a very strong leverage effect.

In short, the first \$250,000 is earmarked for the TV show.

The other \$250,000 is used to fund activities in the communities. Communities can request up to \$5,000 each to hire an artist or organize an activity. As I was saying, in the case of many English-speaking communities, without this funding, there would be no National Acadian Day celebrations. Without this funding, I can guarantee that a mini tintamarre celebration and a show for the National Acadian Day could not have been organized in Yellowknife. It's good for Acadia because it gives it incredible visibility, but it's also good for Canada as a whole because it celebrates one of its cultures and peoples.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: So the loss of this federal funding leads to the loss of funding from other levels of government.

Mr. Martin Th  berge: Yes, absolutely. It's major.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Every time you lose a dollar, you lose even more.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Madam Richard, one experience in Manitoba that we found frustrating that resonated with me when you were talking about mandated overtime was that we had a government that is now on its way out, but the Conservative government of the day was not coming to the bargaining table to negotiate in good faith with nurses. The working conditions were causing a lot of nurses to leave. They would go into a private agency and then be hired back into the very spaces, in some cases, where they had been working before. By working on contract through a private agency, they were able to get the kinds of accommodations in the workplace that they wanted but that governments weren't willing to negotiate at the collective bargaining table.

I'm just wondering if you could speak a little bit about the effort to try to get some of the improvements in working conditions that nurses would like to see through the collective bargaining process and the extent to which that helps to feed the very expensive proposition of using private agencies to staff our health care centres.

• (1120)

Ms. Maria Richard: We know that an agency nurse costs two to three times more than a regular nurse. Here in New Brunswick, we know that there was a private agency nurse who was paid \$300. We know that this \$300 does not go directly to this nurse. We know that two to three times a nurse's salary in New Brunswick does go to that nurse, and what happens is that the rest goes to the private, for-profit agency and then accommodations....

For us in New Brunswick in 2022, in a six-month period, it cost \$9 million for agency nurses.

Yes, there's a shortage of nurses. Yes, these agencies are.... We don't have a choice. Up north here in New Brunswick, agency nurses are keeping a specific hospital running. That's the reality. Just as you've probably seen in Manitoba, where nurses are seeming to favour the urban sites, we're also seeing that in New Brunswick. Young nurses want to be where there are more social activities, so they are choosing to live in urban areas of New Brunswick. That's the reality.

We're hoping that the federal government is going to spearhead and encourage the provinces to do as Quebec has done with its Bill 10; it is hoping to be able to have agency nurses out of the province by 2026. That's what we're hoping is going to happen.

The thing is that it becomes—you're right—a vicious circle. Nurses are overworked. They're fed up. They figure that, well, they can go and work as agency nurses and make more money.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much for that.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Blaikie.

Members and witnesses, we are moving on to our second round. Times are a little bit different in this round, but as I said, I'm being generous and very lenient with our timing.

We're starting with the Conservatives and MP Duncan.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Ms. Richard, my sister Jill would be proud today. She's an operating room nurse in my riding in eastern Ontario. She served in emergency before and also in a long-term care setting, so she's had experience on the front lines from different perspectives and certainly shares a lot of the comments that you've made, particularly about the mental health of nurses and the sustainability of the work and the pace at which they do it. I don't envy it at all.

I want to elaborate on a couple of points from your opening testimony. I appreciated the reference to working to reduce workplace violence in health care. Our Conservative colleague, Todd Doherty, from Cariboo—Prince George in B.C., has a private member's bill, Bill C-321, to make assaults against frontline health care workers an aggravating factor when considering sentencing.

You mentioned about working to reduce violence, and you mentioned some of the initiatives. From a budgetary perspective, not only is that piece of legislation important.... For example, we tried to get that passed through unanimous consent, based on that 2019 health committee recommendation, and couldn't. However, when we talk about the awareness in and around that, what do you envision from the union's perspective of what's needed—not only in the law to do that, but also in terms of whether it's internal or what we could do at a national level to help reduce workplace violence?

Ms. Maria Richard: I think there were nine recommendations that came out in 2019 from the Standing Committee on Health. We would encourage them to have a public awareness campaign to sensitize the public to the fact that it's happening and to make them realize that yes, when they are in front of a health care professional, when it's an emergency and they're at the ER and things are not going well, that the nurse, that the health care professional, is a person. Yes, these are stressful times, but by sensitizing Canadians, maybe we will diminish the amount of abuse—verbal and physical—that nurses and other health care professionals are facing.

