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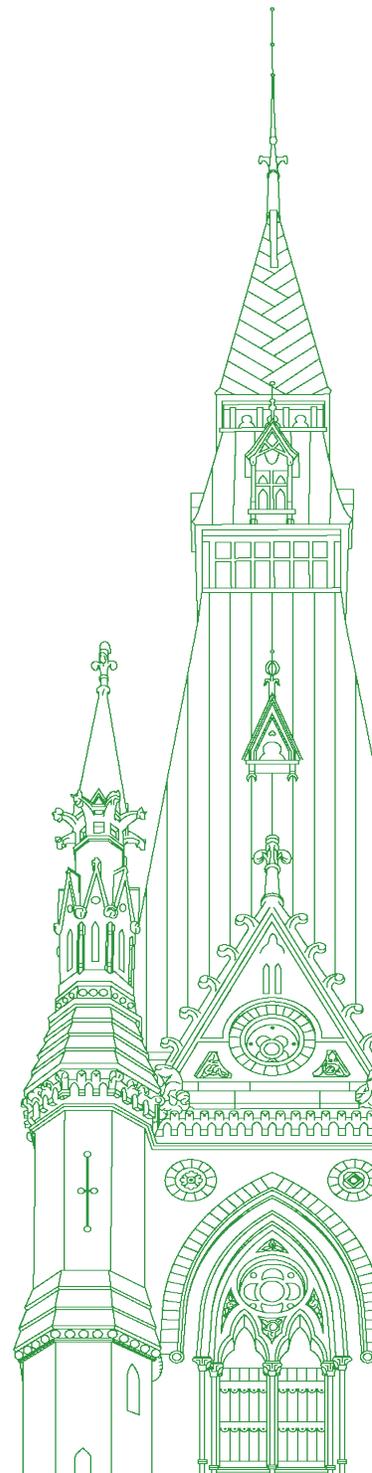
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Thursday, February 10, 2022



Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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• (1640)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

I want to welcome to the committee Mr. René Arseneault from the government side, as well as Madam Laila Goodridge. They are joining the committee today.

Welcome to meeting to number eight of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from health authorities, as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person are asked to maintain two-metre physical distancing. They must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room, and it's highly recommended that the mask be worn at all times, including when seated. They must maintain proper hand hygiene by using the provided hand sanitizer. As the chair, I will enforce these measures for the duration of the meeting. I thank you for your co-operation.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow. Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of "floor", "English" or "French". If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure that proper interpretation is restored before resuming the proceedings. The "raise hand" feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or to alert the chair.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's protocols.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. I will remind you that

all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to keep the consolidated order, which I have been provided with.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 31, 2022, the committee will commence a briefing on the ministerial mandate letters. Our witnesses will begin the discussion with five-minute opening remarks, followed by members' questions.

Welcome to Minister Gould, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, and departmental officials, including Cliff Groen, senior assistant deputy minister; Catherine Adam, senior assistant deputy minister; Janet Goulding, associate assistant deputy minister; Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister; and Annette Gibbons, associate deputy minister.

We will start with Minister Gould for five minutes, please.

Minister Gould, you have the floor.

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon to you and honourable colleagues. It is an honour to serve Canadians as the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. I won't go through and list all of the officials, since you did that already. I'm delighted to be joined by senior officials from ESDC, who will be supporting me today.

This is my first meeting with your committee. I look forward to working with all members and fellow parliamentarians in delivering on the priorities set out in my mandate letter.

[Translation]

I begin with our government's commitment to support families with young children. For those families, access to high-quality, affordable, flexible, and inclusive child care is not a luxury—it's a necessity.

That is why we have signed bilateral agreements with nine provinces and three territories to cut average fees for regulated early learning and child care spaces by 50% by the end of 2022.

[English]

In addition to making child care more affordable, these agreements aim to create new child care spaces and wage grids for early childhood educators. We are also working collaboratively with first nations, Inuit and the Métis nation to ensure that indigenous children will have access to affordable, high-quality and culturally appropriate early learning and child care.

In the coming months, we will be tabling legislation to enshrine in law the principles of the Canada-wide early learning and child care system.

[Translation]

In addition, we will be establishing a new National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care to provide advice and serve as a forum for consultation on issues and challenges facing the sector.

This historic initiative will help drive economic growth, increase parents'—especially women's—participation in the workforce, build a more resilient economy and ensure all children in Canada have the best possible start in life.

[English]

Moving to social purpose organizations, we have made significant progress in advancing Canada's social innovation and social finance strategy. Specifically, we are making it easier for organizations to access affordable financing through the social finance fund. We are now assessing proposals submitted by potential wholesalers, who will invest the fund's capital into intermediaries such as credit unions, community loan funds and private equity firms. Additionally, we are helping social purpose organizations build their capacity to access social finance through the investment readiness program.

• (1645)

[Translation]

Six months ago, my department launched a call for proposals to identify readiness support partners to provide funding to social purpose organizations. This will allow them to build skills and capacity to access social finance investment.

We are currently finalizing agreements. Together, these initiatives will provide social purpose organizations with a greater capacity to make a difference in the lives of Canadians.

We are also moving forward with the community services recovery fund to help charities and not-for-profits adapt to the challenges they face from the pandemic.

