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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio



Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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• (1110)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

Welcome to meeting number 104 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Pursuant to the Standing Orders, members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the members and witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those in the room, your mic will be controlled by the proceedings and verification officer.

All comments should be addressed through the chair. With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain the speaking order for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 27, 2023, the committee will resume its study of the implementation of a red dress alert.

I would like to welcome our witnesses. As an individual, we have Lori Campbell, associate vice-president, indigenous engagement, University of Regina. From MKO, we have Sheila North. We also have Dr. Anita Olsen Harper.

You will each have five minutes for opening remarks, followed by a round of questions.

The floor is yours, Ms. Campbell. Please begin.

Ms. Lori Campbell (Associate Vice-President, Indigenous Engagement, University of Regina, As an Individual): *Tansi.* Good morning, everyone.

This morning, I will begin in Cree as a way to honour the undeniable strength and perseverance of my ancestors for working so hard to maintain our language and, with it, our culture, our way of life and our beliefs in the interconnectedness and resilience of life.

[*Witness spoke in Cree and provided the following text:*]

Nanāskom māmawi-ohtāwīmāw mitoni miwāsin kotak kisikaw iwāpā...tamāk Lori Campbell, ni ti si yih kā son mōniyawisākahikanihk, kit-see-ah-soht-ta-mah-tow-in, kīwētinohk kisiskāciwan ohci niya māka oskana ka-asasteki sāwanohk ni wī kin Niya 2-Spirit Tastawiyiniwak Nēhiyaw āpihtākosisān iskwew.

[*English*]

I started off by giving a short thank you to the Creator, because it's so beautiful that we get to see another day, especially when so many of our relatives and ancestors have had that right stolen from them. In fact, recent reports indicate there are well over 4,000 indigenous women, girls and 2-spirit people who have had this right stolen from them in the last few decades, because they were indigenous.

I introduced myself, and I said that my family is from Montreal Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6 territory, in northern Saskatchewan, but that I live in the south, in Regina. I said that I am a 2-spirit Cree Métis woman.

I am the granddaughter of a residential school survivor, and a child of the sixties scoop generation. One of the things I am most proud of is that, over the course of 25 years, I was able to locate my birth mom and all six of my living siblings, who had been dispersed across several provinces at various young ages.

I have the privilege of holding the position of associate vice-president, indigenous engagement at the University of Regina. However, today I share my statement with you as a proud, unapologetic,

[*Witness spoke in Cree and provided the following text:*]

Tastawiyiniwak Nēhiyaw āpihtākosisān iskwew,

[*English*]

despite the systems that have worked to keep me and others like me from holding our heads high and speaking, even though our voices may shake in rooms like this, in spaces that were never meant for us.

I choose to share with you who I am because it tells you where I come from, and it tells you a bit about the lens through which I experience this world. Also, it is relevant to why I am speaking here today about the importance of the red dress alert.

I want to share with you two personal stories.

As I sit here, I am reminded that my auntie, Maria Campbell, once stood in this building nearly 60 years ago, right in the House of Commons, to share testimony about the struggles of indigenous women.

She had hoped the stories she shared might change hearts and minds, and that the rest of Canadians would see indigenous women as mothers, children, aunts and kokums who are loved and valued. She wanted it recognized that the addictions, poverty and violence in our communities are not cultural traits or human deficits but rather symptoms of a people struggling to live through a government-created destruction of their world. My auntie shared the important truth the community had asked her to share, but it fell on deaf ears. Do you know what they reported about her in the paper the next day? It said that a beautiful, young native girl said there were a lot of problems in their communities, and that was it.

They were the problem. There was no recognition of the harm caused by the residential school system, reserve system and welfare system, and no recognition of the systemic racism that allowed indigenous women, girls and 2-spirit community members to be hunted, stolen and murdered.

I mentioned earlier that I am from the sixties scoop. I was taken from my birth mom when I was 14 months old because of violence towards her and me by a non-indigenous man in our home. When mom called the police for help, they took me away, not the white man. She thought it was temporary and that they would bring me back when he left. Instead, they put me in care and adopted me out. It took me 25 years to find her again. My mom had come across many dangerous and violent men in her lifetime. The way she took control of that was to start to make them pay for it. She was a street worker for her entire career. She saw no other options.

Yesterday, I told her I was coming here to speak with you today about the red dress alert. She said that this program is important. There have been so many she personally knew who went missing or have been murdered. "People target us because we are aboriginal," she told me. She has had a gun pulled on her several times. I asked her if she ever told the police. "No", she said. "There is no point, because they wouldn't do anything. We had to rely on each other to keep ourselves safe and it's no different today."

When I finally met my birth mom after years of searching, she quietly told me that she was scared to find me. She was worried I would be angry—strangely, not because of her past addictions or career as a sex worker but because she had made me "an Indian". I'll ask you to sit with that for a moment. It still tears my heart. She was worried I would be mad at her simply because she brought me into this world with a target on my back—an indigenous, 2-spirit girl child. I made a decision right then and there that I would stand tall and be unapologetically proud of my indigeneity in a way she never had opportunity to.

Recent national statistics reflect that 0.8 per 100,000 non-indigenous women are murdered every year, but that 4.31 per 100,000 indigenous women are murdered during that same time frame. On a large scale like that, it may seem inconsequential, but let's look at it in the context of my home province of Saskatchewan. We're in a province of just over a million people, including approximately 500,000 women. In one year, those statistics translate to the murder

of five non-indigenous women and 26 indigenous women. If those numbers were reversed, something would have already been done about it, and I don't mean further studies.

Over the past few years, I've seen good intentions go bad because indigenous leaders, professionals, experts and community members have not been able to lead the work intended to have meaningful impact in their own communities. The red dress alert program must be adequately resourced, and it must be indigenous-led.

The MMIWG inquiry called for justice reform to make systemic changes to ensure the justice system is culturally appropriate, and—

• (1115)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Ms. Campbell, unfortunately, your time is over. You can answer further in the questioning rounds.

Thank you.

Now we'll move to Sheila North.

Ms. Sheila North (Former Grand Chief, Manitoba Keewatinow Okimakanak Inc.): [*Witness spoke in Cree and provided the following text:*]

Tansi, Sheila North intinkason. Bunibonibee Cree Nation Neena Oahi. Nihminenten uchinow neesta eh pehachimowan oma uysikisken tumam animochikantek. Iskewewuk and Kuhkinow Kiti-nenminanuk Kukinow tuh minow punihikochik keethtom omatis weenwow.

[*Witness provided the following translation:*]

Hello, My name is Sheila North, I'm very happy to be here to tell you all what I know about the topic we are talking about, so that our women, our people, may have a better life once again.

[*English*]

Hi, everyone. My name is Sheila North and I'm from the Bunibonibee Cree Nation in northern Manitoba. In Cree, to also acknowledge my ancestors and to honour our Cree sovereignty, I introduced myself and told you where I am from in Bunibonibee Cree Nation in northern Manitoba.

I'm glad to be here with all of you to share some knowledge and some thoughts on what we're talking about today, the red dress alert.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, committee members.

Thank you, especially, Leah Gazan for bringing us all together in this way and for raising the importance of this red dress alert and for all the championing you have done alongside all of us at the grassroots level.