We are also looking at a pan-Canadian framework on preventing violence in health care settings, similar to the PTSD framework that was enshrined in federal legislation. We're recommending targeted funding to upgrade infrastructure in health care facilities, which would include devices linked to security for nurses and personal alarms.

We know that patients come in with.... We've had in Moncton, at a hospital here, a patient who had a machete in his pack. If this person has psychological problems, it might get dangerous.

We commend the government for Bill C-3, but we realize that we must better inform prosecutors and public safety personnel of this updated Criminal Code to strengthen protection for health care workers and ensure that these changes are enforced. I think some of them are not cognizant of it, so it's not being enforced.

• (1125)

Ms. Maria Richard: We look at recommendations that we've made for pan-Canadian nurse workforce planning. In that pan-Canadian planning, as we bring in more internationally trained nurses, the reality of what you're seeing is that they come in, and by the time they get.... You can't just say, "I'm a nurse" and that's how it's going to happen. We have seen some advancements whereby they've streamlined or fast-tracked that process, so that is working well.

What we are seeing across Canada is that the process needs to be reminded that these nurses have a different culture from us ethically, so there needs to be a balance. If we're going to bring these nurses from the Philippines or India or other countries, we need to support them culturally as well, because they're not going to stay. They're going to move on to another province, and that won't help. We see the poaching that's happening.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I appreciate the context, the additional parts of that.

We talk about the magnitude of the mental health crisis that we face in the country, and to me, it's just stunning, almost, in the one sense. Again, a public awareness campaign, particularly in the legal community, to say that these tools are there.... We're proposing additional ones as an extra factor, for sure, but just the magnitude of where we're at, that we have to go out and say that this is necessary in today's day and age.... When we talk about mental health and we talk about some of the rising crime rates, the fact that this is even on there, despite all the other factors you face, is incredible, to say the least.

Another part of the testimony that you gave in your opening was about having the credentials of international students or health care workers recognized. I think "chaos" would be an understatement of where the current system is at. Even in my part of the country—eastern Ontario, the city of Cornwall—the number of Filipino Canadians, for example, who have immigrated here and have a health care background but are unable to work at all, even in health care....

Can you talk about some of the things that the federal government can do?

We've been proposing, for example, a "blue seal" program, similar to the Red Seal program, that could help provide a path—not an automatic one, but a testing regime for provinces to opt in to, as they do for the Red Seal program. Could you elaborate a bit more about the current chaos around that and how that's hurting retention and attraction?

The Chair: Thank you, MP Duncan.

We'll now move to the Liberals and MP Atwin.

[Translation]

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm the member of Parliament for this beautiful riding, so welcome.

Mr. Théberge, it is a pleasure to welcome you to our committee. On behalf of my New Brunswick colleagues, I want to tell you that we appreciate you and that we are here to support your work, as always. There really was a funding error, and we will make sure that it doesn't happen again. I think some good news is to come on that front.

This is important for Acadia, but also for all francophones and francophiles in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada. To me, it's about history, justice, resilience, heritage, family and the future. It's so important.

So thank you for being here and contributing to this conversation.

• (1130)

Mr. Martin Théberge: Thank you.

[English]

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: I'll switch to Madame Richard.

We know that a part of the significant investment around health care in the last budget was around data collection. In New Brunswick, I've had many conversations with health care professionals, unions and representatives. We fell over this cliff without having the numbers to project what was going to happen.

Can you speak to some of the efforts that are being undertaken now to be better at data collection and how we can use that important information to improve health care?

Ms. Maria Richard: I can't speak for the efforts that the provincial government would be making here. I know the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions has done research on mental health, retention and recruitment. That's where our recommendations come from. The federation realizes that for us to be able to make recommendations, we need to have the studies to prove them. That's why the first recommendation on tax benefits comes directly from our having surveyed our members and asking them what we can do to keep them here longer, and if they've left, what can we do to attract them to come back?

What we are doing is we've commissioned the accounting for the hypothetical federal tax. We're always doing research. We know about the mental health support for nurses and we're working with universities. On PSPNET, it was a university in Manitoba, I think, that spearheaded that through some federal funding from the government.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Excellent.

I have some dear friends who work in health care in the province. I don't know if "disturbing" is the word, but I've seen the trend that people are leaving the profession to pursue medical aesthetics or other avenues that will allow them to have more freedom, perhaps, or have more of a work-life balance and increase their compensation rates.

Is this something that you're also seeing quite a bit of?

Ms. Maria Richard: Yes, we are seeing it.

