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Resources, Skills Development, Social
Development and the Status of Persons with
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Mr. Ken Boshcoff

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• (1150)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.)): Sorry to keep you waiting. Please accept my profound apologies. I really thought I would be here an hour earlier, but such are the winds of flights and planes; everybody understands.

Mr. Hill, will you be leading?

Mr. Peter Hill (Deputy Director General, Emergency Management Policy, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada): Yes, I will.

The Chair: If you're ready—I think you've had time to prepare—please commence.

Mr. Peter Hill: Thank you very much.

It's my pleasure to be here today to talk to you about a very important subject. I'm joined by Dr. James Young, special adviser to the Deputy Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, and Mr. Chaouki Dakdouki, director of regulatory policy and planning with Industry Canada. I'm from Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, and I'm currently the deputy director general of emergency management policy.

I would like to address three areas in my opening remarks with respect to accessibility and the status of persons with disabilities and how those matters are being incorporated into emergency management.

I'll first talk about Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada's leadership role in general terms and talk to you about a specific initiative we have under way relating to the national public alerting strategy. I'll also talk about PSEPC's work, in collaboration with provinces and territories and their emergency management organizations, to build capacity across the country. Third, I'll talk a bit about the provision and promotion of public information and public education when it comes to emergency management.

I'll say right at the start that we know that vulnerable populations tend to be impacted the most from disasters. There's quite a lot of work under way in this area, but it's complex, and a lot needs to be done as we move forward.

Just to give you a sense of this, PSEPC was created in December of 2003 to maximize the Government of Canada's capacity to both promote and provide the public safety of Canadians. It brings

together a number of components, including, from the Department of National Defence, the former Office of Critical Infrastructure Protection and Emergency Preparedness. It also includes the former Department of the Solicitor General; the former National Crime Prevention Centre of the Department of Justice; the Canadian Security Intelligence Service; the RCMP; the Correctional Service of Canada; the National Parole Board; and the Canada Border Services Agency. So it's a fairly large institution that we're creating.

I think the importance of the institution is reflected in the environment in which we're living. We're seeing an increasing number of severe disasters, whether they be natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, or wild land and urban interface forest fires, or whether they be man-made, human-induced, such as terrorism. We've seen terrorist acts persisting since 9/11, abroad and in western countries, and unfortunately, it looks as if that trend will continue.

We're also reminded by medical experts around the world that the emergence of a pandemic influenza is a likely inevitability. That could have very profound impacts on not just our emergency management capabilities but also the abilities of governments themselves to work through that and to maintain the constitutional running of governments. So it's a very dynamic and challenging environment in which we work.

The emergency management system in Canada is a collaborative approach. It is a system that involves the provinces and territories and municipalities and the individual. I'd like to set out carefully how this system works, because it speaks to the roles and responsibilities of each of the players. It's very important to have that in mind as we talk about this area.

The Government of Canada leads and has the national responsibility in certain emergency situations. Matters of clear federal jurisdiction include managing the response to a terrorist event or in situations where the national interest is impacted because the significance of the event is such that it involves a number of departments and agencies and therefore requires a horizontal, coordinated approach. SARS or the pandemic influenza are examples of where PSEPC would have the lead role in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada and others.

• (1155)

This specific responsibility is provided for in statute and in policy. I would refer to the Emergency Preparedness Act, which sets out the responsibility of the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness for civil emergency planning as well as designating responsibilities for sector ministers to develop emergency plans in their area. The minister is the lead minister for terrorism under the national counterterrorism plan and the Security Offences Act.

I should say that most emergencies in Canada are actually handled at the local level or handled by provinces and territories. Provincial and territorial governments may request federal assistance in situations where their resources are exhausted or limited—for example, for military assistance to fight forest fires—but direct emergency response is conducted, by and large, by provinces, territories, and local governments.

Of course, the entire system is based on the primary responsibility of the individual to be prepared. Certainly, with respect to persons living with disabilities, the role of the family will be very important in terms of the initial response in dealing with this very challenging issue.

That in a nutshell is the national emergency management system. It obviously also includes first responders such as police, fire, and emergency medical personnel, who are trained and sensitized to the special requirements of dealing with and helping people with hidden disabilities, communicating with people who are deaf, guiding people who are blind, and helping to evacuate people with mobility impairments.

