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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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● (1115)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are studying the federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for taking the time to be here today. We have Mr. Bruce Drewett and Courtney Keenan from the Canadian Paraplegic Association. From the Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability, we have Jane Arkell and Jason Dunkerley. From the Canadian Association for Community Living, we have Anna Macquarrie. From the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada, we have Bonnie L. Brayton. From Independent Living Canada, we have Rick Goodfellow. From the Council of Canadians, through video conference in St. John's, we have Marie White.

I'm going to give the floor to Mr. Savage, and then we will start with Mr. Drewett from the Canadian Paraplegic Association.

Mr. Savage.

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

Allow me to welcome the witnesses.

To begin this meeting, I want to mention that a number of us are in wheelchairs today: Madam Minna, Mr. Martin, and Madam Cadman. A number of others had expressed an interest, including the chair and Mr. Lessard, in being in a wheelchair. This is the brainchild of the CPA. Last year I spent a day in a wheelchair. I had the opportunity to be the chair of the committee meeting. I'm delighted that this year a number of parliamentarians are doing this. Next year we're going to look for many more to do it. The purpose is to give people some insight into what it's like to live with a disability, if only for a single day. Ottawa is one of the most accessible places in Canada, yet we still find many challenges.

I was pleased that we were able to schedule witnesses from a number of groups representing people with disabilities. Far too many people with disabilities live in poverty, and we have to find a way to make that better. This is the parliamentary committee that has responsibility for the status of persons with disabilities, and we have to do more for them.

I want to thank everybody for coming. I want to thank the CPA for the work they've done, and I want to thank the committee for scheduling this meeting. We were originally scheduled to be on the road, for hearings on poverty. We were able to reschedule that to be here. I thank the chair and the staff for their indulgence.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Savage.

Mr. Drewett.

Mr. Bruce Drewett (President, Canadian Paraplegic Association): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone. My name is Bruce Drewett, and I have the privilege of serving as the president of the Canadian Paraplegic Association. With me today is Mr. Courtney Keenan, our vice-president.

The Canadian Paraplegic Association would like to thank the standing committee for the opportunity to present today.

I would also like to point out, as did Mr. Savage, that on this day, May 7, we have a number of members of Parliament who are taking part in an awareness event on Parliament Hill. I would like to thank specific members of this committee for their involvement in this event. They include Mr. Savage, Ms. Cadman, Mr. Martin, and Ms. Minna, all easily recognizable around this table as using wheelchairs.

We believe the ideas we generate through forums such as these are invaluable, as they contribute to broadening the understanding of the issues facing Canadians with disabilities. It is our hope that our presentation and further discussion to this forum with regard to key decision-makers will help to serve and highlight the needs of the most vulnerable in our community, people with disabilities living in poverty, and that our recommendations will be considered within a broader strategy for meeting those needs.

I would like to begin with a short description of the CPA and its work with people with disabilities.

At CPA, which was formed almost 65 years ago, we are dedicated to assisting persons with spinal cord injury and other physical disabilities to achieve independence, self-reliance, and full community participation. We create direct links with Canadians with spinal cord injury, as well as with their families and caregivers, through our member services and peer networking programs.

The CPA maintains its relationship with Canadians with disabilities throughout their lives. We meet newly injured people with spinal cord injury and their families in hospitals, provide counselling services during rehabilitation, and continue to advise and assist them as they learn to navigate the community in new ways and become productive members of society once again.

While our client services remain the centrepiece of our activities, we have also been successful in bringing peers together to socialize and participate in recreational opportunities. Based on the principle that lived experience will allow people with spinal cord injury to jointly devise strategies for greater community participation, our members find improved health outcomes and empowerment through new friendships.

It is through this one-on-one and group interaction that we're able to speak to the evolving needs of people living with spinal cord injury in Canada. In working to improve the lives of people with disabilities, we also provide an important contribution to Canadian society by helping such persons overcome barriers to participation and by providing services and information to reduce health and social service costs.

More than 4.4 million Canadians have a disability of one type or another. Poverty and isolation are a shared reality for the majority of this community. In fact—

The Chair: Mr. Drewett, could you slow down a bit? Translation is having a hard time keeping up.

Mr. Bruce Drewett: Sure.

The Chair: I realize we make you pack a lot into five minutes, as well. I recognize that.

Mr. Bruce Drewett: I will slow down a bit.

In fact, Canadians with disabilities are almost twice as likely to live in poverty compared to other Canadians. For Canada's aboriginal population, the rate of disability is more than one and a half times the rate of the non-aboriginal population. Women are more likely than men to have a disability, regardless of age. We're also seeing an increase in the needs of individuals aging with spinal cord injury. Not only are members with SCI developing more complex needs as they age, but more elderly people are having spinal cord injuries.

In Canada persons with a spinal cord injury and other disabilities are discriminated against on a daily basis and often face economic, social, and environmental barriers. Clearly government processes and programs in place to promote equal participation for Canadians with a disability are not working well. It is our respectful submission that poverty underpins these. It is through the creation of opportunities to employment, education, and other socio-economic participation that persons with a spinal cord injury will fully realize their contribution to Canadian society.

Statistics do not reveal the emotional and financial effect that barriers facing persons with a disability have on the community, their family members, loved ones, neighbours, and co-workers. Daily obstructions experienced by Canadians with a disability include accessible, manageable transportation; available, affordable, and accessible housing; accessible educational opportunities whether they be at the publicly funded elementary and secondary level or at higher levels of learning; attention to personal needs through attendant care and other such means; admission to leisure and entertainment facilities; recreational opportunities; physical education; and an underemployment rate that continues to be greater than 55% for this sector of the population.

For many years, Canada has been an international leader in the promotion of rights and opportunities for people with disabilities. More recently, this position has slipped as disability advocacy groups have been forced to jockey for government funding and support. Too frequently it is almost impossible to get a wheelchair-accessible taxi, while city buses often do not have accessible routes. I'm certain that Mr. Savage, Ms. Cadman, Mr. Martin, or Ms. Minna can already attest to the problems they have been faced with in making use of the special vans here on Parliament Hill, and their day in using a wheelchair is only half done. Many Canadians with a disability do not have higher education, making poverty among this group equal to third world populations.

Notwithstanding the fact that many Canadians with a disability live in poverty, in Ontario alone, the potential market for persons with a disability continues to be significant at the national level. One can only imagine how this buying power could be expanded to benefit all Canadians with a comprehensive investment in the alleviation of poverty experienced by the disabled community.

The time is now for a comprehensive investment by the Government of Canada in the alleviation of poverty experienced by Canadians living with a disability. While it is easy to see that the reduction in poverty within this community will be directly linked to a reduction in government social-support-related expenditures, this is not just a disability community issue. If poverty is reduced in this sector, all Canadians will benefit. As the Ontario government recently noted in its poverty reduction document *Breaking the Cycle*:

> ...we have another equally compelling rationale for reducing poverty. As a society, we can't afford it. An educated, healthy and employable workforce is critical to the economic future of this province. Our economy is changing before our eyes and we need everyone to be ready to contribute to our future prosperity. Economists agree that investments in reducing poverty would close the prosperity gap, benefiting individual Ontarians and their families, but also Ontario as a whole.

A federal investment targeted toward giving persons with disabilities the tools to remove themselves from a life cycle of poverty will make a critically important contribution toward a healthy, dynamic Canadian economy.

I want to turn it over to my colleague Courtney for final comments.

● (1120)

Mr. Courtney Keenan (Vice-President, Canadian Paraplegic Association): We wish to highlight our key area of concern and proposed courses of action for your immediate consideration.

We recommend that the Government of Canada initiate concerted efforts to develop a joint strategy on poverty with the provincial and territorial governments and first nations to meet the needs of Canadians with disabilities.

Within this comprehensive strategy and investment on disability and poverty, we suggest that the federal government does the following: change the disability tax credit from a non-refundable tax credit to a refundable tax credit; continue federal investment in the federal-provincial housing agreements; ensure that housing units where federal investment is made include at least 15% of units that are universally designed; and expand the contribution limit to the registered disability savings plan, increasing the age limit of this same plan.

Further initiatives under the above objectives may include enhanced service delivery, policy reform proposals, research promotion of best practices in new service delivery models, capacity building, and knowledge sharing and dissemination. Initiatives supported will have outcomes that either address federal responsibilities or have federal significance.

We believe this action plan can help us collaborate with the governmental, non-governmental, and private sector to create an inclusive Canada that lifts persons with disabilities out of poverty. Together we can succeed in the removal of barriers and promotion of the full and equal participation of Canadians with disabilities.

Before I conclude, we would like to acknowledge our profound appreciation for the ongoing funding that we receive from the Office for Disability Issues in order to assist Canadians with a spinal cord injury.

We would again like to thank the committee for bringing together stakeholders working to alleviate poverty and improve the lives of Canadians with a spinal cord injury and other disabilities.