Also, I thank the Creator for having us today and all the people from these original lands, these ancestral lands, as well as my good friend Dr. Anita Olsen Harper, who is here with me as a support. I have to mention that she's also the wife of my good friend the late Elijah Harper. I'm very honoured that she's here with us today. She has much more reason to be here than I do. She's such a beautiful person and one of our greatest academics in this country.

I also want to acknowledge my parents for having the courage to be good parents even though we've seen the struggles our country has gone through and the struggles that continue for indigenous people. I want to acknowledge all the women and girls, families, allies and supports who have always raised awareness about MMIW and the MMIWG relatives all over our country and North America. I have seen their tireless efforts to bring us to where we are now, able to talk about what we're talking about today.

I also want to tell you a little bit about my perspectives to give you some insight into who I am and where I come from and why I am talking to you about what I am.

I'm a kookum, a grandmother, of one and a mum of two. I come from two large, beautiful Cree families and I'm thankful to have been raised by Gilbert and Sadie North, residential school survivor and day school survivor. I grew up in Bunibonabee until I went to high school as a teen. It was a huge culture shock to go from my reserve to the city, Winnipeg. I almost lost my life a few times on the streets during that time of transition. I consider myself a survivor.

I'm also a former journalist. I worked in radio and television and on the web as a reporter for about 15 years, for CBC and CTV in Manitoba. I also realized my lifelong dream to be an anchor. I'm very happy about that.

I was also grand chief of Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak from 2015 to 2018.

Most of my work and my life have involved missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. In my role as a communications officer, I created the hashtag #MMIW in 2012 to link conversations, families, advocates and allies together. When I first started working as a journalist and tackling MMIW stories in 2005, I realized then that I was survivor. Over the years since then, I have worked in many capacities to raise awareness of or to advocate for MMIW.

I wanted to drive home the common theme that kept coming up when I talked to families and friends of victims and survivors of MMIWG2S+ and that was the responses by police. Most of my experiences have involved cases handled by the Winnipeg Police Service and the RCMP in Manitoba. The common theme is police attitudes and responses to families and friends who looked to them for help in finding their loved ones. I can say that in all the stories I've ever done for the media and all the stories I have ever heard, police were dismissive, condescending and disrespectful.

In one story, Gail Nepinak was looking for her sister and put posters of her sister in downtown Winnipeg. It took 10 days for the police to respond to her. They didn't respond to her until I did a story on CBC saying she was looking for her. The worst part was that when the police did finally talk to her, they told her that her sister

was an adult and she could go wherever she wanted and that maybe she had gone on vacation. That was a big slap in the face for Gail because Tanya had only five dollars in her pocket. She told them that her family couldn't afford to go on vacations.

● (1120)

In another story a young woman from Portage la Prairie, Jennifer Catcheway, went missing from her family. That is just west of Winnipeg. It took many days for the RCMP to talk to her mom, Bernice. When Bernice finally got a hold of the RCMP to report her missing, the police said that Jen was probably on a drunken bender, to wait for her to get home, and that she would be back soon.

Unfortunately, around four months after that incident, a young, beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed woman went missing from the same city, and what do you think the response from the police was at that time? I was working at the CBC at the time. I talked to both mothers on the same day. This beautiful woman deserved a response from the RCMP. They were very respectful. They got a search going, and they got the word out she was missing.

I did ask the RCMP why there were differences in how they talked to both mothers. The RCMP spokesperson at the time was [*Inaudible—Editor*]. I can still remember her name. She berated me, attacked me and said I was accusing the RCMP of being racist. Both women deserved justice, and both families deserved respect, but that's not what happened. Unfortunately, these are just two examples, and I share them with permission from the two families.

I believe the red dress alert needs oversight by families and grassroots people for it to be effective. Many of the police forces across the country have eroded the trust of many MMIW families and survivors. They are not trusted to do the right thing on their own, and to report on all cases of missing loved ones in a timely and respectful manner.

[*Witness spoke in Cree*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Ms. North.

We'll now move over to Dr. Anita Olsen Harper.

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper (As an Individual): Good morning.

[*Witness spoke in Anishinaawpemowin*]

[*English*]

That means I'm very happy and deeply honoured to be here, and thankful to Sheila that I've been invited.

I'm not going to speak as long as Sheila has, or Lori, but I am here as a support for Sheila.

I would like to make a land acknowledgement. I always turn it more into a people acknowledgement. I am always thankful to our ancestors who left this land, all of it, in a wonderful and pristine condition before the colonizers came over from Europe and other places.

As an academic, I did my Ph.D. on domestic violence in our communities, which is incredibly high. Of course, there's a great correlation between that and missing and murdered indigenous women and girls.

As for the red dress alert, it is nothing for us, without us. As indigenous women, especially on reserve, but indigenous women who also have positions and places in Canadian society, we do the act of participation. We do the act of leadership, which we can also view as an act of reconciliation. It's not so much that we are awaiting the go-ahead for us to take the leadership, we just do it.

I am Anishinabe. I'm from northwestern Ontario and the Lac Seul First Nation. I've done a lot of work in the area of violence against women. I am now with Movember, the moustache people. I work a lot with indigenous male inmates in federal prisons. When I talked to them, I realized they were raised in homes of violence and chaos. We need to get a handle on that, because we're so used to being the bad people, the bad men, and the bad women who are targeted for violence.

Again, the red dress alert should be for grassroots and indigenous women all over in Canada's societies.

Thank you, *meegwetch*.

• (1125)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Dr. Olsen Harper.

We're going to start our first round of questions.

We will start with Michelle, for six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Meegwetch to our witnesses. We have heard powerful testimony here today as we further study the red dress alert.

There's so much to unpack in what each of you has brought forward. I think the real mission of this study is, as you see in the motion, "an examination of a most effective and efficient manner to operate, administer, and control such alert system;" so it's really about trying to hash out how we ensure that it works. I think those are going to be the critical pieces.

Ms. Campbell, you gave some numbers, and I think numbers are really valuable because when you can see the numbers of what's happening.... I think we have unanimous consent around the table; we all support this red dress alert.

When the red dress alert is implemented, what do those numbers look like? Could you reiterate the numbers of missing or murdered,

if you have them handy? If you need a minute, I can go to someone else while you grab them.

Ms. Lori Campbell: Yes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: While you do that, I'm going to go over to Ms. Olsen Harper.

Your testimony is really profound. I think, off-line, when we're having these conversations, this study is about the red dress alert, and it's an intervention, but upstream, on domestic violence, your comments are very well suited for this committee when we look at the status of women.

One of the things I've spoken a lot about is that men who have been incarcerated say that come out worse than when they go in. They don't have access to programming. We've heard testimony in other studies that behaviour is communication. When we understand why somebody is doing what they're doing, it's possible to help them redirect that. I just want to say thank you for saying that because I think we have a lot of work to do.

Now, I'll go back over to Ms. Campbell for those numbers.

Ms. Lori Campbell: As I said, 0.8 per 100,000 non-indigenous women are murdered every year, but it's 4.31 per 100,000 indigenous women. Then, I just kind of broke it down for what that would be like in Saskatchewan, which would be five non-indigenous compared to 26 indigenous women. In a province the size of Saskatchewan, I would think everybody would be alarmed by those numbers.