We'll talk a bit about a couple of provincial jurisdictions and the role emergency health services and emergency social services play with respect to the development and implementation of emergency evacuation plans and so on.

PSEPC is working, as I said, in collaboration with many stakeholders to strengthen the national emergency management system. I'd like to highlight one initiative in particular; this is the national public alerting strategy. This particular initiative is supported as a priority by the Council of the Federation as well as federal, provincial, and territorial ministers responsible for emergency management. The goal of the strategy is to provide emergency managers with the capability to warn the public of imminent dangers and to provide subsequent information and direction to prevent or reduce injury or loss of life.

Industry Canada has the federal lead for emergency telecommunications issues, and they're collaborating with PSEPC, Environment Canada and the Meteorological Service, Heritage Canada, and others, including the broadcasting industry. The strategy involves multiple delivery systems, both visual and auditory, to reach the greatest number of residents in a threatened area. Field trials have been under way and continue to be under way. I'll allow my colleague to provide some further information when we get into the question and answer part of our meeting today. Most importantly, what I should say is that specific attention is being given to identifying the most effective and inclusive means for public alerting, including for persons living with a disability.

I'd like to touch on two provincial and territorial jurisdictions where some interesting work is under way. Nova Scotia and the Halifax Regional Municipality were approached about a year ago—probably a little bit longer now—by the Persons with Disabilities Network. The group wanted to know what they could do for their membership to be prepared for emergencies. A persons with disabilities emergency preparedness committee has been established. It's in place for the discussion of specific issues facing persons with a disability in an emergency before, during, and after.

The objectives of this group are to act as a central resource of information and expertise on the needs of persons with disabilities. It's designed to provide or be a mechanism for communicating information and expertise on the needs of persons with disabilities during an emergency situation. It promotes that persons with disabilities take personal responsibility and be as prepared as they can be for emergency situations. It ensures that emergency measures professionals and responders understand the needs of persons with disabilities, and it's essentially an ongoing process to facilitate and encourage information sharing across the various groups.

• (1200)

The committee has representation from quite an impressive group, including the Deafness Advocacy Association of Nova Scotia, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, the Independent Living Resource Centre, the Nova Scotia Disabled Persons Commission, the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities, the Canadian Paraplegic Association, and so on—truly a collaborative mechanism.

I wish I could say we had a similar approach in all jurisdictions, but that's not the case. However, it is an encouraging area, one that perhaps provides a model for other areas.

I would also like just to mention Ontario, which has two target areas in particular. They're looking at individuals receiving Ministry of Health and long-term care funding services in their home, and they're trying to identify the most vulnerable individuals in their caseload. They're working to develop individualized emergency plans, which may range from the very simple, such as a family member making a phone call, to a more complex emergency plan that relates to identifying an agency, a group, or an individual who's responsible in the emergency to ensure that the person is driven to a particular centre of safety. The work that's progressing now is to ensure that these requirements are being built into the service agreement between the Ministry of Health and long-term care program and the agency.

Those are two areas with promising work under way I wanted to highlight.

I would like to conclude my opening remarks just by highlighting a couple of other areas my department has. We build capacity in other areas—training, for example, and research and development.

With respect to training, I would highlight that the RCMP training program at Depot has a component that highlights for members who are receiving basic training the importance of working with persons who have sight, hearing, cognitive, and mobility disabilities and explains how to deal with them. So the RCMP, a valuable federal asset in terms of emergency management, has a program in place at the basic level to ensure that all members have some fundamental training that's relevant in this area.

PSEPC has a very modest research and development program. We have some good examples to highlight best practices, to provide guides in the area of community-wide vulnerability and capacity assessments, and to help local levels identify who in the community is the most vulnerable, where they live, and what their capacity is to respond and recover. We've also developed guidelines for the planning and operation of emergency reception centres and shelters and evacuation procedures in densely populated areas. We move these documents out on our website and through our provincial and territorial networks to help at the grassroots level.

The Internet is one of the key areas for people to obtain information on emergency preparedness. The department has a policy to publish all of its new reports on the website. We have a standing contract in place to ensure that our publications are provided in alternate formats, so this is done as a matter of course to ensure that we're reaching the population that may have special requirements to access valuable information to help themselves and their communities to be prepared.