In conclusion, we welcome you, after question period, to come outside to Centre Block to cheer on the members of Parliament who are taking part in our awareness event—Mr. Savage, Ms. Minna, Mr. Martin, and Ms. Cadman—as they take part in friendly wheelchair races against one another and other members of Parliament.

Thank you very much.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to the Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability. Ms. Arkell, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Jane Arkell (Executive Director, Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability): Thank you very much, Mr. Allison.

I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Jane Arkell. I'm the executive director of the Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability. With me today is my colleague Jason Dunkerley. Jason runs a community program out of our office. He is a Paralympic medallist, so we have fame in our room.

I'll tell you a little bit about our organization. The Active Living Alliance has been in existence for 20 years. We're dedicated to the wellness of Canadians with all disabilities through physical activities, sport, and healthy living.

We recognize that it's more important for someone with a disability to be physically active than it is for someone without one, for a variety of reasons: it helps with isolation, it reduces secondary disabling conditions, it increases self-esteem, and it gets people out and active and making friends.

I'd like Jason to talk a little about his own personal experience and why he feels it has positive links to poverty.

Mr. Jason Dunkerley (Coordinator, All Abilities Welcome, Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability): Thanks, Jane.

Thanks again for the opportunity to be here this morning.

I'll offer just one or two considerations, I think. From my own experience, as a person with a disability who was born blind, and who grew up with brothers who were blind as well, we were very fortunate, I think, to really be challenged. That's number one. I think that's a really important thing for a person with a disability. People with disabilities need to be challenged in the same way as able-bodied people of all abilities.

We were challenged to play in our neighbourhood when we were growing up. We played soccer with a ball that had a plastic grocery bag attached around it, which allowed us to hear the ball in the air and have the experience of playing soccer. Out of that, we had the confidence to become involved in other sports. For me, I got involved in track, in middle-distance running. I've had the fortunate experience of competing three times at the Paralympics.

The common denominator, really, has been being challenged all the way through—by my parents, by coaches, by teachers in school, and also by guide runners with whom I've run. So challenge is very important.

As well, I think giving educators and coaches and parents the tools to know how to assist a person with a disability is very important. That's some of the work we're doing with Active Living Alliance. In the program I work with, we promote inclusive strategies so that people know how to help people with a disability, how to challenge them to overcome their situations, to evolve and grow as individuals, and to realize their human potential.

I'll pass it back to Jane, who's going to talk about some of the programs we offer at the alliance.

● (1130)

Ms. Jane Arkell: Thanks, Jason.

The alliance itself is a very unique organization in that we work with all disability groups. At our table, we have over 125 organizations from community, provincial, and national levels and some that are even international partners. Together, we work for the wellness of Canadians with disabilities. We have organizations that represent mental health, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and sensory disabilities. We're organized in every province and territory across Canada and we're all working towards the same goal.

Right now, we run three particular programs. We're fortunate that we receive some funding from the Office for Disability Issues and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

One program that we're very proud of—and it was nice to see my colleague Mr. Drewett here, who was part of the early days of the development of this program—is called “Moving to Inclusion”. Basically, it's a tool and a leadership program and it helps teachers, coaches, or community leaders involve a child with a disability in their ongoing physical activity programs. No longer do children with disabilities have to go to the library during phys. ed. People have the tools to be able to adapt an activity, change the rules, and change colours of equipment so that everybody can participate, hopefully on the same playing field.

It's a very exciting program. It's now going online. We're going to be delivering it through Canadian universities and colleges across the country, so we hope that when teachers graduate and become teachers in the ongoing school system, they'll have the tools they need to include a child with a disability.

Jason, will you continue?

Mr. Jason Dunkerley: We also have two other programs that are very important to us at the moment. We have the youth ambassador program, in which we really try to promote the value of healthy, active living among youth with a disability. We provide information and training to youth in order for them to go back to their communities and live a healthy, active lifestyle, to really advocate for that in their communities at different levels within their schools, or even with their local member of Parliament, and also to become role models for other young people with a disability and really promote the advantages of healthy, active living. That's one of our key programs.

Another one, the one that I work with closely, is a program called “All Abilities Welcome”. As the program suggests, we're really trying to reach out to people of all abilities in Canada to promote an attitude of inclusion. We're working with service organizations and recreation providers to help them with simple strategies to make their programs more inclusive. Also, we're trying to reach out and empower people with disabilities to take advantage of the opportunities for active living that are available in their communities.

This program and, really, all our programs are connected to the ideas of trying to empower people with a disability and to promote knowledge of the importance and value of including people with a disability in active living—and also because of the transformative benefits this can lead to. We feel this is very closely tied to alleviation of poverty as well.

We have a couple of closing comments, so I'll pass it over to Jane.

Ms. Jane Arkell: There are some recommendations we'd like to leave with you today.

We recommend that the Government of Canada substantially increase its investment in the healthy living fund, through the Public Health Agency of Canada, to ensure that Canadians with disabilities are given the same healthy living opportunities as their able-bodied peers.

We recommend that the Government of Canada continue to invest in the enabling accessibility fund, through the Office for Disability Issues, to ensure that buildings are accessible for Canadians of all abilities.

Moreover, we recommend that the federal government recognize the significant transportation challenges faced by people with disabilities in communities across Canada and that it develop a transportation support initiative in line with the enabling accessibility program.

We recommend that the Government of Canada invest in the core operations of national organizations that have direct connections to and daily interventions with people with a disability who are living in poverty.

Finally, we recommend that the Government of Canada place a concentrated emphasis on fostering public will with respect to the social inclusion of people with disabilities and that this commitment be driven by a public awareness campaign that engages all levels of society.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Arkell and Mr. Dunkerley. We appreciate your presentation.

We're now going to move to the Canadian Association for Community Living and Ms. Anna MacQuarrie. The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

● (1135)

Ms. Anna Macquarrie (Director, Government Relations and Strategic Initiatives, Canadian Association for Community Living): Thank you for having the Canadian Association for Community Living here today. We are a national federation of 13 provincial and territorial associations that have about 400 local associations across the country supporting and promoting the full inclusion and full rights of Canadians with intellectual disabilities and their families.

I want to talk a little about what it's like to live with a disability in Canada. Canadians with disabilities are three times more likely to live in poverty than any other Canadians. Just over 75% of adult Canadians with intellectual disabilities who do not live with their families are living in poverty. Children with disabilities are twice as likely as other children to live in households that rely on social assistance as a main source of income. Families of children with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than other families.

These numbers don't exist in a vacuum; they exist largely because people don't have the supports they need, and are unable to access employment and the things they need to keep their jobs. We know that over two million Canadian adults with disabilities lack one or more of the educational, workplace, aids, home modification, or other supports they need. Slightly more than half of children with disabilities do not have access to needed aids and devices.

Employment statistics are staggering. Over 55% of working-age adults with disabilities are currently unemployed or out of the workforce. For people with intellectual disabilities that number goes up to 70%. These numbers are pretty staggering in a country as prosperous as Canada; frankly, they are appalling.

Our poverty is entrenched, and our systems are designed to have disincentives to getting out of poverty. We know the lack of access to disability supports is probably the number one driving force behind the poverty of Canadians with disabilities. Poverty is a result of both exclusion and the lack of those supports, and it contributes to further exclusion and vulnerability in a vicious cycle.

Too often we see that Canadians with disabilities are exiled to inadequate, stigmatizing, and ineffective systems of income support. Social assistance programs were not designed to provide the long-term flexible supports needed by people with disabilities. They were built as a system of last resort, yet they have become a system of first resort for Canadians with intellectual disabilities.

Our existing systems also have built-in disincentives, where we unfortunately find that people are financially better off on welfare than getting off welfare. There are significant challenges. Eligibility for needed disability supports goes down as your income goes up, so people have to choose between being able to earn an income and having the supports they need to be able to gain that income and keep that job.

Further, we know that income derived from employment is often clawed back in many jurisdictions, again forcing people to rely on income security programs to gain access to those disability supports. We need broad system reform to address these disincentives and build a more appropriate support system of income and disability supports.

In the past few years the disability community, under the leadership of the Canadian Association for Community Living, the Council of Canadians with Disabilities—Marie White will be speaking shortly—and Independent Living Canada have worked together to create an ”end exclusion” initiative. We initially developed a vision for an inclusive and accessible Canada, and in the last couple of years have developed a national action plan on disability that identifies four key roles: enhanced disability supports; enhanced federal role in alleviating poverty—which is what we're here to talk about today; labour force inclusion measures; and a national social development role. I know Marie is going to speak more about the national action plan, so I won't spend too much time on that.

I will focus on the fact that we need a long-term disability strategy, and there are five things we could begin to do today to shape the long-term comprehensive agenda that's needed. It is time for a comprehensive agenda. A lot of work has been done in the more than 25 years since the *Obstacles* report was first released, but we need to see substantive change. We need to have new investments and reform of existing systems instead of continued incremental change.