I was talking to Ms. Thompson before we started. The reality is that for young nurses now, maybe we've been doing it all wrong. I'm a mature nurse and what we call a "seasoned" nurse. The thing is that maybe we were doing it wrong; they want work-life balance. The decisions they make are geared toward that. For them, they come in to work, and after a year or two they say, "Look, it isn't work-life balance when you get here in the morning and you don't know when you're going home at night."

I have a code of conduct. It's called "patient abandonment". If I am not replaced at work, I have to stay there. When you have family responsibilities and you're trying to balance that, what we're seeing is that nurses are leaving the profession or going to aesthetic work or training to do all sorts of other careers. That's why we're seeing the shortage that we're seeing.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Chair, do I have time for one more question?

The Chair: Sure. You have time for a quick question.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Okay.

Just quickly, under the national nursing retention strategy recommendation, there's a piece about mentorship and paid preceptorships. Can you speak to the importance of that?

Ms. Maria Richard: The reality we're seeing is that young nurses are coming into the profession, and yes, they have had some experience, but they need that support. Because there's such a nursing shortage all across Canada—and if I'm going to speak, I'm going to speak about New Brunswick—where nurses have retired, the nurses are so overworked on the floors that they don't have the time to give that support to these young nurses.

There are different types of preceptorships. When a nursing student is studying, they do a preceptorship. If we had tax incentives for nurses to not be taxed to the roof if they choose to come back from retirement—as we saw, a lot of them came back during COVID to support health care—it would mean that we would be able to support these nurses.

There are also paid preceptorships for nurses. What's happening is that when a doctor is training to be a doctor, they get paid to be interns. Nurses don't get paid to go in and work side by side. That's the reality of it. Why not reimburse them? That's what we're saying. It probably would encourage more students to go into nursing.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, MP Atwin.

Now we will go to the Bloc with MP Ste-Marie.

[Translation]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Quebec now has a scholarship program for nursing students.

Mr. Théberge: you were talking about core funding for Acadian organizations. As we know, inflation has been super high over the past two years. This means that the government is generating much more revenue through taxes.

As everything costs more, it would be normal for transfers and core funding for organizations to be adjusted for inflation. Is this the case?

Mr. Martin Th  berge: It is necessary. This is a demand that organizations and, even more broadly, official language minority communities have been making for years.

At the Soci  t   nationale de l'Acadie, for example, last year we had to go from four permanent employees to three. All costs are going up, whether it's electricity, heating, rent or travel. We have an agreement with Wallonie-Bruxelles International and with France, so we have to work on these agreements. I don't know if you've bought a plane ticket lately, but the prices make me want to pull out the few hairs I have left. The only place where we have any flexibility is in human resources. We can't decide to pay only half our rent this month. We can't decide to have an Internet connection only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. So we have no choice but to cut back on human resources. I work full time as president, I have a low salary and my own business suffers as a result. That's the situation we're in. Inflation has not been recognized at all, not to mention past delays. What we're going through right now is major. It's even worse these days.

There are also societal changes on top of this. Statistics show that the number of hours people devote to volunteering is declining. Yet we need volunteers more and more, as we can't afford to pay our employees. Something has to give eventually, and the solution has to come from funding. We need to have that support. It's an unbelievable situation.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: That's very clear. Thank you very much.

I'd like to remind you and my colleagues of one thing: When there is inflation, the government sees its revenues increase proportionately. So I find it deplorable that support is not automatically adjusted.

The latest version of the Official Languages Act does not provide for an automatic mechanism to take inflation into account when it comes to support for Acadian organizations like yours. Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Martin Th  berge: The act does not take inflation into account, but we were hopeful that it would be part of the action plan for official languages 2023-2028. However, we're still waiting for official confirmation of funding for the current year. From what we've heard, it would be a 12.5% increase, but this has yet to be confirmed. What's more, it would not be a general increase. So there are a lot more questions than answers right now.

A 12.5% increase won't even enable SNA to rehire another employee. Instead, it will be used to pay down the deficit. In the current year, we've had to make a number of changes, otherwise we'd be facing a \$95,000 deficit. It's clearly and simply because of the

increase in the cost of living. That said, a 12.5% increase in our core programming budget won't solve this problem, as there will still be a shortfall.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: We will follow up with Randy Boissonnault.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ste-Marie.

[English]

Now we'll go to the NDP and MP Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

Ms. Richard, you used the word "poaching" earlier. I come from Manitoba, and I think smaller provinces are especially concerned that when you invest a lot more in training health professionals of whatever kind, larger provinces with bigger tax bases are going to scoop up folks, either with signing bonuses or with other things like that.