I would conclude by saying it's a complex area in terms of ensuring that persons living with disabilities are being supported. It requires collaboration with federal, provincial, territorial, and other, non-governmental stakeholders. A lot of work is under way, but it is a very complex area and much remains to be done.

Thank you very much for your attention.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Goodyear, you'd be our first speaker.

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much for coming and presenting this morning.

I notice that you do have information that goes up on the website. What processes are in place to ensure that people at the other end are required to read those things? It's often good to have a plan on a website. I'm not suggesting that no one is reading them, but everybody is very busy these days, especially our public health care providers. They're exceptionally busy. Most are overtaxed in their volunteer areas. Most are overtaxed in the work they do.

What assurances do the disabled communities of Canada have that those people are in fact reading that information?

Mr. Peter Hill: There are a couple of ways that is being done. Through the normal course of our collaboration with provinces and territories in the setting of priorities, the discussing of priority issues, that information sharing is part of our normal business, so as a matter of course, we're always drawing attention to new publications, to new guide books, to new best practices. The promotion of best

practices is now recognized as a more important area than ever, so we're taking a more deliberate approach to actually providing ourselves as a central resource, a central database for best practices, and to being more deliberate in terms of sharing that information.

The other way this is done is through a lessons learned analysis after every event, which tends to be a very effective way to move information out and to highlight deficiencies in approaches and to look ahead to develop new approaches, to take our approaches beyond where they were before the event so that we don't just build back to the pre-event status, so that we actually try to go beyond and anticipate what might be coming at us down the road.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have another seven and a half minutes, actually.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: Perfect.

Ultimately, the answer to the question is that the lady or the gentleman who's driving around a disabled person who may require medication...nobody is actually enforcing that this bus driver read this information.

Again, my background is in health care. There are all kinds of journals out there, but I don't get any value out of those journals unless I'm required to read them, and what I'm hearing from you is there is no requirement that the bottom-line, front-line worker read this information.

Can I ask you another question? September 11, 9/11, was the event that really turned us on to disaster. Why did it take until December 2003 to decide that there was a need in Canada for disaster management. Why did it take that long for the government to act?

Mr. Peter Hill: Well, it certainly didn't begin in December 2003. I mentioned 2003 as the point where my department, in its current configuration, was created, but emergency management in this country has an extensive history that goes back through various different organizational configurations. It's fair to say that the emergency management system in this country has been in existence for a long time, for decades in advance of 9/11. Events such as 9/11 obviously lead to an assessment of our capacity and investments to strengthen it. Really that's the importance of 9/11. It's a watershed in terms of new investments and new attention to this important area.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: Is there any national plan in place to train our emergency personnel?

I'm getting a bit off the disabled issue, but ultimately it would affect our disabled Canadians.

Is there anyone who would train our emergency personnel, police and firemen...a national plan for biohazards, chemical or nuclear radiological weapons, given that biohazards obviously will float across provincial territories? It seems to me that the national government, the federal government, should have a plan in place. Is there a plan to train the front-line workers?

• (1210)

Mr. Peter Hill: Thank you for that question.

I'll perhaps answer the first part, and then I'll turn to my colleague, Dr. Young, to add some comments.

There's indeed more than a plan in place to address the issues that you've highlighted. The 2001 federal budget provided money for PSEPC and several other departments and agencies to develop training for first responders specifically in the areas of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear consequence management. The program is now in place and has been for several years now.

There are four levels to the training. There's a basic level that is offered to persons who would require awareness, for example, such as security people and public transportation people. It's designed to ensure there's a basic awareness of the issues. The next level is an introductory level that provides a further set of information targeted to first responders. The third intermediate level is a very in-depth course that provides emergency first responders with the information they need, and it's the prerequisite to the fourth-level course that is given to first responders through the Defence Research and Development Canada facilities in Suffield, Alberta.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: What is the percentage for completion of the four levels? Do you have any idea of the percentage of first responders?

Dr. James Young (Special Advisor to the Deputy Minister, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada): The aim isn't to get a large number of people completing the four levels. The fourth level actually deals with the handling of live agents. It would be impossible and actually undesirable to train large numbers of people to do that.