One way we think we can do this is by establishing a high-level table. The federal government could establish a table that reports to both the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development to explore the options for addressing poverty and income reform, including an expanded federal role in income support. It could help set the vision that could guide us on this comprehensive agenda.

● (1140)

We also have to see some connections between the federal Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and the provincial and territorial counterparts. We know that there is significant overlap between jurisdictions in their roles for disability. A constructive dialogue is needed to better understand the distinction between those roles, where they have to work together, and what we can be doing collectively to address the staggering needs of people with disabilities. In particular, we could be looking at what an expanded federal role in income support could mean at a provincial level by freeing up dollars that could then be reinvested in disability supports provincially. We know that in most provinces, more than half of welfare caseloads comprise people with disabilities.

Third, we can explore the federal role in income support. Our colleague mentioned the creation of a refundable disability tax credit. We've seen the federal government demonstrate leadership on this issue in the past. We've seen it through initiatives for seniors, veterans, and children. The federal government has both the tools and the capacity to address the longstanding entrenched poverty.

Another thing we need is data. The participation and activity limitation survey, also known as PALS, is a crucial source of data for our community. The future of PALS currently remains in question. It has not yet been renewed for 2011 and beyond. Not only does this data provide us the crucial research and policy information the disability community, our governments, and other civil society organizations need; it also enables Canada to meet its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We continue to call on the federal government to secure PALS for 2011 and beyond.

Our last suggestion is on the UN convention. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been in force for just over a year. Over 50 countries have ratified it, but Canada is not yet one of them. The convention provides us with a useful framework that we can be using here at home to better understand how to develop and implement a comprehensive disability agenda. It also provides Canada with an opportunity to share its expertise and knowledge internationally. I can speak personally that there are countries around the world looking to Canada to continue to provide leadership on this file. We again encourage and urge the government to swiftly move toward ratification without reservation.

The time for action is now. To be honest, we don't need another *Obstacles* report; we need action. We need change in the lives of people with disabilities, and I do believe the government has the capacity to do that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Macquarrie.

We'll now move to Independent Living Canada and Mr. Rick Goodfellow. You have five minutes, sir. The floor is yours.

Mr. Rick Goodfellow (National Chairperson, Independent Living Canada): Thank you, and thank you for inviting our organization to be here today.

I would like to applaud the members, by the way, who are in wheelchairs today, although I have to tell you it makes it tougher to know which of you are uprights.

Having said that, I have to say that we had a look at some of the questions you had asked us. Independent Living Canada is an organization that is cross-disability. We deal with everybody, no matter what they are. Our boards and our staff are predominantly people with disabilities. It's part of our mandate, if you will. So we see a very experiential piece across the board on this.

I can say that through my own situation after my accident, I can really understand about recovering from trauma. I didn't have the money to pay my power bill. This type of thing crosses all boundaries. They turned my power off while I was upstairs having a shower in my house. My lift didn't work. I had to crawl down the stairs to get to my wheelchair and then try to get the money together to pay my power bill. So I've been there, and I know what that looks like and what it sometimes takes to get out of it.

The first thing we looked at when we were analyzing this situation was your question on the definition of poverty. Of course we've talked about this for years and years now at the federal-provincial-territorial level and have tried to discuss it. We suggested that one of the things that's problematic is looking at it in terms of dollars and cents.

The first recommendation we had about that particular issue was to have a look at some of the work that the Romanow report has brought out and some of the work that the federal-provincial-territorial groups as well as some of your own staff have been doing, because they have worked very long and hard trying to figure a way to measure quality of life. I think that's probably a pretty good place to start, because it's not always about dollars and cents. It is about the quality of life and those issues.

I'll give you a little bit of background. I always like to mention that in the NGO sector, one of the things that we always talk about is that we measure poverty at the door. We see it when it comes through the door, and we see it in everyday life. So again, it's a good place to start.

We also recognize—and Anna had mentioned a little bit earlier, about the numbers—some of the work that has been done. The Saskatchewan government did some work and estimated that at least 80% of the folks who are on social assistance there are likely living with undiagnosed disabilities. We talked to the people in corrections, and they look at the fact that probably most of their folks have some sort of disability, such as addiction. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder of course is becoming a hugely emerging issue. We recognize as well that most, if not all, of the people who are on the streets have a disability.

So you start to recognize that most of the people who are living below the poverty level probably have disabilities or are connected with them in some way, and they don't go away. That's one of the things that we certainly recognize. Disabilities aren't something you can fix, so even the folks we do help into the workplace or into independent work we will still see over a lifetime. They don't go away, and the issues don't go away.

We recognize that the independent living movement around the world is really about empowering people to take control of their lives and live as much as they can with dignity of risk and whatever they need to do, but that still won't go away without some supports.

I Identified priorities for us. The first and foremost one that has come up in every discussion we've had, whether it has been with the NGO sector or with individuals themselves, is that there is a tremendous need in this country for adequate barrier-free safe and secure housing. It was unanimous. One of the issues that we know came up from that is that it's not a sexy issue for builders. We are just now coming out of a phase where there was a real need for housing. What we saw in Calgary, for example, was that the subsidized housing there was being decimated. The people who owned the buildings would get rid of them because it was way more cost-effective for them to be able to sell them as condos. So we had people being booted out onto the streets at such a rate that actually, at one point in time there—and I think there are still around 1,000—we had about 2,000 working homeless.

We know that if those folks can't find a place to live, then the folks with disabilities are going to be way further down the food chain. Having said that, we also heard very loudly and clearly that the housing that's there needs to be something that's acceptable. If you talk to the folks in the east end of Vancouver right now, they'll tell you that if you put people in a hotel where they have to worry about the cockroaches and the rodents and everything else that is crawling in and out, those folks would rather be on the street.

● (1145)

When we talk about housing, we need to make sure it looks after that piece of it. So our recommendation is that we need increased government resources and leadership and a housing strategy that's within federal jurisdiction. Of course we've had that and backed away from it a little bit. I think it's more a matter of re-engaging and recognizing we need an investment of resources into barrier-free, safe, affordable housing.

Having said that, if you provide that type of housing and you don't provide the necessary supports that go with it, it's falling. It won't work. If there's one thing we've seen, it's that folks who have good stability within that sector do very well. So when we talk about the adequate supports that are needed, we talk about financial supports. And I won't get into it very much because I think it's really been covered well by some of my colleagues here. We need to have a look at that and find out what it is.

We do have an agreement that was reached a few years back, called “In Unison”, that lays out a lot of the guidelines for this. It was signed on to by all the provinces and territories and it was agreed that it was a good document even with first nations and with all the disability community. So we do have the groundwork laid. This isn't something that has to be invented, and we do have the buy-in from the province and territories on it. We very strongly recommend that financial supports be looked at.

With respect to disability supports,"In Unison" really went into this. We know right now there's a lack of access to supports when they are available. There are limited opportunities—as the Active Living Alliance has talked about—for community involvement and social interaction and that's key to the health and well-being of Canadians with disabilities.

And we can get into specific things like transportation, to which we also have a serious problem getting access. There are insufficient supports for daily living as well. I actually had one of our consumers say to me, completely out of the blue, "Do you know that it costs me $150 a month because I have to phone long distance to Vancouver to get a crisis line?" This is a man with severe mental health issues. He said, "I have to do that because I don't have access to a crisis line." So again, "In Unison" laid out some of those recommendations.

One of the things that have come up here that we recognized as being critical, as well, is a collaborative and coordinated disability support group across the country. We had the capacity a while back where all the national organizations could come together, strategize, and work on some of these issues and try to create, if not standards, at least a coordinated approach to it that really set some good common goals for us. Collective national goals would help. We need to get back to that again and facilitate the development of a strong national network. That will really help on the ground with being able to approach these issues.

And finally—and this is the one I think is a challenge for anybody in this area—how do you break that cycle of dependency on subsistence living? Where that shows its face—and you've heard it from around the table—is that a great, great number of our folks are reliant on social programs to get them through the day. And I can tell you I was talking to a fellow, an ex-bureaucrat who is now on long-term disability because he was injured on the job, who is afraid to come forward and talk about these things because he feels his income supports will be threatened if he does. That is a reality in our community, which we have to deal with.

Somebody once asked us why we didn't make more progress in what we do. One of the comments was that it was because we have a bunch of folks right now whose entire thought is to keep their head down, their mouth shut, stay in the corner, and keep quiet so people won't take away what little they have now. We have to address that. One of the ways of breaking this cycle of dependency is to have a look at some of those things, at systems that unintentionally create this cycle.

We have policies right now and systems that are created to catch people who are going to try to abuse them. That's the way it's done. And I know because I've been in government where we've gone through this. And I've said, "You know, Future Shop knows that no matter what security they put in, somebody is going to steal from them". So they don't strip search everybody who comes through the door; they simply recognize there are going to be people who will steal from them. So they say, "Let's give the best service we can and write into our margin that we will accept that's going to happen. We'll still do the best we can." We need to start looking at that with some of the policies we have in government. Stop being so restrictive in trying to stop people from abusing it and start really creating the systems to try to help the people who need it.