[English]

Last month the department launched a call seeking national funders to efficiently distribute this fund to diverse organizations across Canada. The call is open until February 22, and the department will select the best projects in the coming months.

Now, as we celebrate Black History Month, I am so proud of our efforts to recognize the contributions of Black Canadians. Through the Supporting Black Canadian Communities Initiative, we're working to identify and address the significant and unique challenges and the systemic barriers faced by Black communities in

Canada. Budget 2021 provided an additional \$100 million in this fiscal year to help grassroots organizations build capacity.

[Translation]

The pandemic has helped us realize just how vital our programs and benefits are to Canadians, no matter where they live. This is why Service Canada will continue to improve by modernizing its delivery model and upgrade its IT systems.

I want to thank the dedicated public servants who have been at the forefront of the Government of Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have worked tirelessly to deliver much-needed benefits to Canadians.

[English]

Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to highlight the progress we've made in advancing our priorities and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

I will now open the floor to questions, beginning with Madame Goodridge for six minutes.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister for her remarks earlier, and to all of the officials for being here. I know a lot of work goes into this.

I will start out with this. You touched on the 3,300 spaces for indigenous child care. What work has actually been done, and have any agreements been signed?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you, Ms. Goodridge, for that question.

Beginning in 2017, our government signed agreements with the three national indigenous organizations—the ITK for the Inuit, the the Assembly of First Nations and the Métis National Council. We have since signed agreements with them and have been working with them to support their efforts in delivering indigenous early learning and child care. It is distinctions-based. It is managed and run by indigenous communities with funding through the federal government. In budget 2021, we made this funding permanent on an ongoing basis and have also included an important increase based on inflation.

We continue to remain in close contact and we work to support the efforts of our national indigenous organizations, as this initiative will be led by them.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: How many spaces have been created since these agreements were signed?

Hon. Karina Gould: We are looking toward creating 3,300 spaces. As you will know, that is—

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: You said 3,300, but how many have been created as of today?

Hon. Karina Gould: I'll turn to Catherine Adam to take that question.

Ms. Catherine Adam (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Service Policy Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): The number of spaces is slightly different in the context of indigenous early learning and child care. There are three current federal programs that indigenous communities are using to deliver indigenous early learning and child care.

There are an on-reserve aboriginal head start program and an off-reserve aboriginal head start program that serve urban and northern communities, as well as early learning and child care programming that supports labour market participation, and also training skills and training for indigenous parents. In this context, quite often the programming is not full time, five days a week, or full day, and it's not universal, but the number of spaces is—

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: In the mandate letter it says, “3,300 new child care spaces”. I'm curious. How many of those new child care spaces have been created to date?

If you don't know the answer, if you could table it with the committee, that would be spectacular.

• (1650)

Ms. Catherine Adam: I'd have to get back to you. Absolutely, we will endeavour to get that response back to the committee and we'll work with our partner departments on that.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: That's fantastic.

One other question I have is this: How many spaces have been created today in the child care deals across the provinces?

Hon. Karina Gould: Well, Ms. Goodridge, as you'll know, 12 of these agreements have been signed within the last six months, which is quite significant. This is a program that was just announced a little less than a year ago and has come into fruition. We're working with our partners in the provinces and territories on their plans, but what has happened, including in your province already, is a reduction in fees.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: When will the agreements be made public?

Hon. Karina Gould: Many of the agreements are already public. They are found on our website, and we'd be happy to share that with you and the committee members.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: That's spectacular.

One of the questions I frequently hear from constituents is, what's going to happen after the five-year mark? We're spending money creating these spaces, but that's only for the first five years. What's going to happen on year six?

Hon. Karina Gould: You can reassure constituents that there is ongoing funding in the federal fiscal framework beyond year five.

What's important to note is that we're signing five-year agreements because we have very specific objectives in place and we

want to work with our counterparts in provinces and territories to ensure that they can meet those objectives. Then we will renegotiate agreements after the five-year mark. However, there is money earmarked within the fiscal framework on an ongoing basis.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: That's fantastic.

Furthermore, the mandate letter states that your aim is to have 40,000 new child care educators. What is being done to train these educators, and how many have been trained to date?

Hon. Karina Gould: Again, we have just signed 12 agreements within the last six months. We're supporting our provincial and territorial counterparts as they work to do this.

We know the only way we can create more spaces is if we hire more ECEs. Depending on the province or territory, they might be providing funding for training, for qualifications, for professional development. They might be increasing wages.

For example, New Brunswick and Nunavut put forward quite an aggressive increase in wages so that they can not only attract but retain ECEs. We're working with all our partners at the provincial and territorial level to support them in these efforts.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: My big thing, and you've heard this before, is that a lot of people are concerned about the day care deals because this is a promise that has been made and broken for decades by Liberal governments. How can we be assured that this will actually come into play?

Hon. Karina Gould: Well, I think that's so long as we don't elect a Conservative government. We had actually had this agreement in place back in 2005. Unfortunately, when Stephen Harper came into government—

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: He trusted families to spend the money.

Hon. Karina Gould: —it was one of the first things he stopped doing.

Well, \$120 a month does not make up for \$1,200 a month in day care fees. We heard in the last federal election that the federal Conservatives would have done the same.