I was talking with my mom yesterday about the alerts. As we see, and as MP Gazan has spoken about, 80% of the children for which an Amber alert has been issued have been found. We need a system that isn't optional. The aboriginal alert is kind of optional. People can look at it, but we need a system that is put out there so that everybody sees it, so that those faces are out there and so that we can have that same kind of response. As an academic and a researcher, I would see that we would have many more found safely. We know time is important. Waiting 10 days to start to look is often too late already.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I really appreciate those numbers. I think that 80% success rate, when you look at the Amber alert, means 80% of lives. That's why I think it's really important to have that number on the record and how that can transfer.

To Ms. North, I commend you on your hashtag. I think we live in a digital age, and with that comes a double-edged sword. It has not always been the best thing for our children, but it also has the capacity to do that.... With your background in that and being able to get a hashtag that really resonated with folks and is easy to understand, do you see that as part of this red dress alert as well?

Mrs. Sheila North: Again, it still connects us all together. It ties us in some way. It ties us together in a lot of ways. We know that the red dress alert has to have a digital component. MMIW is also very digital, so it has to keep us connected to remind us of what the problems are.

As far as numbers are concerned, I wanted to add that we know officially that NWAC had numbers and the RCMP had numbers. The last official number I ever heard from the RCMP was 1,182 missing and murdered in Canada, and that was quite a few years ago, probably in 2013 or 2012. They haven't updated the numbers, but we know it's probably three or four times more than that, and nobody has been able to get that real number or the true number. It hasn't been worked on; it hasn't been a priority, so that has to be a factor as well.

● (1130)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: A hundred per cent, I think data is the driving force behind efficiency. If you don't have the numbers, you can't really do that. Those numbers need to be changed, for certain.

The last thing is just ensuring that when we look at this...we've heard "for indigenous, by indigenous" from multiple witnesses. I think that's fair.

In a short amount of time, do any of you have recommendations to put into this report for what that looks like from the federal roll-out perspective of how that is implemented and still having a key operator?

Do you see the minister operating this? How do you see it rolling out?

Mrs. Sheila North: I think there are already best practices, probably from the Amber alert and the silver alert.

I think the standards of what it is going to look like should be set way ahead of time, with major involvement from grassroots people and academics like Lori and Dr. Olsen Harper here—people who have gone through it and who know the realities.

I think that, coming up, the standards and what constitutes a red dress alert have to be with grassroots first, and academics and allies, before it even gets there.

When it finally rolls out, I think the mechanics of it will be easier once these systems have been put in place by the people themselves.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Ms. North.

Now we will go over to Anita.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank all three of our witnesses not just for your testimony today, but for the incredible work you do every single day.

I have a question for each of you. I'm going to start with Ms. Campbell.

First of all, I want to offer you a few moments because I saw that at the end of your speaking time you didn't quite finish your remarks.

Do you want to take some time to do that?

Ms. Lori Campbell: Absolutely. Thank you for that. I was nearly done, but I had a couple of summary points.

The MMIWG inquiry called for justice reform to make systemic changes to ensure the justice system is culturally appropriate. The creation of a nationwide red dress alert program is a tangible step for the federal government to take to end the ongoing genocide of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and 2-spirit people.

As MP Gazan has said, response times to reports of missing indigenous women, girls and 2-spirit people are far too slow. A red dress alert, similar to the Amber alert, would make a difference.

What we, as indigenous people, are asking for is fairly simple. It is the same care, attention and respect afforded to the rest of the population.

We believe that we can find solutions and lead the way. I think that's one thing that is often missing. We saw it even in the inquiry, where it wasn't indigenous-led, even though we had indigenous professionals, experts and community members in the room. The oversight by the government was too much to allow it to move ahead the way it needed to.

Thank you.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much for that.

I also note that in your testimony, you referred back 60 years to your aunt's testimony. I just want to say that I think we all share a determination that the outcomes and the actions of the testimony today will actually lead to change. Thank you for that.

We've heard a lot about the impact on women and girls, but not as much about 2-spirit peoples. I just want to give you a moment to talk about the unique realities and ways that 2-spirit peoples would be even more impacted, and whether or not there may be things that need to be done specifically or uniquely for that group of people.

Ms. Lori Campbell: At the intersection of being 2-spirit, we know how much more significantly queer people are targeted just in the general population. Then within the indigenous community, if you add it onto being a woman and being indigenous, being 2-spirit exponentially causes harm. Our access to resources is exponentially less there, from the policing service and all of those types of things.

I remember working at the youth centre nearly 30 years ago. We had a young, 2-spirit individual who attended. He was murdered in the streets of Regina just for being who he was. Things like that were never reported. That part of it wasn't reported. I think that's where, even as an academic, the statistics and the data are not there.

I think it's partly because people like to erase it as well and not consider it as an issue.

• (1135)

Ms. Anita Vandebeld: Thank you.

That leads very well into my next question for Ms. North, which is about that invisibility that you spoke about.

You were a journalist, so I would like to get your sense and perspective about publicity.

We know that there is a difference in terms of who is seen and who is mentioned in the media or publicized. Is there a way we can turn that to our favour in a red dress alert? Can we turn that publicity into a good thing and make indigenous women, girls and 2-spirit people less invisible in the public realm?

Mrs. Sheila North: I think the presence of our people, with our faces and our names, has been a long time coming in the media. In 2005, the media was still calling victims prostitutes and street workers who were living precarious lives. We were describing the victims as that. We have come a long way.

Media can't be the only one raising awareness about who's missing and who needs awareness. I think that media does get it right a lot of the time. At the same time, it doesn't do a thorough job. It's left to editorialize a lot of it. Again, coming from the journalist background, I know that there are a lot of good intentions by journalists and the people who decide what gets put on the news.

At the same time, we all have systems that we have learned about. The way we treat indigenous people in our country is a systemic issue that also reaches journalism and the media. We need an Amber alert that distinctly talks about who is missing and needs help right now.

You can probably watch a missing persons report on any news-cast across the country. You'll probably find at least one a day, but they get lost now in the system. They get lost because people stop paying attention to the media on these reports. If we can get it on our phones with the same importance as when a child goes missing, or there is a silver alert, then that will be better.

Ms. Anita Vandebeld: Thank you so much.

That goes to my question to Dr. Olsen Harper. I think you only have 10 seconds. You said there's a stigma like they are bad people. That really struck me.

Can she answer in 10 seconds? No. Maybe she can answer it in the next round.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you.

Now we are moving to the Bloc with Andréanne for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the three witnesses.

Your testimonies today are just as impressive as your résumés. You have an incredible background that has greatly enriched this

study, and I thank you for that. I have some questions for all three of you.

Ms. Campbell, if I understood correctly, in your opening remarks you said that the red dress alert should come with sufficient resources.

Can you tell us more about what those resources would be?

• (1140)

[*English*]

Ms. Lori Campbell: When I think about sufficient resources, I think from the perspective of knowing that this isn't a new problem. It's not something that has occurred in the last year or two. This isn't a project; this is a long-term investment. There's been a long-term investment...that has had us hunted, stolen and murdered.