I'm getting a little carried away, but it's true. Move away from the black and white and recognize the grey areas. And also, look at these things through a disability lens and make sure we don't inadvertently create problems that shouldn't be there.

● (1150)

To wrap up, after all this is said and done, we've heard again that we need to establish a system to monitor and measure the progress. But I always qualify that we need to do it in the areas where it's affected. So what we do is we measure what we value, and whatever decisions are made around this table need to be about what we value. If we don't measure what we value, we can very quickly end up valuing what we measure.

I love to use money as an example, because money was something that was created as a medium so that we could increase our quality of life, so that we could trade with other people, and get things that we couldn't get. We couldn't measure quality of life easily, but money is really easy to measure. So we've forgotten now that what we really wanted to do was increase our quality of life, and we focus on money. That's what happens.

I really emphasize that we need to make sure we're going to measure what we value. If we don't, we'll end up valuing what we measure. We did it with money. Let's not do it with this piece.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Goodfellow.

We're going to move next to Bonnie Brayton.

Welcome, Bonnie. It's nice to have you here today. You're with the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada. The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton (National Executive Director, DisAbled Women's Network of Canada): Thank you.

I thought I had ten minutes. It doesn't matter.

The Chair: You do the best you can.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: I'll do the best I can.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Bonnie Brayton and I have been the National Executive Director of the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada for the past two years.

[*English*]

My name is Bonnie Brayton and I'm the national executive director of the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada. I want to thank you all for having us here today. We also wish to thank and acknowledge the people of the Six Nations and the Haudenosaunee people for the use of their lands today. And we of course would like to thank the chair and the members of the committee for inviting us to participate in this process.

It is indeed only through bringing women with disabilities to the table that we can hope that.... The situation that over 35% of women with disabilities face in this country each day is indeed poverty. Many of my colleagues today spoke in terms of numbers and statistics, and I have a few. Certainly I think a lot has been said already about the realities that all people with disabilities face. I think the most important thing that I need to bring to the table today is the double discrimination that women with disabilities face.

DAWN-RAFH Canada is the only national organization in Canada focused on women with disabilities. Consequently, in the last two years, since opening our national head office in Montreal, we've developed a strong voice and presence for women with disabilities across the public and private sector through our affiliates, representatives, and partners, many of whom are here at the table.

Marie, it's nice to see you. I'm glad you're going to be the closer here, because I know you'll do a great job.

I also would like to say that it's quite exceptional and wonderful to look around this room and to see something quite unusual, which is a broad representation of women with disabilities. It's quite unusual and certainly it is a big part of what I think I need to speak to today.

Unemployment rates for women with disabilities in developed countries like Canada are 75%. This is a very real number. We've talked about 50%; it's even higher for women with disabilities. In developed countries unemployment rates are 75%, but globally it's closer to 100%. The global literacy rate for girls with disabilities is just 1%. The rates of violence against women and girls with disabilities are at one and a half to ten times the rates for able-bodied women.

With considerably less access and sometimes no access to housing, to women's shelters, to legal services, with poor access to education, we've become the forgotten sisters. That is something that I repeat over and over wherever I go. Disabled women of this country and around the world are the forgotten sisters of the women's movement, and we indeed are statistically almost non-existent in terms of studies and research. Certainly there has been some work, and DAWN Canada has certainly contributed to that work over the years. We can say that since 1984 we have done our best to represent women with disabilities in this country.

The very real organizational impact of women with disabilities in crisis is something I experience every day in my office. As we are the only national disability organization focused on women, I receive calls from women in crisis on a daily basis. In fact, last night as I sat in my office trying to prepare for this presentation today I received a call from a woman. It happens almost every night as I'm sitting in my office. I have to tell you that when trying to do the work of a national women's disability organization while I receive calls daily from women in crisis across this country, it not only makes me sad, it makes my angry. It makes me angry that we're still at a stage where I'm asking for and urging this committee to understand that there is a complete lack of resources in the community for women with disabilities. Access to shelter continues to be a serious issue, as well as access to education, access to employment.

In terms of the people we need to engage, it's everybody. In terms of stakeholders, I have my friends here from the disabled community who stand beside us. Again, as I say, I work on an ongoing basis with the women's community across Canada and around the globe to ensure that we're present. But when I say there is only one women's disability organization in this country, it means we're under-represented all the time.

There was a world conference of women's shelters in Alberta last September. There were 750 different shelter groups involved in access to shelters, and groups dealing with violence against women were there. There was one panel that DAWN Canada headed up with Australia and Barbados that spoke to access to shelters for women with disabilities—one panel. On the Association for Research on Mothering last year, our representative was again the only person there to speak for women with disabilities.

● (1155)

I was at an educational conference at McGill University last week, and I have to say that the biggest conundrum I faced was how to figure out a way to be in each room as we broke off into panels to make sure that somehow women and girls with disabilities would be remembered.

We have specific recommendations, and many of them are duplications of some of the things that have been said here, but I certainly would like, for the record, to go through them.

I would like to say that women with disabilities—and particularly lone-parent mothers with disabilities—are the poorest people in this country. There's no statistical argument that can be made that denies this fact. The lowest income level in this country belongs to women with disabilities. The poorest people in this country are women and children with disabilities. I would say, in terms of recommendations, that an increased child tax benefit specifically directed at lone-parent mothers with disabilities is an absolutely critical must-do. As my friend here said, this government and you all can choose to make that choice today and go forward from these consultations knowing that the very first and most imperative thing you can do is put more money in the hands of single mothers with disabilities.

I also wish to bring to the attention of the committee the particular circumstances of aboriginal women with disabilities, who suffer a higher rate of poverty than any other women with disabilities in this country.

Our specific recommendations are for affordable, accessible housing, involving creating new units and retrofits where needed; rental supplements to ensure that housing is accessible based on income; early childhood development initiatives for girls with disabilities, including affordable, quality child care for girls with disabilities and their mothers; improved high school completion rates and literacy rates; demand-driven training that engages the private sector, training institutions, and employment programs; and the removal of barriers to employment for women with disabilities.

On transportation, I'd like to share a personal experience. When we opened the national head office for DAWN Canada in Montreal, my office was in old Montreal and there was no handicap parking. I had to get to work every day, so I had to figure out what to do. It took two years, $2,000 of my own money, and an unbelievable fight just for me to be able to go to work every day. I need to drive. I can't take public transportation. I have an invisible disability, but I have one that means that taking public transportation is not possible. Like I said, it took two years and an incredible fight, and what I managed to get was a public parking space in front of the building, which means that I still face, every day, the possibility that when I get to work there will be nowhere for me to park, and that I have to figure out a way, or I have to go into my pocket, or go home. That's me. I'm not facing the same challenges that some of the women and people we spoke about today face. I can tell you that this kind of struggle, in every small way, is at the core of what you guys need to understand today in terms of the challenges.

I'm sorry. I'm a little emotional.

Other recommendations are for improved minimum wage and enhanced supplements to low earnings through working income tax benefits, and for flexibility in terms of women with disabilities entering and leaving the workforce. Some 74% of women in this country have some type of chronic illness. Chronic illness has not yet been studied on a significant enough level, but I know that what we will find—and again, I go back to what my friend said about the PAL survey—is absolutely critical. The PALS information must continue. In fact, the PAL survey needs to be enhanced so that there's more information collected on gender and disability together. One of the huge problems I face is that I have no data to hit you with except the data that I can pull from elsewhere. I can tell you now that we need to look closely at what's going on. The numbers will speak for themselves. The numbers you heard today speak for themselves. When you take the numbers in terms of the types of systemic discrimination that women face and people with disabilities face, and you put them together, you have a big problem.

We need to make improvements to the EI system and reforms that extend benefits, reduce the contribution hours, and provide flexibility for women with disabilities in terms of their ability to move into and out of the workforce.

● (1200)

We need strong links between research, program development, and services delivered to women with disabilities, and we need to stop working in silos. There's an aging population in this country. A lot of those people are women, and a lot of those women are aging into disability. I still find we're working in silos. We're not bringing everyone together. It goes back to what my colleague said about bringing everyone together, bringing everyone to the table. That can't happen unless you agree it needs to happen.

We're all NGOs. We don't have big budgets that allow for us to do this. It's very important for the Government of Canada to support us being able to come together, not only to speak with you but to work together and develop national strategies that will start to make a real difference.

Two years ago almost to the day I started my job as the national executive director of DAWN Canada, and I presented, with my president, before the status of women committee. It was on economic supports for women with disabilities. It's two years later, and not a thing has changed except that the numbers continue to rise. Only the numbers have changed.

There's an urgent need for resources, a critical need for resources and referral services for women with disabilities in their communities. You don't have to reinvent the wheel here. There are lots of services in place, but without any kind of specific and explicit attempt to include women with disabilities, I can tell you, they aren't included.