We believe in this. We have signed agreements with 12 provinces and territories. We hope to have the 13th signed soon. We're delivering, and families across the country are already seeing a reduction in fees, including in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and many others.

Mrs. Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Goodridge.

We'll now go to Madame Ferrada for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say that I will be sharing my time with my colleague Mr. Van Bynen.

Madam Minister, thank you for being here today.

I am interested in one of the issues mentioned in your mandate letter, which is the national school nutritious meal program. I know that this is part of your mandate and that of the Minister of Agriculture.

In Quebec, currently, 70% of young people do not consume enough fruits and vegetables. In Montreal alone, about 17% of youth live in a low-income household. Indeed, we don't even know if they've had breakfast or if they're going to have dinner.

I'd like you to tell us about the importance of our commitment to creating this program.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you very much for the question.

It reminded me of my university days, when I volunteered in Montreal to provide breakfast to children in need.

Every child in Canada should, of course, have access to healthy and nutritious food. As we know, this is important for their mental development and learning progress. It is also a way to lift them out of poverty.

This is an important issue. Partners from across the country are really committed to this initiative.

• (1655)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you.

I have seen that several coalitions are forming across the country.

Last year in Sudbury, the Public Health Agency of Canada was calling on the provinces and territories to collaborate on a program.

In your opinion, are the provinces open to working with the government to develop a national plan?

Hon. Karina Gould: That's an excellent question.

Of course, collaboration with the provinces and territories is fundamental. It is also important to know that there are different initiatives across the country, although some provinces and territories are more engaged than others. We need to learn from their experiences and retain best practices so that all children, no matter where they come from, have access to the food they need to nourish their bodies and minds.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I will now yield the floor to my colleague.

[English]

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Van Bynen for three minutes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for coming today.

I was very happy to see that your mandate has the commitment to develop a national school food policy and a national school nutritious meal program.

My wife is a retired public school teacher, and she has seen all too often that for many children, their school is the only time or

place where they get a healthy meal. Many schools have developed programs on an ad hoc basis, but they do not also have neighbourhood associations to support these programs.

In my riding of Newmarket—Aurora, for example, Frank Stronach, the founder of Magna International, is developing the GUHAH Way, which stands for growing up healthy and happy, as a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting healthy eating for children. I know he's eager to see that he is able to support, if possible, rolling out the program.

This is a very real issue, and I feel it's important, since one out of 10 families and children across Canada would benefit from these programs.

Minister, could you speak about how the program is being developed and how other organizations might also be able to get involved?

Hon. Karina Gould: Certainly. There have been a number of consultations leading up to the inclusion of this in my mandate letter and that of Minister Bibeau, and there is certainly an opportunity for organizations to share their ideas and feedback as we develop this policy further.

I know there are many people who have been working in this space for a very long time. We also know—and certainly I experience it in my own riding in Burlington—that there are a lot of initiatives that are volunteer-led and making a difference by filling gaps, but I think what many have said and what many probably across parties feel is that there is a way to do this that will not just be filling a gap but will be more consolidated and more coordinated. Those are the things we're looking for to ensure there's a nutritious meal, but we're also looking to see how we can make it inclusive as well.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Minister, are you planning on working with provinces and territories? How do you plan to approach this need when you're implementing the national school food policy and program?

Hon. Karina Gould: We certainly have to work with provinces and territories on this issue, and it may be different depending on the province and territory that we work with.

As I mentioned, different provinces and territories are at different stages and have different programming in place. Certainly, we will be starting to have those conversations with provinces and territories as well as with the stakeholder community, because we have a tremendous opportunity to make a lasting impact for kids right across the country.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Van Bynen, your time is up. Now we move to Madame Chabot for six minutes. Madame, you have the floor.

• (1700)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Madam Minister.

Thank you for being with us today to explain the many mandates given to you by the Prime Minister.

I don't know if you're going to prioritize, but I'm going to dare to suggest one. You are the Minister responsible for Service Canada, and in your mandate letter it states very clearly:

As the Minister responsible for Service Canada, lead the development and implementation of modern, resilient, secure and reliable services and benefit delivery systems for Canadians and ensure those services and benefits reach all Canadians regardless of where they live.

It will come as no surprise to you that I want to talk to you again about the crisis at Service Canada right now. In my view, it is indeed a crisis, as there are many problems in meeting the needs of thousands of EI claimants in a timely manner, claimants who have been waiting for weeks and months.

Last week we heard from officials that the volume was almost normal and that we should not worry too much, while there are cries of alarm everywhere about these delays. I'm not sure what the point of these service standards is, because many people have been waiting for a long time and they're not getting a response within a time frame that meets those standards.

As the Minister responsible for Service Canada, do you feel that services are currently being delivered effectively?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you very much for the question, Ms. Chabot.

I would like to start by saying that it is a priority for me to ensure that all Canadians who access Service Canada receive service in a timely manner.

I would also like to provide a small update. Since the officials appeared before this committee last week, we have been able to verify the identity of 2,900 people whose files were on hold. Many of them are already receiving their payments.

Service Canada officials are doing an extraordinary job. There has been an incredible increase in applications, due to the winter spike that we face every year, but also due to the closure of many businesses caused by the Omicron variant during December and January.