It's like many things in policing or any other area where you develop increasing areas of expertise. For example, there's a need to train all police officers and firefighters up to level two so that you get a recognition. From there, you then need level three and level four people falling in behind them and doing the necessary things.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: Do you have any idea of the percentage of police officers and firemen who have reached level two?

Dr. James Young: No, I don't know that.

I do know that level three and level four work is well advanced. We've created CBRN—chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear research—units in major centres across the country, and work with the military and the civil authorities has advanced.

For example, I'm most familiar with Ontario, where we've created teams in Windsor, Ottawa, and Toronto. They are interoperable, they are working with the military, and they're working with teams in other cities. Within places like Ontario, in larger centres, we've also created secondary teams that are trained to about a level three. We've then increased the amount of training at a haz-mat level within fire departments.

I can't give you an actual figure of how many are currently at level two. I simply don't know.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: We often hear, or I hear on the Hill, that there is potentially a lack of communication among the RCMP, CSIS, and even the Canada Border Services Agency. The excuse that I hear is because it violates the Privacy Act.

I'd like a comment from both gentlemen. Would you briefly comment, if you could, on how the Privacy Act has a negative impact on national security and the ability of Canada to respond to various disasters?

Dr. James Young: We entered quite a new era with terrorism and September 11. Our level of concern about terrorism and the need to share information about potential terrorist acts and threats certainly became very different from what was recognized before in this country. I think it was recognized that there was not only the need to share within CSIS, the RCMP, and police forces, but it had to go more widely into provincial governments, municipal governments, and private industry, in some instances, for example, when there are vital industries within the chemical industry, transportation systems, or other places.

There's a better sharing of that information, and it has improved, but it is an issue where privacy plays a role as well. I think people have been making an honest effort to try to find a way to share enough information, without sharing too much information. There have been successes and failures.

There have been no fatal failures, but there are instances where information has been passed on. I can think of an example in the transit commission in Toronto, where the right information was passed on, but it was probably too much information. It became public and probably more information than was needed became public. The fact is that it should be enough that a credible threat has taken place, without detail that doesn't need to be known by a large number of people.

It's a learning process, and it's a real change in mindset for everyone to get past the point of who you share with and what you share. It has improved, but it's a work in progress. It's one that we're finding is an important element for critical infrastructure protection as well, and one that we're working on. We're learning as we go.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Poirier-Rivard, s'il vous plaît.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sirs, I consulted the Public Safety website at www.SafeCanada.ca. Aboriginals, children and adults can easily access the information on this web site.

Is there some reason why the website does not include a portal for persons with disabilities?

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: The information on the website is formatted to facilitate access to visually impaired persons. We publish our documents in alternate formats for the visually impaired as well. Every effort is being made, and, indeed, our publications are consistent with the Treasury Board guidelines to ensure the fullest possible access to persons with disabilities, including the teletype arrangements and so on. Those requirements are being met.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: If I understand correctly, you're telling me that information is available to the visually impaired and that they can easily access information in the event of a disaster. Correct?

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: Yes, that's what I'm saying.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: In the United States, information guides are available for persons with disabilities. Are you familiar with them?

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: If you could be more specific, I might recognize—

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: Yes, the U.S. government has produced special information guides for persons with disabilities. Are you familiar with these guides? Do you have access to them? Could you possibly glean some information from these guides that could help us make similar arrangements here in this country?

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: That information, obviously, is available, and we would be willing to look at that. In fact, when we develop the documents, our communications area tends to consider what else is available and is being used in other jurisdictions that represent the partners with whom we work most closely. That certainly is something we could do and are doing to ensure that information is available in formats that are accessible to persons with various types of disabilities.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: I can give you the titles of several of these guides: "Saving Lives: Including People with Disabilities in Emergency Planning" and "An ADA Guide for Local Governments". Do these titles ring any bells?

• (1220)

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: I'm not familiar with those myself, but that's not to say that my colleagues in the department who are a little bit more closely involved in this work than I am wouldn't be.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: I can give you the information. I have it here with me.

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: Okay.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: One thing troubles me a great deal. Is there a program in place to provide follow-up measures or training to persons with disabilities following a fire or flood related disaster?