I would like to briefly speak to you about the fact that legislation is another important way by which I really believe we have to address poverty. There are international instruments, including the CEDAW, the CRPD, and the CRC, that exist but are not enforced. In addition, I would also point out that representation of women with disabilities, with the exception of this room, is almost non-existent. There's no one at the table for us. And because there's no one at the table, we aren't spoken of, we aren't remembered, and we continue to find ourselves the poorest and most vulnerable people in this country.

Since you seek recommendations, I want to bring up something that comes out of Quebec. From having our head office in Quebec, I can say that an interesting thing to look at and something I think the committee needs to consider is an act to combat poverty and social exclusion. This is legislation in Quebec, and I can say, as an employer in Quebec, that I've seen how this is working.

How this works in my daily life is that I have the ability to hire and bring in people with disabilities to work for my organization, and I have the support of the government and the employment programs in Quebec to do so. And I don't mean small support; I mean significant supports, not only to bring people in but for retention. Those supports come in the way of salary supplements, training. This is very specific, very real, and it's working today, now, in Quebec. It's certainly something the committee should look at.

Finally, I would say that it's always critical and a must-do: the intersection between disability and gender has to be part of everything we do. You must always bring gender and disabilities together. Whether we're talking about research, whether we're talking about programs for delivery of services, if you do not do the intersection, we remain forgotten.

● (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Brayton.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: I want to again thank everybody for your time today, and welcome any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, and thank you for your presentation.

We'll now go to Marie White, who's last but not least by any stretch of the imagination, out in Newfoundland.

Thank you for joining us today. The floor is yours.

We don't have volume, so you may be on mute.

Ms. Marie White (National Chairperson, Council of Canadians with Disabilities): Does that work?

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you very much.

The floor is yours, and thanks for joining us.

Ms. Marie White: Thank you for providing me an opportunity to come here today on behalf of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. I will make an effort to speak slowly, but, coming from the east, it's very difficult for me.

You've heard that people with disabilities are especially susceptible to poverty. The main reason for this is that social policy is homeless. If social policy was not homeless, there would not be people living in Canada on a social assistance rate of below $10,000 a year; we would not have aboriginal people with disabilities living in the state in which they do; we would not have people de-institutionalized, becoming homeless and poor without proper supports; and we would not have people living in an institution, as thousands of people do, in poverty of soul and spirit.

What we have is a national disgrace. The personal, social, and economic costs of exclusion are high—too high to be ignored. A number of national organizations have established a national action plan on disability. What we have devised is a road map. It's a road map for policy-makers to use to improve the lives of persons with disabilities. The main issues are inextricably linked. There is no magic bullet for persons with disabilities. We are a complex group. There is not a simple solution that will solve our ills, but there are many clear paths and roadways that will enable many people with disabilities to be lifted out of poverty.

Our issues include many that have been discussed today. In addition to poverty, there is a lack of access to disability-related supports, unemployment, underemployment, lack of education, gender issues, and federal leadership. If we don't have federal leadership, then we will have nothing. The state of federal, provincial, and territorial relations is absolutely abysmal. If this does not improve, then the lives of persons with disabilities, perhaps the most vulnerable group in this country, will not change.

Action cannot be deemed to be purely long-term. We must have a number of short- and medium-term improvements, and I would like to refer to a few of those. We know that the Government of Canada has jurisdiction over first nations people living on reserve. We know that the incidence of disability among this population is staggering. We believe that there must be action taken to address the shameful lack of support.

Tax is often the first mechanism for addressing social policy. While we believe it is a blunt tool, we know it has a place. We recommend that the disability tax credit be made refundable—initially for low-income Canadians with disabilities—and retained as a credit for those higher incomes for which it would be more of a benefit.

Labour market agreements must include a target for persons with disabilities. However, until we have an appropriate and inclusive way of offering true training and real opportunities for employment, then we suggest that there should be more funding put into the opportunities fund and the multilateral framework agreements.

EI eligibility is fine if you can get a job. If we can improve the lives and employment opportunities of people with disabilities, we suggest that EI reform should be a priority. I spoke about two weeks ago to a standing committee looking at EI reform and women with disabilities, and I stressed in my opening remarks that if you don't have a job then EI is of little consequence to you.

As for the Canada Pension Plan disability benefits, these benefits are important to people who have severe and prolonged disabilities, so we should ensure that those who qualify for that benefit automatically qualify for DTC. We are sick of having to verify that we have disabilities. The executive director of my organization wrote a paper some years ago called “No Miracles Yet”. Disability doesn't disappear. If disability doesn't disappear, then the opportunities to improve poverty are not often found within the population.

● (1210)

It was referenced earlier that the Government of Canada should look at exploring a basic income program. I urge you to look at a paper on this written by Michael Mendelson of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, who has been looking at this in great depth and who, in particular, has a number of issues and arguments in relation to a basic income program.

I would like to reiterate the importance of working with provinces and territories. If we don't have increased access to disability-related supports to allow disabled Canadians to participate and to be full citizens, then, as Rick referenced earlier, Canadians with disabilities can have everything else, but their quality of life will be nothing.

We believe that governments currently are operating in isolation from each other. So now it's up to us to decide where we're going to live based on the patchwork of opportunities available to us. Maybe I should go to Manitoba because it has good home care, or I should go to Alberta because it provides me better income support. It is unreasonable to assume and unfortunate to believe that in a prosperous nation such as ours, this is what we are left to do. It may not be a politically correct topic, but that's never concerned me. The disability community wants and expects the federal government to ensure national standards so that all can benefit from the resources of our country.

I guess I'd like to end on this note: that disability is not a partisan issue. I'm very fond of saying that disability is a totally non-discriminatory activity. It doesn't matter your economic background, your financial status, your culture, or where you live, how you live, where you grew up, or where you were educated, but disability can happen at any time to anyone. If we improve the situation for the lives of people with disabilities, we improve it for many, many people.

We remain committed to building an inclusive and accessible Canada, and we urge this committe to embrace this vision and make significant policy changes to improve the lives of persons with disabilities. No one in Canada should live in poverty.

Thank you.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. White.

We appreciate having here all of the witnesses who have come before us.

We're now going to start with rounds of questioning. I didn't want to limit the witnesses' time because I believe in what they have to say. So I'm just going to ask the committee to work with me as we move forward.

I know that Ms. White has to leave at 12:30, because of a teleconference. Is that correct, Ms. White?

Ms. Marie White: I do, yes. Thank you.

The Chair: I'm going to continue with questioning after that, so that we can—

Ms. Marie White: That's fine.

The Chair: —get in as many questions as we can.

Without any more ado, I'm going to start with Mr. Savage. You have the first round of seven minutes—and I know you're going to split your time with Ms. Bennett.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

Are we going to have just one round? Is that what you were saying, Chair?

The Chair: I'm going to try to get back to another round for you guys.

Mr. Michael Savage: Okay.

Thank you all for coming, and thank you for the knowledge and the passion you bring.

I do want to congratulate the Canadian Paraplegic Association for the initiative they've taken the last couple of years to bring attention to these issues before Parliament. I see that David Hinton is here.

I'll just mention that next year is the 65th anniversary of the CPA, and they're looking to have 65 members of Parliament in wheelchairs next year on this day. I'm sure he will take names starting today. The parliamentary secretary has indicated to me that he'd be interested in doing that.

I think all of you are right in saying that we don't need a lot of studies or a lot more analysis. We know there are things we can do, I think, in fairly short order—social infrastructure items, training items, and on accessibility issues, etc.—to make the situation better for persons with disabilities.

I'm certainly struck by the comments—and we've certainly seen evidence of this before—that we don't have a uniform social infrastructure. Last week we heard from Mike Kirby that the social infrastructure we have, whether it's EI or a number of other things, really doesn't suit people with mental health issues. It's episodic, for example—and the EI system does not suit people with these issues. It seems to me this might be the case here as well.

You've made some specific recommendations, and I'm very pleased you have. You've given us some specific things on disability tax credits and housing. I think we heard Mike Kirby say last week that housing was the number one issue for him, and social infrastructure was second.

What I want to ask you about is the fact that we don't have a national persons with disabilities act in Canada. Would that be a way of bringing together a national strategy that would perhaps alleviate some of the inequities that exist province to province? You are entirely right in saying that if you go from province to province, you find different home care and different income supports, drug coverage, accessibility supports, and some are better than others. Should we have national standards, and how do we get there if that is the case?

I'd ask anybody to respond who wants to pitch in on that.

The Chair: Let's start with Mr. Goodfellow, and then we'll go to Ms. Macquarrie and then maybe Ms. White.

Mr. Rick Goodfellow: Thanks for that question, Mike.