I am currently working with officials to ensure that we can respond to the most urgent cases where the deadline has passed. As I mentioned earlier, if you know of anyone who is not receiving a response within our service standards, please do not hesitate to contact my office so that we can assist you.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Minister.

If you want to be flooded with emails, we can do that.

Your response addresses one part of the problem, which is the issue of identity theft.

On the other hand, I raised a rather disturbing aspect regarding efficiency, and I don't mean the efficiency of Service Canada employees. Some things were predictable. Emergency measures such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, or CERB, and the Canada Recovery Benefit, or CRB, have ended. A certain volume of claimants could be expected, which is not unusual in December and January. This volume was to be expected and it seems that it

was not anticipated. We hear that people are going hungry, but some people are hungry because they are not getting their benefits.

The 28-day service standard is a long time. What are you doing, today, to relieve the 300,000 people who have not received their benefits within the 28 days and are still waiting for them?

• (1705)

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you for the question.

I want to assure you that I take this issue very seriously.

Let me clarify something. Every year there is a winter spike, but this year we saw a 25% increase over last year due to closures caused by the Omicron variant.

We had indeed anticipated the normal increase in applications, but the Omicron variant wave, of course, took the whole country by surprise. The increase was significant. Despite this, we had increased the number of staff and agents at the call centre in preparation for the winter peak. I can assure you that we are mobilizing all the necessary resources to be able to respond to the increasing demands.

The numbers you mentioned are not necessarily good. Some cases are being processed, but not everyone is waiting for benefits. Some people have gone back to work while others had opened a file but did not need to apply.

As I mentioned, if you know of anyone who is not getting a response within a time frame that meets service standards, you can email me, and we will follow up.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Madame Zarrillo, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you. Welcome, Minister.

I'm going to ask some questions about mental health today.

I spoke recently in this committee about two children whose lives were tragically cut short in my community. This pandemic has been hard on children and youth. I hear from parents regularly that they cannot access mental health support for their children. It is either not available, or what is available is too expensive.

I note that the mandate letter says to work with other ministers to ensure that mental health supports are accessible for children and youth. That need has been exacerbated through this pandemic.

My question is in regard to children and youth. What is the plan to work with other ministries to ensure that mental health supports are accessible to children and youth, given that service delivery is a provincial jurisdiction and that multiple ministers have this directive in their letters?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you very much for that question, Ms. Zarrillo. It is one that is incredibly important. As the minister responsible for children, I see and hear about it every single day. We talk about the fact that our children are resilient, but gosh, this has been really hard on them. We need to do everything we can to support them through it.

One thing we've already done is provide support to the Kids Help Phone of about \$8.5 million in the last budget to support its initiatives. This was led by Minister Bennett. I am supporting her in those efforts in making sure the voices of children in particular are heard.

A couple of things that our government has done already with regard to supporting mental health include creating the *welnesstogether.ca* portal and the PocketWell app.

You're absolutely right that mental health is within provincial jurisdiction, but there are initiatives that we can take to reach Canadians directly from the federal government. We will absolutely be working with provinces and territories on this issue as well.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Just to speak to those apps and the access to information, we know broadband Internet is not available in many of our rural communities. I want to ask a little bit about disaggregated data and the way that this information is being collected so that we can find the most vulnerable pockets and make sure we're getting supports to all these children and youth.

Can you share how data is being collected right now? Is there any learning so far in regard to the impacts of this pandemic on the mental health of children and youth?

Hon. Karina Gould: I would probably have to defer that specific question to Minister Bennett. She is leading in that regard. I can say that we are working to support her in the development of this strategy.

One thing I'm hoping to do is to get out there and speak specifically with children right across this country.

I think you raise a really important point about children in remote and rural areas. We also know that access to broadband can be difficult if you are in a low-income family in downtown Toronto. We need to make sure that the services and supports can reach every child, no matter where they are in the country and no matter what their family circumstances are.

• (1710)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm going to follow up by talking about low-income families.

We know that the price of food right now has many families stretched, families that were already stretched because wages are not as high as they should be in this country. I want to talk about the national school meal program and ask if there is a time frame to get a program operating under this plan. Right now, in my community of Port Moody—Coquitlam, kids are going hungry every day.

Hon. Karina Gould: I hear you. I've spoken with our honourable colleague, Leah Gazan, on this issue a number of times as well, and I look forward to working with you and all members as we move forward on it.

Look, this is right at the beginning of this initiative. We have work to do when it comes to engaging provinces and territories and engaging stakeholders across the country. I don't have a specific timeline for you. I can tell you that I'm very committed to getting this done but also to getting it done right.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'll just ask about the community partners. There are a number of community partners that have been doing this type of programming for a very long time through schools. I'm just wondering if this program will also take into account those children who are going hungry who aren't at school. Are there plans in place to do outreach outside of the schools?

Hon. Karina Gould: It's a really good question. It's something I think we have to think about very carefully.

For example, in my community I have partners that provide meals in schools, and then there are partners that have meals to take home on weekends and over PA days and on winter breaks to make sure that children can eat even when they're not in school. We saw very clearly during the pandemic how important school meal programs were, especially for children who don't have access to healthy food at home.

These are all really good questions. I would welcome the opportunity to talk to you further about them.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Zarrillo. We'll now go to Madame Kusie for five minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome, Minister. I'm going to continue on the line of questioning that my colleague Madame Goodridge began on the day care initiative.