The resources that would go to this would be committed to long-term investment like the Amber alert and other things like that. I don't have a dollar value, but it needs to be able to be done and done well in order to have an impact. We can't have organizations having to reapply for funding every year in order to continue this work.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: If I understand correctly, when you talk about sufficient resources, you're talking about the importance for organizations to have recurring or perpetual funding. That is a priority.

Ms. North, you talked about an indigenous woman who disappeared and was murdered in Portage la Prairie and the police response, which was not the same as in the case of another missing and murdered non-indigenous woman. It was a poignant testimony.

Could the red dress alert have saved this woman who went missing in Portage la Prairie?

[*English*]

Mrs. Sheila North: Neither of them have been found, and I think the families of the non-indigenous women don't feel that justice has been done either. Both families deserve justice, but I think that they saw the failures and inadequacies of the RCMP.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: In your opinion, if the red dress alert had been in place at the time, could it have helped find and save this woman? It's a reminder of how important it is to implement it.

[English]

Mrs. Sheila North: It would have definitely made a difference. They wouldn't have been waiting days to hear a response from the RCMP and then told to wait a little bit longer. It would have been instant.

When the RCMP learned about the second woman, it was instant. The word was out. Media was out there. There were people walking arm in arm in the fields in Portage la Prairie looking for this woman. The same search was not done for Jennifer Catcheway.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you.

Ms. Harper, in your opening remarks, you talked about reconciliation.

How could this red dress alert fit in with the important steps to achieve real reconciliation and nation-to-nation dialogue? We've just talked about all the prejudices that the RCMP can have, as in the cases that Ms. North has just mentioned.

I'll leave you to comment on the link between the red dress alert and this necessary reconciliation.

[English]

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: I think, first of all, we would have to know about the history of colonialism and also the history of pre-contact times when our families looked out for each other, when the gender roles were complementary between men and women. We should find a way to get back to that because reconciliation is everybody's effort. It's not an indigenous effort. Part of it is, but part of it is the non-indigenous component of society on that. It's everybody's job. It's working together with the goal of where our family members can be cohesive, holistic in our growth and development, and protecting each other.

Of course, that's really easy for me to say, but at the same time we live in—I'll use the word—a chaotic society where we don't have that cohesiveness. Even on our reserves it's not cohesive where we are able to look after each other. One reason is entrenched poverty. It's not just a poor family being poor for a time, it's entrenched.

Yes, we definitely have to know that colonialism is ongoing. It's not something in the past. There's neo-colonialism also going on and reconciliation between the two groups can certainly help that along, and it should, especially with the findings of Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

• (1145)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you, Dr. Harper.

Now we'll move to the NDP, Ms. Gazan, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you so much.

I want to start out by saying that it's such an honour to know all of you who are here today. I feel very privileged, and I thank you for being here.

I also wanted to thank the families of Tanya Nepinak and Jennifer Catcheway, who I also know very well, for being so courageous to share their stories.

I also want to thank your mom, Lori. These are difficult stories, mired in stigma. I want to thank your mother for allowing you to share her story. I, too, have a mom who went through child welfare. I was lucky that she turned out just like you, Lori—a scholar, brilliant, brave and wonderful. It's an honour to know you, as well.

My first question is for you, Lori Campbell. I want to talk specifically about child welfare. We know that child welfare is a pipeline to MMIWG. I think that also within that we know that, statistically, when women lose their children, it often results in a downward spiral emotionally. Often, kids in child welfare, we know, are invisible. They don't have family connection. They don't have community connection.

When we're looking at oversight, why is it important for oversight to be independent and grassroots-led by women, 2-spirit and other advocates, survivors and family members?

Ms. Lori Campbell: I think it's because we're outside of those systems. We bear the brunt of the impact of those systems. Like my mom said, she didn't tell the police because nothing was going to be done. We talk to each other. We know best how to care for each other and how to protect one another. What we need is for those voices to be heard and for the resources to be available so that this work can be done.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm talking specifically about frontline organizations. For example, in your testimony, you spoke about how you found your family, but up until that time, you were kind of alone.

Why is it important for organizations that are on the front lines of these issues to have involvement, especially in cases where there is no connection to family?

Ms. Lori Campbell: Like our elders say, knowing who you are really changes the world. It helps you to be a whole person, having that connection. The system does not help with that. I only found out who I was because I'm a good researcher. The system does not provide us with that information, but we do need that support in order to be able to make those connections. When we know who we are, we feel better about ourselves. We have our confidence. We're able to be connected, and people are able to watch out for us in ways that they don't when we're just another kid in the system.

Ms. Leah Gazan: My next question is for you, Sheila.

I know that when you were the grand chief of MKO there was an initiative of reconciliation, in fact, working with the RCMP around improving systemic racism within the police force. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that very briefly and share whether you were pleased with the outcomes, and if you could offer some suggestions on how it could be improved a little bit.

• (1150)

Mrs. Sheila North: I'll just say that, as a journalist and then also as a leader of my nation, I saw the differences in how police treated even me in either of those roles. I was berated many times as a reporter for asking pointed questions. When I became a leader, I asked the head of the Winnipeg police at the time what that was all about, and he showed up in full tactical gear. When I look at it in retrospect, I think it was an intimidation tactic. They tried to intimidate me to not ask questions or make points where I was trying to hold them accountable. That's been my experience.

I was put on two committees, one with the Winnipeg police and one with the RCMP that Anita and I were a part of. We were welcomed, and we were asked questions and for our opinions. However, as soon as we got really tough on them, really pointed and really direct, we were disconnected. They stopped asking us questions. They stopped inviting answers, and that's the way it is now. We have no closure from either of those councils, and they've dishonoured our people by not having proper closure.

Ms. Leah Gazan: It's like opening up a can of worms, right? If anything, in the red dress study we're finding out that the trust has eroded. It's not just a feeling; it's a result of ongoing, systemic racism. You gave the example of the Catcheway and Nepinak families. I know that the Catcheway and Nepinak families are still actively searching for their loved ones.

We have talked about—certainly, pretty much all the witnesses have spoken about—the importance of it being indigenous-led. Do you think it's possible, due to the history and due to the ongoing behaviour, for police to be involved in this process?

Mrs. Sheila North: They need to be involved, because they need to learn about the issue themselves properly. They need to be taught. They need to do their jobs.

I have to say that there's a distinction: I have had a better time and better luck in having these conversations with the first nations police forces. The non-indigenous ones have been very difficult. It's been hit-or-miss. That's why I feel that they also need to stay involved. They need to know what their role is and support the families properly, but they can't do it solely.

We see what's happening with Thunder Bay policing and the things that are coming out there. That's just an example. I would say that an inquiry like that, or an inquiry into policing, needs to happen, because this has been the common thread for our people. It's not just for this issue; it's for our people across this country. It's disparaging....

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Ms. North.

Mrs. Sheila North: I have to mention one more thing. Tanya Nepinak is presumably still in the landfill in Winnipeg. Since 2011, they did a very short search for her, and they still haven't found her.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): We will now move to the second round. It will be four minutes and four minutes.

We will start with Dominique.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

There are a lot of things to say, so we're going to have to be very concise.

Ladies, thank you for joining us this morning.