You heard me in my presentation talking about “In Unison”. What we recognized a number of years ago is that, with the devolution of federal jurisdiction to the provinces and territories, it's been pretty much accepted that trying to do a Canadians with disabilities act is going to be very difficult. That was I think one of the primary reasons we looked at putting together the “In Unison” agreement; it was a chance to identify some of those issues that had to be dealt with on a national basis. But we have to have buy-in; we have to have the provinces and territories, because they now have jurisdiction over a lot of this.

The way it was explained to me very clearly when we started that whole process was that it was going to take an agreement like “In Unison”, whereby all the provinces and territories signed on to how they were going to set some of the standards, in order to make it work. That's one of the things we've accepted in the community: that trying to do a national act is going to be really difficult, but that if we can get a vehicle like “In Unison” and get everybody to contribute to it and actually implement it, that's probably what the answer's going to be.

● (1220)

The Chair: I'm going to go to Ms. White, because I know she only has until half past twelve.

Ms. White, if you'd like to, you may comment as well.

Ms. Marie White: Thank you so much for accommodating my time issues.

The Council of Canadians with Disabilities together with CACL has been looking at the issue of a national disability act for probably two or three years, in tandem with the announcement that was in the Conservative platform some years ago.

It has always been a contentious issue within the disability community, because there are many concerns associated with it, not the least that it will become “the act for you”, if you catch the drift; in other words, that it would solve all ills.

While we recognize that a national act would really only be able to address the issues that are under a national purview, we believe there are many existing mechanisms for moving forward in the multifarious and complex areas of concern for persons with disabilities. Rick well articulated the foundational document of In Unison. There are also a number of regulatory frameworks we think we could use.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Right now there are voluntary codes of practice for transportation in this country. They do not work, as per CCD's seven-year battle with VIA, as per its recent win in yet another court around "one person, one fare". We believe and have said for years that there should be regulations, not voluntary codes.

The second one, and I can speak to this shortly but with some experience, is this. I co-chair the homelessness advisory committee in Newfoundland and have done for eight years. One of my areas of background expertise is housing. Until the money that is provided through the homelessness partnering strategy, and earlier through NHI, has accessibility and access principles attached, what will happen is that we will continue to spend fantastic, phenomenal amoutns of money, thank you very much, and make investments in housing that is not accessible.

I'm sorry if private industry doesn't like the idea that they should have something imposed upon them, but there should be standards to ensure that something is.

In terms of an act, I would say no; I would say why don't we look at what we have existing and ensure that governments talk to each other?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. White.

We have about 45 second left.

Mike.

Mr. Michael Savage: That in itself is a radical thought, that governments would talk to each other.

I just want to say that we know there are some answers here. This is the committee of Parliament that has responsibility for persons with disabilities. We have in the past had subcommittees that specifically dealt with issues—Mr. Lessard's concern and my concern about things such as how the enhancing accessibility fund is being played out, and other issues of the disability community. I think it's probably time—other members have talked about this as well—that we need to have a subcommittee that looks specifically at these issues.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

The Chair: And thank you for coming within the time.

Mr. Lessard, you have seven minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

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

First of all, I want to welcome the witnesses and thank them for their contribution.

I especially want to welcome Mr. Goodfellow. Please accept my apologies, I had not recognized you earlier, probably because I was distracted. I went to your conference last fall where I was very well received.

One rarely hears such a clear, concise and concrete presentation. I thank you for that and I also want to thank the chairman for allowing you to go over five minutes. Time constraints frequently prevent us from fully stating our case but I think it was very worthwhile for us to hear you completely.

I want to start with Ms. White's conclusion who said that no one in Canada should have to live in poverty. That sentence means two things. First, we could make sure that people are able to live with dignity because it is up to us to make the right decisions. Ms. Macquarrie has neatly summarized the situation by referring to it being a matter of political will.

I believe you were the one to refer to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that was passed by the General Assembly in December 2006. Canada had approved the Convention but the Canadian government—I am not saying Canada—has not yet ratified it.

I would like to hear the witnesses about this. Do you understand the reasoning of the Canadian government? I know that this is a very significant matter for you, quite properly, but do you know why our government has not yet ratified that instrument?

● (1225)

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Macquarrie, please.

Ms. Anna Macquarrie: To clarify, in 2006 the convention was adopted unanimously by the General Assembly of the UN. It was open for signature in March 2007. Canada has signed the convention; we have not yet ratified it—it's a two-step process.

I think Canada's ratification of the convention is important for a number of reasons, one being that we were very actively involved in its development. Canada was a leader on really critical issues in the convention, in particular the issue of legal capacity. This convention introduces something known as supported decision-making, which is recognized internationally as a "made in Canada" concept. I think Canada's contributions to the international community in this regard and in a number of regards on the convention could be incredibly beneficial, both for Canada and for other countries.

Domestically, the convention, as I said earlier and actually in a bit of response to Mike's question as well, can provide us with a framework for the action that needs to happen here in Canada. I think the convention in many ways could become what was intended around a national disability act or Canadians with disabilities act. It provides a consistent format that would work well internationally. It puts us at the lead on the international stage. If you have a chance to read the convention when you walk through it, it really identifies that it's not just a rights-based entitlement document. It not only identifies that you have the right to education or the right to health care or the right to legal capacity, but it lays out the where, the why, and the how of those rights not having been realized for people with disabilities.

I think that provides us a really useful tool and can provide a great framework to move forward on legislation here in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you very much.

I am very aware of this situation. Some of you may already know because I had the opportunity to mention it in the past. I have myself been handicapped for a long time in my childhood. I could only move in a wheelchair or with crutches. I know what it means to be the target of prejudices at school, especially from other children. One never forgets that kind of experience and it makes you very aware.

That being said, there is a crying need. In a statement to the Canadian Paraplegic Association, you referred to barriers to social interaction. You referred to issues relating to access to transportation, to housing and to education. You also mentioned problems with access to recreative activities and to the fact that unemployment rates are higher in the disabled population. However, I have not read anything very specific relating to barriers to employment. I would have liked to hear your comments about this, as well as those of Ms. Brayton's.

Ms. Brayton, I was on the verge of congratulating you. You stated that you came here to make representations but realized that nothing ever changes. We share your anger and your frustration. As Mr. Savage stated earlier, we are trying to make changes and to deal very seriously with these issues but we also have to recognize that nothing changes. That is why my first question was on the United Nations Convention.

Could you tell us what steps should be taken, according to you, especially in the context of this economic crisis, to improve access to employment and to prevent discrimination against women? I would remind people that this discrimination can take many forms in the fields of employment, or unemployment, for example. For a disabled person, this is an additional barrier, and it is even worse for an disabled aboriginal person.

What steps should be taken in the short term?

● (1230)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Drewett, could we have just a quick response to the question?

Mr. Bruce Drewett: Quickly, I have a couple of examples. We continue to see that when people with disabilities are recruited, a number of them are put on short-term contracts, which immediately creates a challenge in that people don't have the benefits that go along with those types of employment opportunities. So they're really faced with the challenge of having to decide whether to remain on social assistance, where there may be benefits and supports that go along with it, versus an employment opportunity that may be short term and without benefits.

There's also the real challenge of accessible transportation for people. A lot of people can't even get to the workplace once—or if—they do get an opportunity. We need to be able to deal with that type of matter, let alone the challenges that go along with accommodations in the workplace, whether they be physical access types of arrangements, accessible and adapted technology types of arrangements, flexible work arrangements, and so on. We need to take into account the full range of issues in order to ensure that once people are in the workplace they have the opportunity to be successful, to be retained, and to be developed and move on.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have for this round. We're going to move now to Mr. Martin.

You have seven minutes, sir.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you for being here today.

It's nice to see Bruce again. I worked with him in the early 1990s when I was parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Education in the Bob Rae government. He'll remember that I chaired a minister's committee on deaf and hard-of-hearing education issues and that we, as a government, brought in an act called the Employment Equity Act that actually saw a significant number of disabled people get work, particularly in the public sector. When that act was done away with by the subsequent government, all those people, because they were the last ones to be hired, were the first ones out when cuts began in the public service. It created some extra level of challenge for those folks.

This committee is studying poverty and how it affects people living with disabilities. I've heard today a call for national leadership. I've heard a call for more resources so that we can do the kinds of things you suggest, such as having accessible housing, better incomes, and access to jobs and the supports that go along with that.

The experience I had myself today with the chair, the little set of inconveniences I experienced, I can't imagine having while dealing with the question of income and poverty on top of it on a daily basis. I can get out of this chair this afternoon and get on with my life. I have a good job and a decent income. There are thousands of people out there who I really feel for who can't do that.

Yesterday the Ontario legislature passed an act on poverty that was supported by all the parties, with unanimous agreement, and hailed by advocates. Quebec has an act on poverty.

I'm going to put a couple of questions to you, and then I'll let you answer, because I don't often get back to a second round.

What do you think of a poverty act that forces government to act on that issue? Have you looked at it? Is it going to be helpful? Would something like that at the federal level be helpful?