In my conversations with provincial counterparts, one great concern currently is not only the rate of inflation in the nation but the fact that fee increases are capped at 3% per year, while inflation is currently at 5% per year. This concern around the agreement certainly exists in my home province of Alberta. I'm just wondering how you anticipate provinces will deal with the rising operating costs when inflation is at 5% a year and you've capped the increase at 3% a year.

Hon. Karina Gould: I'm very pleased that we signed a historic agreement with Alberta. That's \$3.8 billion that is going to help Alberta families. In fact, we've already seen families in your province receive the 50% reduction in fees for licensed child care. That's fantastic news, and that's going to be a game-changer.

Of course, we remain in dialogue with provinces and territories. However, the 3% cap in fees is important. We don't want people profiting from public dollars when it comes to the provision of day care services. It is really important to ensure the good and effective use of public funds.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Perhaps you could expand on why you did not decide to have the fee increase cap reflect the current inflation rate. As I mentioned, entering these partnerships will leave operators holding the bag for the difference between the capped rate of 3% and whatever inflation continues to be. It doesn't really sound like you're coming from a place of good faith. You're saying that with this rate of inflation, whatever it might be, you don't have good faith that operators, the ones you're entrusting to implement these programs and take care of the nation's children, can provide for them under the capped 3% rate you've indicated.

• (1715)

Hon. Karina Gould: We are primarily concerned with ensuring that there is good use of public funds. As you're someone who's in the Conservative Party of Canada, I would imagine it's something that's very important for you as well.

We want to ensure that the funds we send to provinces and territories are going towards service provision, that they're going toward high-quality care, that they're going toward paying ECEs fair and appropriate wages. These are all things that are very important for us. We want to ensure that those funds are being put to good use.

We've worked very closely with the Government of Alberta. Of course we came to an agreement, an agreement that is good for Alberta and good for families in Alberta.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Unfortunately, Minister, I don't think your work is done as of yet with Alberta, as there still remains concern over the cost control framework. The agreement with Alberta, fortunately, unlike other provinces, allows for the expansion of these private spaces in cases that Alberta and the federal government have agreed on.

As I said, your work is not done. You still have to determine the cost control framework. Will you commit today to a thorough consultation, beginning with Alberta, to start on the cost control framework, please?

Hon. Karina Gould: We have really good agreements in place with provinces and territories right across the country. It is the same with Alberta, but the work continues with every province and territory. It's why we've put together an implementation committee for every province and territory.

We are doing something completely new here. We are building a Canada-wide system of early learning and child care. This is exciting. It is great news for families, and we know that we're going to have to continue to work. As I have shared with my counterpart in Alberta, with whom I have a great working relationship, we're going to continue to do that work together, because we want to see this be a success no matter where it is in the country.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister, I'm glad to hear that, and let me say I know her better than you.

I'll finalize by closing with my colleague's concerns about getting this done. Your government didn't get this done in climate targets or in housing program targets. In your file specifically, proportional representation, the CCB is based upon the Conservative model of the UCCB, and frankly, I'm worried about your grandchildren pay-

ing off the debt and deficit, never mind having a space in day care, Minister.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Minister, please give a very short answer.

Hon. Karina Gould: I am very excited about the early learning and child care initiative. I know the Conservatives wanted to scrap it, just as they did in 2005. Fortunately, Canadians felt differently, and we are very excited to implement this measure. Families in Alberta and across the country are already seeing the benefits. That's progress.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Madame Kusie.

Now we go to Mr. Collins for five minutes.

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chairman, and welcome, Madam Minister. It's always nice to see you.

My questions are going to focus on the child care plan as well.

We're neighbours back in the Hamilton and Burlington area. Our ridings are adjacent to each other, and I know that my constituents in Hamilton East—Stoney Creek were very excited about the 10-dollar-a-day child care plan in terms of the money they would save and the savings that would accrue to families who had a child or children in the system.

I'm assuming your community was as excited as mine, and I was wondering if you could highlight today the amount of money that families in our area in southern Ontario, in the Burlington area and in the Hamilton and Stoney Creek area, might save as a result of the implementation of a 10-dollar-a-day day care plan.

Hon. Karina Gould: It's a great question, Mr. Collins. Thank you for it, and I can say that certainly families I've heard from in Ontario are eagerly awaiting a child care agreement. Unfortunately, they're the only families in Canada that don't have certainty about the reduction in fees this year and into the future. We are talking about hundreds of dollars a month. Families in southern Ontario pay some of the highest rates in the country, anywhere between \$1,500 and \$1,800 a month, and in some cases higher.

You can very well imagine that this is savings in some instances of hundreds of dollars a month, and we've committed to families across this country to see a reduction in fees by 50% by the end of this year. In Hamilton, Burlington and southern Ontario, that could be \$600 or \$700 a month. That's quite significant.

• (1720)

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks, Minister. The most common question, I think, from my constituents was about how soon they will see those savings. I think you've highlighted that today, and congratulations on the success across the country. We're just down to Ontario in terms of getting this across the finish line for everyone.

I'm curious to know if you could provide an update on the talks with the province. I know that it has balked at the five-year term that you've secured with every other province and territory. They've balked at the dollar amount. I think it's over \$10 billion over five years with no strings attached. There are a lot of red herrings out there, and I hope this has nothing to do with the provincial election that's on the horizon, but if you could comment on the status of negotiations with the province, we'd appreciate that.