I'm pleased, Ms. North, to hear you talk about the presence and involvement of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and, more generally, the police. No matter where you are in the country, the RCMP is either there or it's not. In Quebec, it's the Sûreté du Québec. It doesn't really matter. Many of the women who have come to see us have told us that they don't trust the police at all.

Ms. Harper, if my information is correct, you are a senior adviser to the RCMP's national reconciliation team. Is that still the case?

[*English*]

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: No, it's not. I did write a report on how the RCMP could do reconciliation with the first nations, the Métis and the Inuit in Canada. That report.... It resulted in a national strategy for reconciliation that I was not a part of, which says something, right? I don't know where that's at.

• (1155)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Ms. Harper, you did study the issue of reconciliation with the RCMP. Do you think that the red dress alert should also be set up in collaboration with the police forces?

Obviously, women and indigenous peoples must have a major role to play in the development and management of this new service. However, does the police have a major role to play, as Ms. North suggests, even though there have been failures in the past?

Would it be better to focus instead on the criteria on which to act, since these criteria could have an influence on whether or not there will be discrimination?

[*English*]

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: For sure the police have to be involved in the red dress alert. I mean, there's no way that the police cannot be a part of it, but they should not be the final and sole authority on how it works, or be who gets to "push the button", as we say.

Yes, they definitely do have a role. With regard to what the role is and how much of it they play, that should be up to indigenous groups. It should come from the grassroots communities and the families involved who have lost women and girls to violence.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you, Ms. Harper.

Ms. North, should we draw heavily on the Amber alert model, or even reproduce it in its entirety?

[*English*]

Mrs. Sheila North: I think we can draw a lot from the experiences of the Amber alert. I think we can draw experiences from the silver alert. We learned a bit about some of that in some of the committees that led to getting the red dress alert established in the first place. I think we have a lot of good knowledge and best practices there. We have a lot to learn.

Again, I agree with everything that my colleagues here have said about the RCMP, the Winnipeg police, all of the other police forces and the first nations police forces, needing to be involved. They all need to have their hands on deck to support more than they ever have before.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Ms. North.

Now we move to Emmanuella for four minutes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): First, thank you all for your moving testimony. It was great to hear all of you. I'm really sad that we're even in the situation that we have to invite you here to talk about this because of what the reality is out there.

We've touched on a lot of issues, and I want to bring this somewhere a bit different. I don't want to talk about the red dress alert today, even though everyone else has got great testimony out. I know we're going to end up doing the right thing. Especially in this committee, everybody is unanimous in supporting it.

I want to talk about mental health being a major factor at play here.

Dr. Olsen Harper, you also mentioned the fact that it starts in the home, and a lot of these homes have violence because of the inter-generational trauma.

Reconciliation is extremely important. One of the things reconciliation can do is help heal these people. I think healing is really the answer, and it's at the core of the answer of what needs to be done.

I would like to hear from you on what you think is needed for indigenous communities to heal.

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: The first thing I would say is that culture is healing. I hear that so often when I speak to the indigenous male inmates. The teachings they receive from a program called Work 2 Give.... They grew up with little pieces of culture here and there, but they couldn't really live it out, really, because of poverty. They were not accepted, as most of us aren't, by the dominant society.

As such, if I were to answer that very simply, I would say it's going back to our culture, because we had those holistic teachings that addressed our mental development, our spiritual development, and our physical and emotional development.

We need to go back to those ways. Of course, the landscape is not at all the same as it has been. It's changing constantly, so it needs constant work, but our traditional cultures are our healing paths.

Meegwetch.

• (1200)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: I want to get one last answer to a question before you head off, if you don't mind.

I just want to know if you think a federally funded program that really centres on indigenous leaders being at the heart and centre of the creation of the program, and that supports mental health in indigenous communities would be helpful.

Dr. Anita Olsen Harper: Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you.

We now have just two minutes left. We'll give one minute to the Bloc and one minute to the NDP.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I don't know which witness to turn to.

In one minute, I'd like to talk about something we haven't talked about as much today, which is the technical problems surrounding an alert similar to an Amber alert.

Many remote communities could have connectivity problems, and we know that the alert will depend a lot on technology.

Have you given any thought to this aspect and to possible solutions?

[*English*]

Mrs. Sheila North: I think the federal government needs to now implement the proper infrastructure to support the access of the Internet to all remote communities. This is all about the social determinants of health. We don't live in a third world country anymore. We should be affording nations with everything they need to have proper participation in our country.

Ms. Lori Campbell: That also includes things like phones, like cellphones.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you.

Now it's over to Leah.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My last question is for you, Lori.

We heard about policing. I wanted you to talk a little bit more about what the oversight of policing looks like, considering the testimony we've heard today.

Ms. Lori Campbell: Absolutely.

It's not oversight. It would be listening and taking direction from community and grassroots members, who are dictating and expressing what needs to happen. It's on the red dress alert, but it's also on the justice system as far as the other side goes, because there are those who are hunting down and murdering us. We need to follow through on that aspect of it as well.

I think there are two major roles for the justice service or the policing services to be involved in, but they should not be the decision-makers.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you.

This concludes our first panel.

Thank you to all the witnesses here for their great work and for their testimony. You always can submit your testimony to the clerk.

Now we need to suspend for a few minutes for our next panel.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1215)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): We'll resume the meeting.

I would like to welcome the witnesses. From the Tears to Hope Society, we have Lorna Brown, executive director, and Denise Halfyard, assistant director.

You can share your five-minute presentation.

Mrs. Lorna Brown (Executive Director, Tears to Hope Society): First, I want to acknowledge the Algonquin people, on whose unceded and unsundered traditional territory we are doing this important business.

Hadih. I am Wet'suwet'en, and also the founder and executive director of the Tears to Hope Society in Terrace, B.C.

We are, first and foremost, here as family members. My niece Tamara Chipman went missing in September 2005 along the Highway of Tears, which runs from Prince Rupert to Prince George. The Highway of Tears' name originated when my cousin Florence Naziel started the very first Highway of Tears walk, after my niece went missing, working with her niece Karen Plasway. They wanted to come up with a name for her walk, and they sat down and talked about so many women who were missing from our community of Witset. They started drawing tears. There were just so many that they couldn't fit them all on the napkin, so they suggested it was like a "highway of tears". That's just a little bit of background on where the name came from.

There was a walk from Smithers to Prince George in 2006, which led to the 2006 symposium in Prince George. That was led by Matilda Wilson, whose daughter Ramona Wilson was found murdered near the Smithers airport. She was 16 at the time, and this year marks 30 years of her family waiting for answers. That will be coming up in June.

My sister Gladys Radek and Bernie Williams also continued the hard work that these family members started. They organized seven walks across Canada, starting in B.C., to call for a national public inquiry into the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls across the country. Our families testified at the inquiry. Tamara is still missing to this day, and we still have no answers, like so many other family members. The number one thing we hear from family members is that they feel like their cases aren't being investigated or taken seriously.

I'd like to add that missing men matter, too. My cousin Phyllis Fleury has also been searching tirelessly for her son, who was 16 at the time and went missing from Prince George. This is an issue that affects our men as well.