I know that you've also commissioned, as a disability community, the Caledon Institute to explore parameters for a possible basic income program in Canada that would apply to persons with disabilities. Do any of you have any comments on that? What would the parameters be for a basic income program for people with disabilities? Who would be eligible? How would it be delivered? How with a basic income program do you maintain incentives for employment? Do you have any sense of the cost to government and the savings to provinces in their welfare budgets?

Those are the questions I want you to answer. There's the poverty act, which was passed in Ontario yesterday and that Quebec has in place and whether that would be good at the federal level. And there's the basic income question.

I just want to finish by saying that you'll hear from governments that we can't afford all these programs. But we know, in this place, because we hear it every day in question period, that the present government is rolling out $250 billion in tax relief to people who have jobs, mostly the well off and big corporations. The previous government will come back at them and say that they cut taxes by $100 billion. That's $350 billion the government has said no to. That is money that was coming in to the government that could be used, even a small percentage of it, to deal with some of these debilitating issues that confront people with disabilities all across Canada.

Maybe I could have some comment on that from you as well. Whoever wants to can answer.

● (1235)

The Chair: Who would like to start first?

Go ahead, Ms. Brayton.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: Thank you for your question, and I thank Mr. Lessard for the question earlier.

As I said, the poverty act in Quebec I know works in some contexts. I certainly don't think that a poverty act alone is a solution, but I can tell you from the experience of having used the program that it has a significant impact in terms of opportunities for employment for people with disabilities and for women with disabilities in Quebec.

Do I think we need legislation? I don't think there's any question that legislation is the only way to go. We've been politely waiting for people to do the right thing for a very long time, and it hasn't happened.

There are 2.3 million women with disabilities in this country, and there's one national organization that's grossly underfunded. I can't address some of the specific questions you have, and part of the reason is that I'm under-resourced. As an organization, I'm grossly under-resourced. I didn't come here today to ask for money for my organization, but I can say that I'm alarmed that there are so many women with disabilities in this country and virtually no programs. There are no programs directed at women with disabilities, not at the national level, not at the provincial level, and not at the municipal level. It's like a blank page.

The Chair: Mr. Drewett.

Mr. Bruce Drewett: I think poverty reduction legislation is fine. It certainly needs to be forward-looking into the future and not just static in time, if a particular initiative is put in place. I think, however, for legislation to be effective you have to know what your policy framework is in advance in order to be able to legislate that. So you need to know what your vision is. You need to know what your guiding principles are. You need to know what your activities are, what your performance measures are going to be, what type of consultation you're going to be looking towards, what type of annual reporting on progress there might be, and then be able to enshrine that in legislation, not only now, but into the future as well and allow it to be adaptable into the future and forward-looking that way.

The Chair: Mr. Goodfellow.

Mr. Rick Goodfellow: Thank you.

You had a couple of really good questions there, Mr. Martin. One of them I think is really important is when you ask about legislation. One of the things my colleague Bonnie brought up is very apparent to any of us who have much dealing with the United States, for example. I live in the Yukon. I live in Whitehorse in a remote area and we're very close. We do a lot of business with Alaska.

One of the things we recognize is that we are a country that by definition and by our example tends to be very conciliatory and very accommodating and compromising, and that's what we've done. What happens is that we rely on voluntary compliance. That's what we rely on in this country, voluntary compliance to move these things forward. And I will tell you it is an abysmal failure. It doesn't work. So the federal leadership role we talk about really does need to include legislation, because it's almost the only way we really can solidly move forward.

As long as disability issues are seen as cost-restrictive, which they are right now, that won't change, because we value money. We don't necessarily value the quality of life stuff or the other things we need. So what we've seen is, for example, that what gets ignored.... We just had a national federal justice meeting about FASD in the fall in the Yukon. One of the very staggering stats that came out of it was that if you don't deal with somebody with FASD in the corrections system, it will cost on average about $1 million a year to deal with that one person. So if folks don't pick up on that stuff and run with it, then we know we do have to have legislation. We have to have something hardened and solid that takes that leadership control and basically puts it out there.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Martin and Mr. Goodfellow.

Mr. Komarnicki, I understand you're going to split your time. We'll start you with seven minutes.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): I'm splitting my time with Mr. Cannan, so please let me know when my three and a half minutes is about up.

There are two areas I'm going into. One is supports and accommodations we now have, and the other is that we talked about some income supports specifically and we had some suggestions. I'm wondering if there's anything in addition.

Firstly, with respect to providing the opportunities, to live in freedom and dignity is a pretty big issue. I know when I look at some of the supports that are available, I see that the Canadian Paraplegic Association, for instance, has peer counselling and support, rehabilitation counselling, vocational employment services, community advocacy, that kind of thing and there may be others. The question is this. How are we doing in terms of support services that are available to ensure we can provide the opportunities to do the kinds of things those disabilities might want to?

Secondly, where do we need to go? Perhaps Anna or others could answer that question. I'll come to the income one shortly.

Ms. Anna Macquarrie: Thank you for the question.

I think in regard to the supports question, you really raise a bigger issue, and that is that the majority of supports and services are in fact in provincial jurisdiction, and there is a difficulty for the federal government to address that delivery of supports and services. I think, predominately, supports and services are not readily available. They're not portable. They're not flexible. Families and individuals have to insert themselves into an existing support system.

I talked earlier about the need for reform of our systems, and it sort of gets at some of the questions asked earlier, as well, about affordability. In many ways, I don't think this is about pouring new money into existing systems. If existing systems aren't working, new money doesn't help them. We need to be really looking at how our systems and support services are best designed. But it gets to that notion that FPT governments have to come together to talk particularly about the issue of supports.

And where do we go? I think that's where we go. I think it is intricately linked with the income support idea. We know probably the number one reason people live in poverty is that they do not have the supports they need—the supports to go to school, to get a job, to keep their job, to live and be part of their communities. Until we can address that piece.... It's similar around the legislation piece. A poverty act could be great, but if it's not dealing with why people are experiencing such staggering rates of poverty, where's it going to get us?

So I think the supports issue cannot be addressed in isolation. I don't think it can be addressed solely by the federal government, and I think the supports reform has to be linked into income reform as well.

The Chair: Forty seconds.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I'll pass it over to Mr. Cannan.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to our witnesses. I appreciate all of your comments, your suggestions, and your words of wisdom and advice. I especially appreciate your budget submissions that we received for our January 2009 submissions. I know we've been able to act on some of them, and there are still more. So continue to keep pushing us, because we've tried to check a few off. We know it's important that we work together to ensure that we have a quality of life for people of all disabilities.

I spent nine years in local government before becoming a federal member of Parliament, and I worked on a committee called the access awareness committee on our social planning and housing committee within the city of Kelowna. It was brought to my attention many times. I had a chance to be in a wheelchair. I also walked down the streets—and Jason will be interested in this—visually impaired. CNIB had a day where you go down the street and you have a much more empathetic understanding of the challenges that you face.

I know that our government has put $20 million into the last budget to help make barrier-free buildings or trying to increase the accessibility for people with disabilities. But one thing I noticed was that a lot of the building codes are provincial, and local governments have to implement the bylaws. One of the challenges that we face—and my question would be for whoever might be able to provide some insights—is that people have conflicting challenges when you have urban planning. For example, you're walking down the street and you have barriers, little A-frame signs and things that hinder mobility for wheelchairs or people who are visually impaired. You get to the curb and you have a curb cut, which makes it accessible for people in wheelchairs, but those who are visually impaired need that curb to know where the end of the street is. So they put down sidewalk markings, but in most communities across the country we have winter, and those markings become covered in snow. So there's always this conflict.

I'm just wondering if you have a working relationship with provincial associations and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to help address some of those barriers in urban planning.

● (1245)

Mr. Jason Dunkerley: This is a work in progress, for sure. Inclusion is going to mean many different things to many different people. What I, as a person with a visual impairment, am going to need differs from what a person in a wheelchair needs.

I think one of the areas we need to be looking at and need to be working on is promoting awareness of these issues among the general public. This is one of the recommendations we're calling for with the Active Living Alliance: a concerted effort on the part of the government to raise awareness through a public awareness campaign about some of these types of issues. It might not necessarily answer all of the questions and deal with everything and all of the challenges, but it would be just to have awareness around things like snow removal, for example, so that people can get out and take advantage of their community and those types of things.

We're not going to solve everything, and we may never, but we should have more awareness and more consideration and recognition of some of these big challenges.

The Chair: Mr Drewett?

Mr. Bruce Drewett: I'll be very brief.

There are no guarantees in the world of disability in terms of getting it right the first time. You sometimes do make mistakes, and you have to move on and adapt.

Universal design is really where it's at. And we have to understand that when you do make changes like curb cuts and so on, it will create challenges for people with visual impairments or low vision. But at the same time, it's universal insofar as it helps people with strollers, carriages, if they're carrying luggage and rolling it along, whatever the case may be. So I think universal design is really the way we need to go in the future. You do it in the preparation stage and not as an afterthought. Then you have to adapt it at times after that in order to make it work for situations that aren't always contemplated. But universal design is clearly something this committee should be thinking about.