Hon. Karina Gould: Certainly. Our objective is to see families have a 50% reduction of fees by the end of this calendar year and to get to \$10 a day by 2025-2026, as we've managed to achieve in agreements in every other jurisdiction in Canada.

Talks continue with the Province of Ontario. Minister Lecce and I continue to engage, and I remain very clear that there is a very fair deal of \$10.2 billion over five years on the table for families in Ontario. That is a lot of money, and it will go a long way toward making a big difference for very many families here in Ontario.

I would like to add that we are having positive conversations, but we do need Ontario to send us their action plan, because that is the basis for the agreement and that is how we reached agreements with every other province and territory.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks, Minister.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to cede the rest of my time to my friend and colleague Mr. Coteau.

The Chair: You have one and a half minutes, Mr. Coteau.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you so much.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

That \$10.2 billion is a lot of money for Ontario to use in building a program. In large sections of the community I represent, family incomes are under \$50,000 a year, so this would be a huge game-changer. As you know, the average cost for child care in Toronto is \$1,700 per month.

I'd really like to know about the economic impact. There's always what's good for families and children, but what is the economic impact for society as a whole from a program like this? We're going to have parents going back to work earlier. We're going to have early development for children.

Have you done any type of study on the long-term economic impact for Canada?

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, and we have Quebec as an incredible model and example that we can draw from. We saw in Quebec that when affordable day care was implemented, Quebec went from having the lowest female workforce participation in the country to the highest.

We estimate that if Canadian women are able to go to work at the same levels as Quebec women, it would add 240,000 workers to the workforce here in Canada. At a time of labour shortages, that is quite significant. When you're choosing between going to work or paying for the high cost of day care, which may cost your monthly salary, it's pretty difficult to go to work.

That's one benefit. The other one, I would say, is that this is a program that pays for itself. The revenue generated by increased tax revenues, by higher household incomes and by greater workforce participation actually outstrips the costs of the program. That's what we've seen in Quebec.

In fact, when I spoke with my colleague in Quebec, Mr. Lacombe, he said it's a no-brainer. It's something that's good for kids and good for families and good for the economy.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau.

Now we'll go to Madame Chabot for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, I will try to follow up quickly on the exchange we had earlier.

I have to say that the answers we got do not reflect the feelings and needs of workers who pay employment insurance premiums and expect to receive service and their benefits on time, nor the need for urgent action on the volume of claims that currently need to be processed.

In my view, a culture change is needed within Service Canada. This was part of the mandates specified in a 2016 report. I hope you will address it now and in the future.

I have a few simple questions about the \$400-million community services recovery fund that is planned.

What is the timeline for the introduction and implementation of the fund and how will the money be distributed across the provinces? Many community organizations have needs. The crisis has also exacerbated their demand for services.

What criteria will be applied to distribute these funds equitably among the provinces to the organizations that need them most?

• (1725)

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you very much for the question, Ms. Chabot.

I want to assure you that I really care about the issues at Service Canada and I will continue to work with public servants to respond to people's requests, because I know how important it is to them.

In response to your question, the tender closes on February 22, 2022. We have approached three national organizations in terms of managing funds for community organizations: the Canadian Red Cross, Community Foundations of Canada, and United Way. We established objectives and goals. We have encouraged other organizations to apply as well. Our decision will be made on February 22, at which time we will see which national organizations can manage the funds.

We will certainly make sure that all regions of the country are fairly represented. Many organizations will be able to benefit from these funds. We will, of course, share the information with the committee when it becomes available.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Madame Zarrillo, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to ask some questions around the implementation of the community services recovery fund.

I'll start by saying that "urgency" was definitely the keyword over the last two years in my community. We have relied very heavily on small, agile and vital not-for-profits and charities in my community to get food onto people's tables.

Could I get some more information about the part of the mandate letter that says, "Advance the implementation of the Community Services Recovery Fund"? What does that look like and what's the timing?

Hon. Karina Gould: The community services recovery fund is a \$400-million fund that is designed to help community organizations recover and particularly to modernize how they deliver services. Throughout the pandemic, we saw that many community organizations had to pivot how they delivered services, but as you mentioned, Ms. Zarrillo, we also saw how much our communities rely on these organizations.

We've put out a call for proposals for organizations that can help us manage these funds nationally, much like the emergency fund that was provided at the height of the pandemic. We've solicited proposals from the Community Foundations of Canada, the United Way and the Red Cross, but we've also opened it up to other organizations to apply. Then each of those organizations would be responsible for managing the distribution of those funds to community-level partners.

What's really important is that they can't limit the delivery of those funds to their existing partners. It has to be broad-based.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: There are a couple of things, but I'm just going to ask specifically about operating funds. I think the biggest thing that has been missing for some of these organizations is operating funds.

I want to preface this by saying that the NDP would rather see taxation increased, especially among the wealthiest people in Canada, so that we wouldn't have to rely so heavily on community groups. We love to see community groups out in the community surviving and being able to plan ahead, so operating funds are a big piece.

Is that part of this fund or that RFP, or is this strictly to distribute funds?