• (1220)

Ms. Denise Halfyard (Assistant Director, Tears to Hope Society): *Hadih.* My name is Denise Halfyard. I am Lorna's oldest child, and I just want to say what a blessing it is to be able to do this important work alongside my mother.

I'm the assistant director for the Tears to Hope Society, and we fully support the red dress alert. The Tears to Hope Society has a support system with family members along the Highway of Tears. There is a lot of support for this alert, especially if it were to be implemented like the Amber alert.

Since the 231 recommendations were made, we continue to have our women targeted, as they are still going missing or being found murdered.

There were some issues identified for this program. What is the criteria for a missing person? The definition is going to vary. Many families who go to the police are told to wait 24 hours; however, we know that this is not a true regulation, as the first 72 hours are the most important.

What is the threshold of time that allows us to alert the public?

Recently a woman in the north was reported missing. She was active on social media but had not been in direct contact with her loved ones who wanted proof that she was okay. How do we differentiate between someone who's not interested in being in contact with loved ones for various reasons and someone who is truly missing?

Cell service continues to be an issue that gets raised. There are many areas that still don't have that service. North of Terrace, there is zero service unless you have personal Wi-Fi, so, if an alert were to go out while I'm on any part of those highways, I would have no idea who to look for because I wouldn't get the alert until it was too late.

The Tears to Hope Society is working towards the prevention of missing and murdered women and girls through education and taking care of your physical and mental health. When we are educated and are actively involved, we are more empowered. We believe we are stronger when we support one another because “She is Somebody”.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you for your testimony.

We'll now start the first round with Michelle.

You have six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you, Chair.

Meegwetch. You travelled here, and thank you very much for being here for our study on the red dress alert.

Thank you for the work that you do, first of all. These are the boots-on-the-ground organizations that truly make impact and change. I'm truly grateful for that.

Denise, two things really jumped out at me. I think what we really want to see come out of this study is how to effectively implement it. We've all agreed this is necessary and important, and now it's about the logistics.

Let's talk about the threshold of time. Do you have a recommendation that you'd like to see in the report?

• (1225)

Ms. Denise Halfyard: That's a difficult one, because it is important to get the word out right away, but we need to take into consideration these women who, for safety reasons, don't want to be found.

I don't think there's a problem with being alerted right away, whether they want to disappear or not. I think we need to err on the side of caution, because it's better safe than sorry.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: You took the next words out of my mouth. Risk versus reward is often what you see. I see this often in vulnerable people in general.

I have a mom in my riding, and her daughter lived on the street and dealt with severe mental illness. She went missing, and nobody put it in the media. Nobody seemed to pay attention. We were able to get her home through social media, but there's a stigma or shame. If I'm putting that on social media, people are going to say, “I don't want people to know it's my family”, but I think you have to look at the bigger picture. I appreciate your putting that on the record.

The other thing you said that is really important when we look at this are the dead zones on highways when you're travelling and cell service in remote areas. A lot of these women and men—thank you, Lorna, for pointing that out—are in these really rural parts of Canada.

I'm wondering if you think a good idea would be signage saying that this is a dead cellphone area. I guess people would already know it's a dead cellphone area, but how do we close that gap? I think about when I travelled the highway from Banff to Jasper. It's

one of the most dangerous highways. It was snowy, and there's not one ounce of cell service.

What do you think we can do when we're trying to close that gap of notifying people? Are there any suggestions, or has there been any talk about that?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: We have a lot of industry in the north. About 70 kilometres from us is the largest LNG project in Canada.

There were a lot of announcements about all this new investment into cellphone services. It's improved somewhat, but my daughter lives just five kilometres out of Terrace, on the Kitsumkalum first nation, and she doesn't get cell service there—it's very scratchy. There definitely needs to be more of an investment, even into the communities. We hear about all this investment, but our services are still very scratchy, so I think these companies that are making these promises need to follow through. I won't mention the company, but there are all these promises. I know that they use the word “MMIWG” to receive funding, and yet five kilometres out of our community there's no proper cellphone service.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I think you've hit an interesting point that needs to be put into this report. We've been promised working cellphone service since I worked in telecommunications, which was a long time ago. I know I look really young, but I'm not—I'm just kidding.

I'm just bringing some levity to this very serious topic. I think that is something that has to be put into this study, that the working cellular network is critical to this.

When we look at how this is implemented, I just don't want it to get lost in the logistics. I've seen this so many times. Everybody agrees on a great idea and then everybody walks away from the table. It's like a group project—yes, that's great—and then you don't have that one person who is the implementer, who gets it going and makes it operate.

You mentioned the Amber alert. Do you think that the Amber alert is the project to follow? Do you think, since it's already been created, there's no need to reinvent the wheel? Basically, recreate the same principles as Amber alert—

• (1230)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you.

The time is up. You can always send us a written answer.

Marc, you have six minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll continue along those lines, but before that, I just want to make sure of your testimony because I think it's really important. In the committee, when we talk about cell coverage—and let's name them—Telus, Rogers and Bell have failed Canadians. Let's be clear: They, the wireless industry, say that they cover 98% to 99% of the Canadian population, which is a lie. Your testimony here, from B.C., is like what I have in northern Ontario. There is not proper cell coverage, so it would be a strong recommendation for the committee to get these companies, which are giving millions to shareholders, to make sure there is proper cell coverage. Thank you for doing that.

The other component here is that you mentioned the Amber alert—and we'll talk about the silver alert. How do we make this grassroots? We have, in northern Ontario—like in B.C.—the Anishinabek police force on reserve. In Ontario we have the Ontario Provincial Police, and then you have the municipal police. How do we have a system, and what recommendations do you have for us to have it grassroots-led by indigenous women especially, to ensure that these three levels of police do the proper red dress alert to make sure the system works either locally or provincially, and then nationally?

Ms. Denise Halfyard: I think it needs to start out regionally. We know our women. We know our locations, our areas, so we would definitely have a better idea of the scope of where we're searching more than somebody, say, in Vancouver. They wouldn't know, really, where to look if they were there.

As far as police involvement is concerned...I don't know if you want to speak to that.

Mrs. Lorna Brown: There definitely needs to be police involvement. However—again, I think it's been said before—it needs to be in collaboration with family members. Whether that's just consulting, having a committee to consult with on a regular basis so that they're informed... There definitely needs to be that communication because, again and again, we've heard that there's a lack of communication in regard to families. Something like this needs to be community-led. There definitely needs to be that, like Denise said, starting out in the region, and then it could be spanned out from there.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

We heard from a colleague here earlier who was speaking to our other witnesses about mental health and about ensuring the red dress alert is in place and is indigenous-led by women. Those are clearly recommendations that we're going to hear from the committee.

When we talk about intergenerational, we look at residential survivors, at child welfare. It's not just women; there are men in general in the community. What are your recommendations related to mental health?

What should we do as a federal government to support the red dress alert system linked to mental health services and programs?

Ms. Denise Halfyard: I think it comes down to education again.

A lot of people don't understand, still, what intergenerational trauma is, even people who are actually going through it. Educating them and showing them this behaviour is a result of their intergen-

erational trauma and guiding them, giving them resources to get that help that they need.... There's education for sure.