Mr. Ron Cannan: Thank you. I know my time is up.

I just wanted to also thank our analyst, who reminds us each week. She's in a wheelchair. And we have colleagues like Steven Fletcher, who is a great inspiration for paraplegics and quadriplegics. His line is that when he lay in the hospital bed, the doctor said he would be institutionalized for life, but he never knew that institution would be the House of Commons. So he's a great ambassador.

I welcome you to B.C. for the Paralympics as well in 2010. I hope to see you there.

Congratulations, and thank you for your concerted efforts to help raise awareness for those with disabilities.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cannan.

We're almost out of time, but I did promise we'd come back.

Ms. Minna, I'm just wondering if we can maybe have one quick question. I hate to limit the debate on something like this, but go ahead, do what you can.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): I'll do my best and I'll throw them out all at once.

I know that my colleague Mr. Martin already asked about basic income, but I want to add to that a structure of basic income that deals with ability. People work, they want to work, and sometimes they have to be in and out of the labour force, depending on the difficulty they face. We need to build a system that is flexible enough so that their money isn't cut off and they have to start from scratch again, which is what happens now in many cases, and it's a constant stress.

Is basic income the way to go? How would it be structured—if any of you have thought about it—in terms of allowing people who do work to be able to get in and out of the labour force? I know it's a complex issue, but it's also a very important one.

On gender analysis, I just want to say that the women's caucus at the Liberal Party has recommended that gender analysis be done on everything. Our former leader had announced a national gender equality commissioner who would report to the House of Commons. That also, obviously, would deal with women with special needs. That's just by way of information.

My last question, then, to tag onto the income and employment issue, is should we go with quotas, as some countries have done, to ensure that certain positions of work are there for people who are challenged?

● (1250)

The Chair: Okay, I have three hands.

Go ahead, Ms. Macquarrie.

Ms. Anna Macquarrie: Just on the issue of basic income—and I can address some of Tony's questions from earlier—I don't think the design has been worked out enough at this point to say how it would interact with employment issues. I think it's certainly something that needs to be done, and perhaps something that a high-level table could look at if we were doing a broader exploration into that sort of thing. The design, as it stands right now, really is looking at probably a pretty small group of people. It would likely be DTC-eligible, which is generally where the Caledon proposal has looked at it. Essentially, it would be a way of pulling people off provincial caseloads, and then that money would be opened up to be reinvested at a service level.

The design elements are still being worked on. It was really a proposal to get on the table to get exactly these types of conversations going, so we would welcome further discussion around that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Minna.

Mr. Vellacott, just one quick question before we wrap up.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm looking over an article from the Canadian Paraplegic Association's magazine, so you've probably read this one—it's a good one. I ask this because we had to inquire on this in respect to our own son. It is in regard to the RDSP program, or the registered disability savings plan, which a lot of people don't seem to know too much about. We kind of scrambled to get information at the early part of the year too.

I have a quick question in respect to that, because the intent of the program, as I understand it from our federal government's announcement, is to help people with disabilities secure their financial and social well-being by creating a mechanism that leverages federal contributions, encourages families and friends to contribute, and helps those who may not have anyone to contribute to their plan to save for the future. It has leveraging of 300% in terms of matching grants, 200% at another level, so it's a pretty high-matching contribution.

I don't know if people at the table have delved into that, or whether you know the program enough to recommend how it could be improved or done differently. Are there some upsides, downsides, strengths, weaknesses to the program that you could advise us of?

Maybe we could start with Bruce.

Mr. Bruce Drewett: Yes, a couple of things that we recommended in our brief were that there be a consideration of the overall lifetime limit that is currently placed on the RDSP, which is $200,000. If you look at a person who gets a spinal cord injury at an early age, it would probably take a minimum of $2 million over a lifetime in incremental expenditures to support that person with their well-being. So the $200,000 is really a pittance when it comes to that consideration. As well, the age limit is currently 49. We know through our statistics that there is an increasing incidence of spinal cord injury among people who are in the ageing population, so the age limit is a real problem that way.

The Chair: I'm going to have to call time here. We'll suspend for a couple of minutes before we have some committee business.

I want to thank the witnesses again for taking time to be here. I know that most of you made recommendations. If there are any specific recommendations that you did not get a chance to mention to us, please submit them to the clerk and we'll make sure that all members get them. We'll also make sure they are referenced in our report.

Once again, I want to thank everyone for the work you're doing. I know it's difficult, but we do appreciate you being here and not only helping to educate us but to promote awareness of what is going on in this country. Thank you very much.

We'll suspend the meeting.

● (Pause)

●

● (1255)

The Chair: Members, please grab a seat. There are a couple of things we need to deal with very quickly, because of travel next week. Also, Mr. Savage has a motion, and we have to turn this room over to another committee coming in here in about three minutes.

What I wanted to indicate to the committee was that I believe there is some major poverty demonstration happening in Quebec City, so we're having a hard time with witnesses in Montreal, understandably. What I have suggested to the clerk is that we go with one day in Montreal. The clerk is working with both offices to try to make sure we have enough witnesses. We will be sure, at a later time, to either bring them to Ottawa or do a teleconference. We'll make sure that we have a chance to hear them.

Because of the number of witnesses we have right now, we'll only be able to do the one day in Montreal. We're still working to get more. There is a suggestion of a possible site visit, so maybe we can give some suggestions for Mr. Lessard to look at.

I just wanted to state that, and then I wanted to go to Mr. Savage's motion, but I see two hands. I have Mr. Martin and Mr. Lessard on the topic of Montreal.

Mr. Tony Martin: I have no difficulty with making it one day, if we don't have enough witnesses to present in Montreal. I'm confident that the clerk and everybody involved has been trying desperately to get anybody who wanted to appear before us. If there are only enough witnesses for one day, then that's fine. We all have work back here to do as well.

I have a question about the travel, Mr. Chair. This is the first time in my experience when members of Parliament have to use a point of our travel to get to the place of the hearings. In this instance, there's a charter flight leaving Toronto, I believe, for Halifax. I have to use a point to get from Sault Ste. Marie to Toronto. That's prejudicial against anybody who doesn't live in Toronto.

● (1300)

The Chair: Actually, no. It's leaving from Toronto and Ottawa. Travel is always from Ottawa back to Ottawa.

Mr. Tony Martin: In the past, Mr. Chair, when I've travelled with committee, I always had my travel covered from home, from where I was, to the location of the hearings and then back again.

The Chair: That has not been the case for any travel I've done. I've been expected to either get to Toronto or to Ottawa. You have to come to Ottawa, so the travel is from Ottawa back to Ottawa.

Mr. Tony Martin: For example, on the employability stuff, I travelled out to meet up with the committee. I got that covered, and then my travel from there on. If we should leave the committee at some point and not be able to stay with the tour, so to speak, we then are back on our own point system again.

That's not fair, in my view. It penalizes those of us who live away from Toronto and Ottawa and who perhaps need to leave and come back here or go someplace else in order to continue our work as members of Parliament. I don't know if anybody else is feeling that this is different and problematic, but I certainly am, because I push the limit every year on my travel.

I'm surprised that it's been your experience that this is the way it has worked. It certainly hasn't been mine.

The Chair: It's actually the way it works with all committees. It's a bigger issue than just this committee. It's actually policy that all the trips have been revolved around leaving from Ottawa and coming back.

I have Mr. Lessard on the list, Mr. Lobb, and then Mr. Savage.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Chairman, I see that those groups that will not be able to appear are very important, such as the Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté, FRAPRU, L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, and so on. Those groups are used to testify.

There will be an important event in Quebec City, as you may have said at the beginning, but I did not follow what you said after that. Those people will all meet in Quebec City for a demonstration that is precisely aimed at fighting poverty. I suppose they will wish to be heard at another time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: That is what you suggested, I believe, and I agree. We could cancel the second day and book them for another time. They want to be heard and we should not leave them aside.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Lessard, that was what I suggested. We'll try to bring them in via video conference or we'll bring them into Ottawa. We will extend the invitation to them again. I believe we need to hear them as well.

I have Mr. Lobb and Mr. Savage.

Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: If we don't hear witnesses next Thursday in Montreal, can we have a committee meeting here in Ottawa, where my motion and perhaps any other outstanding committee business could be heard at that time?

The Chair: That is definitely a possibility, that's for sure.

Mr. Michael Savage: Because I don't think we're going to get to my motion today, and I understand that as it's past one o'clock, but I'd like to have it dealt with at the first opportunity.

The Chair: All right.

You know what? We are out of time here.

Tony.

Mr. Tony Martin: I just want a notice of motion and I will put something in writing. I really think, after today, that we need to look at a subcommittee on disabilities to get on with some of the issues that are on the table in that file.

The Chair: Okay. We'll get you to submit a motion on that.

Thanks again, everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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