• (1730)

The Chair: Minister, please provide just a short answer.

Hon. Karina Gould: Well, a portion of them might be able to be used for operating funds in the context of the project they are putting forward, but these are not specifically operating funds.

The idea is to provide a fund, and it's something we actually heard from community organizations. This is in direct response to their request to have access to funds to help them modernize the delivery of their services, to adapt and to pivot to the world we're living in today. In response to very extensive consultations that my predecessor led throughout the summer, that's how the structure has been funded.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister; and thank you, Madame Zarrillo.

Minister, if your schedule permits, we have two final questioners to finish the second round, with five minutes to Mr. Ruff and five minutes to Mr. Coteau.

Seeing no disagreement from the committee, I will proceed to Mr. Ruff for five minutes.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thanks, Chair; and thanks, Minister, for coming.

My first couple of questions will be around child care as well, and then if we have time, I'll have one about seniors. They are fairly straightforward questions.

As to my first question, I represent a rural riding in Ontario, so I acknowledge that a deal has not been signed with Ontario yet, but I'm optimistic it likely will be. For rural ridings across this country, out of those 250,000 spaces that you're promising will be built and ready and delivered by 2025-26, how many are going to rural Canada? How many are dedicated? What's the criterion for a village?

I live outside a town of fewer than 1,000 people. That has been my concern around this program from day one. How is it going to help rural Canadians in places where there are no spaces in existence right now?

Hon. Karina Gould: It's a really excellent question.

Mr. Ruff, let me just say that I share your optimism. I do believe we will be getting an agreement with Ontario. I'm working very hard to do that.

With regard to rural Canadians, the way it works is that we ask the provinces and territories to create a certain number of spaces, and we ask that they ensure that those spaces reflect the zero-to-five population right across their province or territory. It would be no different with Ontario to ensure that every community has access to the spaces they need.

Also within these agreements, we provide infrastructure and operating cost support to build out and create new spaces.

In Ontario, there's actually quite a bit of work done by municipalities and not-for-profits. We will work with the Province to ensure that no matter where you live in the province, you will have access to day care.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Is there a percentage, though, or a number tied to that 250,000?

Hon. Karina Gould: It would be equivalent to the number of children who live in rural areas.

Mr. Alex Ruff: All right. Thank you.

Tied to this is a question that my colleague asked. It's what works and who had to work. I'll mention my brother and his wife, both essential workers throughout this pandemic. There is no access to day care and child care spots, even for essential workers, due to the sheer demand. They're having to depend on family members or private caregivers to help. Is there anything in this program that will cover those private caregivers or family members who need to work? For shift workers, it's a huge challenge for families right across Canada.

Hon. Karina Gould: There is nothing preventing a province or territory putting forward that kind of flexible care.

I can tell you a bit about my own story. As parliamentarians, we work strange hours and in different places around the country. I had the amazing opportunity to use the services of Andrew Fleck here in Ottawa, which is a not-for-profit day care that provides flexible home care outside of their hours as well as care at the centre. Those options are there.

I know there are providers in Alberta that have after-hours care that is specifically dedicated for essential workers. If they are licensed providers and the province works with them, they can absolutely qualify for this support.

Mr. Alex Ruff: All right.

Minister, I am a single father 50% of the time. My daughter has attended a lot here in the House of Commons over the last two years, and I know Ms. Goodridge's newborn has been here lots of times as well.

My final question is tied to the part of your mandate letter stating that you need to work with the Minister of Seniors to provide seniors with a single point of access to a wide range of government services and benefits. Could you update the committee on the progress in simplifying access to those benefits and services for Canadians who, frankly, have trouble navigating the Internet and lack digital literacy, and even more importantly for many in my riding, just do not have access to the Internet?

• (1735)

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, of course. It's a really important question, and I'm working very closely with Minister Khara on this aspect.

One of the first things that we're advancing on and hope to be able to deliver on soon is automatic enrolment for OAS and GIS, because as you mentioned, for many seniors navigating the Internet can be quite challenging, and maybe they don't even have access to the Internet.

We're also looking at the various access points that we have for seniors, whether it is the OAS or CPP call centre or 1-800-O-Canada or just general Service Canada offices. We're looking at how we can best support them to make sure they have the access they need, no matter which door they open.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ruff.

We will go to Mr. Coteau for five minutes. I will go to Madame Zarrillo and Madame Chabot for one and a half minutes to wrap up so that everything is fair.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll share my time with MP Martinez Ferrada. I'll give her half the time if she wants to use it.

I have a question, Minister, specifically about the supporting Black Canadian communities initiative. When I first heard about this program, I was really excited. As you know, there are a lot of disparities for the Black community. When you look at the average numbers in a city like mine, there is a very high homicide rate in the Black community and large challenges around unemployment and disproportionate rates of incarceration. It's a huge challenge in communities like Toronto, Ottawa, Windsor and in many other parts of this country as well.

What success have you found in this program? In the last budget, we increased the allocation by \$100 million. What success are you seeing in this program, and why did the government think there was a need to expand this program?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you very much, Mr. Coteau, for that question. I think it's really important, and I think it's really important in the context of Black History Month as well.