• (1235)

Mr. Marc Serré: We talked about urban and indigenous. We have reserves. What role do you think the municipalities, when we look at friendship centres, when we look at urban indigenous...so we really have the rural aspect and the urban.

Are there any specific recommendations along those lines?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: In Terrace we have a local friendship centre because we're considered an urban centre. Terrace is a hub to the northwest and we have approximately 27 surrounding first nations communities that all come to Terrace for their goods and services. We're definitely lacking in that area of even having any type of counselling available.

I know there are groups that have been advocating for a healing centre or detox, and for the number of first nations we have in our area it's quite shocking that there is nothing available. The first place that you can get any type of help with is in Prince George, which is a six- to seven-hour drive. Then there are certain criteria that have to be met before they can access any of those services.

I think the services need to be streamlined so that people can get help right away because they might be ready to get help today, but next week it might be too late. I know that personally, because I lost my sister a year ago February. She wanted to get help, but there was the red tape and she had to travel and she had to jump through all these hoops before she could get help. Then when it came down to it, it was too late.

We need to be able to streamline and cut out all the criteria to be able to get help. When somebody wants help, we should help them now, not next week or in three months or six months.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Mrs. Brown.

Now, we'll move to Andr anne for six minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank our witnesses for being with us this morning.

Your family stories of missing and murdered people are extremely moving.

I would also like to thank you for reminding us that your stories affect not only indigenous women and girls, but also men and boys.

I've travelled the road from Banff to Jasper, and Ms. Ferreri reminded me that there is no mobile phone coverage in this area. This is also the case in several other rural areas. We've already talked about this.

We're in solution mode here, and I'd like to hear your views on the following issues.

Why is it important, beyond the red dress alert on phones, to find a way of rallying other people?

I'm thinking, for example, of initiatives involving truckers who want to raise awareness, contribute to the fight against the disappearance and murder of indigenous women and girls and act as scouts.

I'm also thinking of certain initiatives in airports, such as the "Not In My City" awareness campaign.

We also want to make posters of missing and murdered people.

What do you see as a complement to the red dress alert on telephones to make sure you cover as many areas as possible and make up for certain shortcomings in cellphone coverage?

[English]

Ms. Denise Halfyard: I think you make a very good point about truckers being educated and assisting in this. My cousin Tamara has been missing. Her dad Tom is a trucker. He trucks from Terrace to Alberta and sometimes into Saskatchewan quite regularly. Yes, it would definitely be a huge help if they used their network to help get the word out when a woman goes missing.

I think there also needs to be a proper active list of women who are missing based on location. If I were to be, say, in Winnipeg and saw an active list of who's missing, I'd know who to look out for. Of course, that would be voluntary for anybody who wants to look, but I think you'll find that, for those of us doing the work already, it's something we would definitely look into.

• (1240)

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Ms. Brown, would you like to add anything?

[English]

Mrs. Lorna Brown: No.

[Translation]

Mme Andréanne Larouche: Okay.

There's another interesting aspect, and that's the fact that the red dress alert is not an end in itself. We also need to be able to offer other education and prevention services, both upstream and further downstream, to make sure we support the victims.

You talked about the heavy administrative burden imposed on organizations that want to help survivors. One of the witnesses who took part in a previous meeting of this committee spoke to us about the recurrent nature of funding.

Predictable funding is important for organizations that want to support victims.

How important and essential is it to ensure the recurrence of funding to support organizations that help survivors or that work on prevention, so that the red dress alert can be properly implemented?

[English]

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Yes, 100%. There needs to be funding. We have all of these meetings. I know it has been a frustration for family members that we're always having meetings, yet very little action is happening. We need to have funding for a call centre—or whatever that looks like for the red dress alert—and to implement it and train people, whether they're family members or other indigenous people working with non-indigenous people. It's about having a full balance of committee members, whether that's the RCMP where we are, or different policing.

Yes, it costs money to run these organizations. We need to act on that and come up with a plan that's actually going to work, then implement it. There needs to be continuous funding.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Ms. Halfyard, would you like to add anything?

[English]

Ms. Denise Halfyard: No, I think she said everything.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: In closing, I understand that we have to reduce the administrative burden on organizations and ensure that they are guaranteed funding. That's how we can sum it up. Both aspects are important.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Andréanne.

Leah, you have six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

Thank you for travelling so far to be with us in committee today. Thank you also for sharing stories about your family. I know those stories are difficult and painful to share.

Lorna Brown, you mentioned that in the territory you're from there is resource extraction. Would you say that there is a lot of sex trafficking or sexual exploitation that's happening out of those resource extraction sites?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Yes, absolutely. We have heard so many stories of sometimes really young girls—as young as 15—being held up in hotel rooms for two and three days at a time. They're picking up young girls and doing whatever they want with them. We're also finding that there are lots of foreigners, who are new to the country, who are also coming in and picking up our young girls and doing the same thing. It is the extraction industry, but it's also new people coming into the country.

• (1245)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Our committee did a study on the connection between extractive industries and increased violence against indigenous women and girls.

I ask that question, because you also shared the fact that companies are coming in, not taking proper safety precautions, and also using the ongoing genocide against indigenous women and girls for financial purposes. Can you expand briefly on that? Then I have another follow-up question. It's deeply troubling.

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Yes, it's interesting. I know in the one project... I do have sons who work in the industry, and, obviously not every single person is a perpetrator. My son told me he saw me on his training video this morning. I wasn't really even aware, but the work we do on the Highway of Tears is used in industry to train. We actually try to hold the companies accountable, to see what they're actually doing.

I can think of an example. A few years ago my sister had word of a perpetrator who had assaulted a female police officer in Kamloops, I believe, and he was actually employed with this company in Kitimat. A bunch of grassroots women went there to hold the company accountable for—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm sorry, but I have limited time.

Like I said in the study, this isn't about how you feel about resource extraction. Whether there's resource extraction or not, it needs to be safe, and it's not safe for women and girls, wherever you sit on that issue.

I ask that, because there are dead zones. First of all, there are dead cell zones. The second issue is that companies come in promising these digital technologies. These are companies that are already not taking precautions to make sure women and girls are safe, not fulfilling their promises. How is it important to put in legislation to hold these companies accountable? This is particularly because these agreements are generally made—sometimes tripartite, federally and provincially with the company—to hold them accountable for things like ensuring digital technology, holding governments to account to make sure, as a human rights matter, that there aren't dead zones.

In light of the extreme violence and sex trafficking, particularly in your area, how is this critical if we are going to make sure women are safe and can participate in a red dress...equally, like other people in different regions across the country?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Yes. You bring up a really good point. I know an indigenous woman who is actually holding the company accountable directly. Our women need support in doing that, whether that comes from a government level.... She is now fighting on her own as just one person. They definitely need to be held accountable for not providing a safe environment.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I feel concerned because this is really quite a serious human rights matter. We have all this money to support industry and building and we can't build cellphone towers to make sure that all the women going missing on the Highway of Tears.... If they're abducted, they literally have no way to communicate.

That was what first came to mind. If they are trying to escape, it's like there's nowhere for them to go, in the boondocks with no technology. How urgent is this?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Extremely urgent.

Ms. Leah Gazan: We've known about the Highway of Tears forever. What is the feeling—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Leah. The time is up.