I wonder if you could speak to the importance of trying to have a national strategy. This is not to say it's a strategy developed in Ottawa, but for the federal government to use its convening power to bring provinces together to talk about what their health human resource needs are and then develop a plan to be able to train them. This is so that everybody has what they need, instead of having 10 different plans, some of which include taking from some provinces and giving to others.

I wonder if you might elaborate a bit more on that.

• (1140)

Ms. Maria Richard: That's why we think it's vital for the bilateral health agreements with provinces and territories to be anchored in a holistic national nursing retention strategy. We don't have a choice.

When we talk about poaching, the reality is that when nurses are tired, when nurses are frustrated and when they're not getting their needs met, they're going to go and look somewhere else. The reality is that we're seeing poaching happening. Apparently, India has now told organizations going into that country to recruit nurses that they have to stop, because India needs its nurses there.

We saw what happened here in New Brunswick when Nova Scotia came out with retention bonuses or retention incentives to keep its nurses. For us, that's another story, but nurses were so frustrated and felt so disrespected. Everybody needs to work together. All of the provinces need to work together so that we can find a balance.

If we're going to do this, we need to support nurses throughout their continuing work. If we have a licensed practical nurse who wants to become a nurse practitioner, having a pan-Canadian nurse workforce plan will help with that, because we'll be able to treat everybody the same way.

By improving retention and recruitment in each province, hopefully we will encourage nurses who have trained in Manitoba to stay in Manitoba and work there and not go somewhere else because they feel the working conditions are better or the salary's better.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: One of the things at stake for New Democrats, certainly in the 2015 election, was the idea of using a national health accord approach. I'll speak for myself. I was disappointed to see the bilateral approach. I'm glad that funding is flowing, but I felt it would have been much better to pursue the health accord model whereby the federal government uses its convening power and its financial power to get provinces talking to each other about what the needs are.

Do you think it would be useful—and I recognize that the bilateral agreements are in place for a certain amount of time, and there's not a lot to do about them between then and now—to try to get back to a health accord model, as opposed to signing individual bilateral agreements with provinces in order to be able to get people on the same page?

Ms. Maria Richard: If having what you just said means that provinces will work better together, by all means, but what we've come to realize with the federal transfers of money is that if there's no accountability, the money is not going where it should be going. The only way....

If money is going to come from the federal government, it should be the one that is steering the how and the where, or at least asking the right questions: “You had a certain amount—a billion dollars. What are you doing with it?” I'm not going to be nice. “Did you buy lawn mowers or tractors with the money we gave you for health care in New Brunswick, or did you put it where it was supposed to be going?”

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, MP Blaikie.

Go ahead, MP Duncan.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Richard, if I can, I'll build on where we left off in the last round with the recognition of international students, nurses and health care workers, and some of the challenges.

I take your point as well of the apples to apples education and the standards here, with our post-secondary situation being different based on the country. However, I think one of the challenges that come from this is when new Canadians or immigrants arrive with a health care background who are given express entry and so forth because they have a health care background, yet at the end of the day they're not able to practise, or be on the path to be able to practise, between having none of their credentials recognized or no standard test to at least be able to be given entry.

The bottom line, I'd say, is it's like making a sausage. You'd never eat it if you saw it get made, in terms of how a person gets there.

Can you speak a bit about this, maybe from a New Brunswick perspective? There's obviously a gap, because there's always the intention of having express entry, but with the number who are actually able to go through and practise and have a proper path to be tested to get to a “yes” and get there, can you elaborate a bit more on some of those gaps?

I think it is important from the federal level to tie the intention with the actual frontline results at the end of the day.

• (1145)

Ms. Maria Richard: With nurses, what happens is that each province governs its regulations. Here in New Brunswick, there's an act called the Nurses Act. I think they've just opened it and it needs to be updated, because I think it hasn't been updated since the 1970s, so they're looking at different ways that....

They know there's a nursing shortage and they're trying to expedite the process. At the end of the day, yes, we need nurses, but we need to have qualified nurses who are able to do the job safely. The reality here in New Brunswick is that a nurse will be vetted by the association here in New Brunswick. Once that happens, they don't need to write what we call the NCLEX exam across Canada. They get to work. However, what nurse managers are telling us in the province is that while some of these nurses function very well, some of these nurses....

How you nurse in India or how you nurse in Croatia is different from how you nurse in Canada, so some of these nurses have a huge nursing shock when they come in. That's when we talk about preceptorship, it's not only preceptorships for nursing students, but we need.... If we could have nurses come back—because we can't spare the ones who are on the floor now—to help these internationally trained nurses to get used to how we do nursing, they'll stay in the system.