We've also seen and heard very clearly from the Black community that this fund is important and that it matters. If we're going to get to equality, we need to have equity. That means we need to have specific investments in Black Canadians and Black communities to make sure that they have access and opportunities. It's come to light so very clearly over the past couple of years, even though we've known this, that there are real systemic barriers that Black Canadians face. We need to address those. We also need to give Black Canadians the opportunity to enable themselves and empower themselves.

I want to share a couple of examples of success that we've seen so far. The first one is a project called Shoot for Peace, which proposes the purchase of photography equipment and software to improve the photography and arts programs serving youth in the Black community within the Regent Park neighbourhood in Toronto. The Olive Branch of Hope project looks to increase awareness for older women cancer survivors by delivering virtual programs and training sessions to those at higher risk for more serious health outcomes during the pandemic.

I could go on and on and on. There are some really incredible initiatives being led by Black Canadians that we're very proud to support.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Madame Ferrada, you have two minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, I'd like to quickly go back to your comments about Service Canada. You talked about the exceptional work of public servants and how the department responded to the needs of Canadians during the pandemic.

You mentioned that prior to the Omicron variant wave, there was a tremendous amount of demand. The Omicron variant exacerbated the situation, resulting in an increase in the number of applications to Service Canada. You talked about the measures that were taken.

Can you elaborate on the measures that were put in place during the pandemic and the demands related to the Omicron variant?

• (1740)

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, of course.

I'll start answering, and then Ms. MacDonald and Mr. Groen can add comments, if necessary.

We have seen a huge increase in requests since the start of the pandemic. We have doubled the number of agents in the call centres, and we have reorganized services between regions to respond more quickly to requests. We have hired contract workers at Service Canada to meet the ever-increasing demands.

Service Canada is always monitoring call volumes and making adjustments to meet all demands. I want to assure all members of the committee that public servants are taking this situation very seriously and are keeping me informed on a daily basis so that we can make the necessary adjustments to meet the needs of Canadians.

Ms. MacDonald or Mr. Groen, would you like to add any comments?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Benefits and Integrated Services Branch, Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Yes, thank you, Minister.

Since the pandemic, and especially in the current fiscal year, the results show that the timelines for the provision of employment insurance services are shorter than they have been in the last 15 years. Although we have received many more claims this year than in previous years, the average time to process claims is 16 days, which is the shortest time in the last 15 years.

We were also able to process EI claims within our service standard 88% of the time. This represents an 8% improvement over the two years prior to the pandemic.

We recognize that there are still many claims to process and we take this situation very seriously. That is why we are very proud of our results in terms of service delivery.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Groen.

We'll go to Madame Chabot for a short question, and then we'll end with Madame Zarrillo.

Go ahead, Madame Chabot.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Is it my turn to ask questions, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: Yes, Madame Chabot. You have one and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I have to say that I am confounded to hear that the department is so proud of these results, which are still focused on the service standard. We are never given the exact figures. The figures we've just been given don't take into account all the people who fall outside the service standard, and we know there are many of them. So there is no reason to take pride in the results of this survey. I wonder what exactly we're talking about when we talk about EI in the context of the pandemic.

Madam Minister, you said that Service Canada hired up to 3,000 people during the pandemic. Of that number, how many people are still working at Service Canada?

Hon. Karina Gould: That's a good question.

About 16,000 people may have been victims of fraud and are undergoing identity verification. Service Canada has already contacted these individuals and corrected the benefit calculations of almost 3,000 people in the past week. Further adjustments will be made. However, it is important to note that not all claims are necessarily legitimate. This is why Service Canada must verify the identity of clients.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, I'm sorry, perhaps my question was not clear. I wanted to know, in terms of human resources, how many people are still working at Service Canada.

Hon. Karina Gould: Oh, I'm sorry.

Ms. Louise Chabot: The officials told us that 3,000 people were hired during the pandemic. Of those 3,000 people, how many are still working at Service Canada?

Hon. Karina Gould: They all work at Service Canada right now.

Ms. Louise Chabot: And yet, Madam Minister, we have learned that only half of them remain.

Hon. Karina Gould: I think there may have been a communication problem, because we doubled the number of agents in the call centres during the pandemic. The pandemic is still going on, so call centre staff have to continue to respond to client requests.

It is important to know that the human resource staffing process is being updated and new staff are being hired to accurately meet the needs of Canadians.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

• (1745)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Madame Zarrillo, the final question goes to you.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

In understanding that day care, child care, is part of provincial and territorial jurisdictions, I want to talk about the 250,000 new high-quality child care spaces. I want to get an understanding of whether the government sees these as for-profit spaces or not-for-profit spaces.

Hon. Karina Gould: These are not-for-profit spaces.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Do you mean all 250,000?

Hon. Karina Gould: There is an agreement with Alberta to have a maximum of 22,500 new spaces that would be for profit, but they would be subject to a cost control framework that we are figuring out with Alberta. It cannot create those new spaces until that cost control framework is put into place. There are a small number in

New Brunswick as well. However, New Brunswick already has a very robust cost control framework, and the remaining spaces around the country are not for profit.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Zarrillo.

Thank you, Minister and officials. It was an easy meeting for the officials, Minister, as you took all the questions.

Before we adjourn, I want to advise members that Minister Hussen and Minister Khera will appear before the committee on Monday, February 14.

Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials, for appearing, and thank you, committee members.

The meeting is adjourned.

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