Now we are starting the next panel. Because of the time, what we will do is three minutes for Anna, three minutes for Lisa, and then two minutes for the Bloc and two minutes for the NDP.

We'll start with Anna for three minutes.

• (1250)

Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm going to share the last bit of my time with Dominique.

First of all, I want to congratulate you, Ms. Brown, on your film, and your daughter on her radio show—like mom, like daughter. You're an inspiration to all moms.

One of the things I do want to ask about, Ms. Brown, is what you mentioned earlier. I'd like you to expand on the comment you made about "little action", please.

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Well, again, where is the accountability? We hear it from the family members. They say that there are 231 recommendations. Can we bite off, like, six or seven of those, and just implement them? It's just an extreme frustration that very little has been done.

It seems to be very fragmented across the country as to who is speaking for the missing and murdered women and girls, like the families. Who is actually holding government accountable for implementing these calls to justice?

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Would you say, "less talk, more action"? I think that's what we're looking for.

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Yes.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I want to refer the other question to your lovely daughter, Denise. You do look like your Mum, by the way.

Do you use your radio show to help identify murdered and missing indigenous women and girls?

I've listened to it. I went through it, and I love the music.

Ms. Denise Halfyard: I do, actually. Every week has a different theme, especially around the days of interest for MMIWG, February 14 to May 5, and we even have events that we coordinate. I bring attention to missing and murdered indigenous women and girls through song. There are a lot of artists out there who are also using their voices to amplify this message, not just in Canada but into the States as well. There are a lot of artists, so—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you. I'm sorry, I don't want to cut you off, but I promised Dominique some time, because she has something very important to ask.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you, Ms. Roberts.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a brief question for you, Ms. Halfyard.

Earlier, you answered my colleagues' questions about the response to the Amber alert. You drew a parallel with the Amber alert, as we did, and you talked about the territory to be covered. You replied that we should start at the regional level and then extend the territory.

You may have mentioned it and I missed it, but could you tell us what is this regional territory you were referring to? Is it the province, the reserve or the administrative region? What did you have in mind?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Just a quick answer, please.

Ms. Denise Halfyard: I think it should be by population. In the Vancouver area, they definitely look out for each other. I think that especially if we were to do something like that regionally in the Terrace area, it would cover the Highway of Tears.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you.

Now we will move over to Lisa.

You have three minutes.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you.

I'll pick up on the same vein.

At this committee, we're trying to nail down how this.... We all agree that there should be a red dress alert. It should be indigenous led, but what does that look like? I've heard several witnesses, including you, talk about the Amber alert and how it should be similar.

Pelmorex is the company that operates the red dress alert system in Canada. It also does the silver alert system. It also operates The Weather Network, so I always just call it The Weather Network. It operates those for free as part of its broadcasting licences.

What happens for those alerts is that the threshold to decide whether or not to call it goes to the police. I think what we've heard at this committee is that it should be a consortium of indigenous leaders—indigenous women—that makes that decision. I think that's the key decision in all those instances: What's the threshold? How do we decide whether this is someone who even wants to be found or whether it's someone we need to look for right now?

I like your idea of it being regional to start with.

Could you see a system where we have regional bodies of indigenous women in particular who oversee the initial contact and then...? Can you see what I'm getting at?

Where do police fit in? Do they fit in at all? Is there a role for police?

Maybe you could hash out where we're getting at with this committee with this red dress alert system.

• (1255)

Ms. Denise Halfyard: I think it's interesting that you bring up The Weather Network because that's exactly the model I was thinking of, where you can choose different destinations to follow. As well, the default is wherever you are at that moment. I think that's a great option.

As far as police go, I think that whoever—let's say “committee”, for lack of a better word—would be leading this in their region should just be called upon and utilized as they see fit.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: It would be the committee making the original decision and then they would reach out to police for tactical support and that kind of thing.

Ms. Denise Halfyard: Yes, it would be for assistance. Again, every region is different. Everybody has different relationships with police. Some are very close and some aren't.

Again, it comes down to being regional and whatever their relationship is.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Lorna, do you have anything to add? Do you have any other ideas of how this would roll out?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: No.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: We've talked about how there are many different types of police services in Canada, depending on where you live in the country.

Do you have anything more to add on whether we need more indigenous policing resources to support this work?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Again, I mentioned how we have the highest population in B.C. of first nations people. I don't know that we even have any indigenous police in northern B.C. For a population of that size, we definitely need more indigenous police.

Also, having that connection with.... I recently met with some new police officers in Terrace. I think they're trying to change that. They recognize that they have failed in the area of trust. However, they're very new, so we'll see how that plays out.

Yes, it definitely needs more indigenous policing.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Clearly the work you're doing is getting out and doing some good, so thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Sonia Sidhu): Thank you, Lisa.

Now we'll move over to Andréanne.

You have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Halfyard and Ms. Brown, I'm watching you this morning, and I'd like to add a few comments to what my colleague has already said. I hope to have the opportunity to do a wonderful project like yours, in collaboration with my little girl, who is now two years old. I hope I'll be lucky enough to experience this wonderful complicity with her.

There's an interesting aspect I'd like to talk about. I recently met an Amnesty International activist at an event. I know that my colleague Ms. Gazan has already spoken about human rights and resource exploitation, and I know that Amnesty International also supports the women of the Wet'suwet'en nation.

What additional support can this organization provide?

[*English*]

Mrs. Lorna Brown: I can answer that.

We look at the northeast of B.C. It's not officially the Highway of Tears but the Dawson Creek area where so many girls and some men are going missing. I have a friend who has two family members missing; they went missing less than a year apart. It's been an issue with extraction, and it continues to happen. These companies need to be held more accountable for so many who are still going missing, and are being affected in violent ways.

• (1300)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you, Mrs. Brown.

We'll now turn it over to Leah, for two minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

Mrs. Brown, you spoke about complicated relationships with police. I know the UN has noted a number of human rights violations

that have been perpetrated by the RCMP within your territory, so I want to honour that.

My question is for you, Ms. Brown. You spoke about criteria, and the criteria for issuing an alert. I say that, because you shared information about a young girl who was held captive for four days.

My question in that case, was there an alert sent? Did anybody look for her? Can you expand on the need to put in place very clear criteria, especially with minors who are going missing?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: With that situation, I'm not aware that anybody.... Nothing has been really put in place. We're such a grass-roots organization that I only heard about this in the community. The community member was a business owner who witnessed this.

There is nothing in place, so we're starting from the ground up to implement something that's going to keep these young girls safe.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Would you say that, currently, many young people and women go missing without a trace, or a concern, in your area? I'm not talking about the community. I'm talking about authorities that are supposed to be there to protect us.

Mrs. Lorna Brown: There's really nothing in place. I know this for a fact from community workers who have tried to assist younger women and girls. There is nothing in place, and even when they do get reported missing, it's just not taken seriously.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Is that the reason why it needs to have oversight, or whatever we want to call it? Does it need to happen for indigenous folks by indigenous folks within regional areas?

Mrs. Lorna Brown: Yes, 100%.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

On behalf of the committee, thank you for your testimony. I'm sorry about the technical difficulties and delays.

You can always submit your testimony in writing if you want to answer some questions.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

The meeting is adjourned.

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