You're right in saying that we need.... The reality is that we have nurses here right now in Canada who are not practising as RNs because they weren't vetted, so they need to go through the process, and it needs to be expedited.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I appreciate that. It goes back to the “blue seal” program pitch that we make that way as well. We do have the Red Seal, which is a voluntary program that all the provinces opted into over 50 years ago to deal with skilled trades. Everyone opted in and maintained it. It's actually a very good best practice.

I agree about the standardization by province, and the voluntary opting in, but that could be replicated in that certain part. In agreeing with you, if somebody comes in as a doctor or an RN, for example, at least being able to be in a health care setting, perhaps doing PSW functions or something in there would help provide that. They could work their way up, being in there.

Again, I would just go back to the chaos. We all hear the stories about a doctor driving a cab or about the number of nurses who have some sort of health care background. Getting in and having some sort of organized, coherent process varies by province. A lot of times, for a number of those I've met for whom nothing is recognized, it goes back to the cost of living. In my area of eastern Ontario, I met a woman working at Tim Hortons who had a nursing background as an RN in India. None of it was recognized when she came into the area. She was working full time just trying to pay rent, and could only afford to do one or two courses at a time at St. Lawrence College. She figured it would be six or seven years for her to get retrained to work in a health care setting. Many just walk away because of how that works.

I appreciate the further context from a federal lens of what we can do to make it better organized and have a better outcome for the health care setting, keeping the quality, but also what we can do to have the people for whom the intention was express entry actually practising in health care in some form, working their way to that full form and their full potential.

Thank you.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, MP Duncan.

Now we're moving to our last questioner. That will be Liberal MP Thompson.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

I'll make a couple of points. Then I'll go to Madam Richard for a response on the health accord.

That is intended to be a 10-year agreement that allows us to move from political conversations to have the runway needed to implement some changes. One thing I was really pleased to see in that accord was the data management aspect, which should now be close to completion across the country and allows for outcomes and accountability so that provinces indeed do not spend the funds on lawn mowers. The funding is aligned with the pillars that provinces and territories signed on with as part of the funding exchange.

The second piece, which I know from conversations in my own province, is that the colleges or associations are highly engaged in conversations across the country around credentialing. I will say, to my colleague's comments earlier, that nursing is a highly skilled profession. The need to credential and hold to the standards, particularly for the safety and well-being of the population, is very important. I think the expertise exists across the country. The conversations are happening. Obviously, the federation plays a key role in those conversations. I don't think that's something the federal government can enter into or impose at all. I want to state that very clearly.

The third piece is the level of collaboration needed, especially in a country as diverse politically as this country is, around provinces and the ability of nurses to move from province to province, while also understanding that it is the provinces and the territories that negotiate the contracts with nurses who are responsible for health care within their own areas.

I'm interested in your comments on how the federal government is then able to work with those provincial and territorial governments to ensure that the basic protection and rights for health care, with nurses being critical to the delivery of health care, are embedded in the overarching health agreement. I just wanted to clarify a couple of points that I thought were a little misleading earlier.

Ms. Maria Richard: You're right in saying that the federal government has to steer the ship, but it ultimately becomes province-wide. Each province will have its unique needs.

If we look at the introduction for violence, Bill C-3 is governed by the federal government, and that's helped us here in the province. It has helped our nurses feel more.... Yes, there's work to be done. We need to work on educating prosecutors, public safety staff and the RCMP on the Criminal Code changes. There needs to be more enforcement. Yes, we need to have a campaign.

The fact that the federal government made that change has helped. That's why we're looking at the federal government to look at safe patient ratios. If it's not safe.... Just like the government has done with aviation and transport, set an number of hours after which a nurse has to stop, because at the end of the day, it's not safe. When a nurse has worked 24 hours, if they're lucky, they might get an hour of sleep. We don't call that sleep.

The thing is that the federal government can, with the pan-Canadian workforce planning, look at retention, look at recruitment and look at how we can better help nurses come back in the system and stay in the system.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Thompson. That's the time and the end of our session.

I want to thank our great witnesses on behalf of the committee. We thank you for your testimony informing our pre-budget consultation study in advance of our 2024 budget. Thank you for your advocacy for nurses, for artists and for New Brunswick.

We thank you as we do our tour here of the Atlantic and then the rest of the country on this study.

Thank you very much.

We are adjourned, members.

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