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: I'm not sure if I follow the question. Did you mean in terms of an assistance program for recovery? Is that the kind—

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: I'm talking about an aid program for persons with disabilities. Do you provide any kind of follow up after they have experienced a disaster? Is there a committee that provides follow up and assistance?

[English]

Dr. James Young: There are such programs. I think they'd be done at a local level. As we saw in Ontario, the provinces recognize the special needs of the disabled. When they're building in to the groups that are providing the care, one of the requirements is a plan for an emergency and a plan for managing the emergency. I think we're starting to see this happen as a requirement for funding from the province.

It really has to be done at a local and provincial level rather than at a national level, I think. Nationally, what we can do and certainly try to do is gather best practices and discuss them at national meetings, so all the other provinces are aware of them. The actual delivery of such a program I think would fall either to the province or to the municipalities.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: I see. Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: I might add that following Ms. Susan Scotti's appearance before the committee some time ago, PSEPC was invited to participate in the disability agenda initiative that they are leading. We've accepted that invitation, and I participated in a recent meeting. So we're beginning to explore nationally what we might be able to do to support the inclusion of these kinds of things in existing programs and existing policies to really give us the best results with limited resources.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: So then, if I understand correctly, these persons will contact each other in order to lend assistance.

[English]

Mr. Peter Hill: Exactly, and it will be done through the federal-provincial-territorial mechanisms that we have in place.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Merci.

Mr. Powers, I know you've just joined us. Welcome. Have you had a chance to think of any questions? If not, I'll take your spot for you or split with you, or whatever.

Mr. Russ Powers (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, Lib.): I have a singular question. If there's time left, you can take over, Mr. Boshcoff.

The Chair: You have 10 minutes, so try to refrain from making the question more than nine minutes long.

Mr. Russ Powers: You'll have plenty of time, sir, to raise your question.

Mr. Hill, you've alluded to the fact that, whether or not it's an emergency, there are obviously the partners involved. Dr. Young alluded to the municipal partners, the provincial-territorial partners, and the federal partners. Since this committee's purpose is basically to deal with the status of persons with disabilities—this question may have already been asked of you—what parts of the legislation are clearly in the federal purview?

Dr. Young has alluded to establishing the partnerships, and if you want to call it that, defining responsibilities of all the partners. That may be something that still needs to be sorted out, but is there anything that clearly is a responsibility under the purview of the federal government as it relates to the appropriate accommodation and handling of individuals with disabilities under your jurisdiction?

Mr. Peter Hill: The national legislation provides the role for the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness at the national level to coordinate and lead emergency management, which covers the full spectrum of activities from prevention to mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. That's the full cycle of comprehensive emergency management. It's in that vein that the legislation and the roles and responsibilities are very clear. We follow through on those initiatives, as I mentioned, through the federal-provincial-territorial framework, and that is being strengthened.

Federal, provincial, and territorial ministers are now meeting on a regular annual basis through the creation of a permanent emergency management forum, which was established in January of last year. Prior to that, ministers hadn't met for about 10 years. So we now have the governance arrangement in place to provide at the highest levels a venue to discuss these important matters. At a future date, that particular forum could be a venue to discuss emergency management in the context of persons with disabilities.

I'm not sure if that fully answers your question. I hope it does.

• (1225)

Mr. Russ Powers: I just have a supplementary to that.

If it's not in place, obviously future meetings may very well discuss the devolvement of responsibilities to the appropriate partners as things play out.

Dr. James Young: Yes. I think the early meetings certainly set up the structure for the meetings. It set up the high-level work of governance of emergencies, how we work horizontally and vertically across government. So we're working our way down to more specific topics.

For example, the last meeting involving deputies spent a lot of time on pandemic and pandemic planning and the relationship between public health units and emergency management, but among many topics that will be need to be studied by the group would be managing of special needs of the disabled as well.

Mr. Russ Powers: Mr. Chair, I hope I have left you a minute or so.

The Chair: Thank you. You're very kind.

When we endured the year 1999, in anticipation of tragic consequences across the whole planet when computers wouldn't be able to cope, many municipalities, primarily on an individual basis,

went through large-scale exercises of passing out things to each home about what they would need—batteries, blankets, bottled water, canned goods, transistor radios, an emergency exit from the home, and all those types of things. It was used as an opportunity by many municipalities across the country to help prepare people. It was also in the wake of the ice storm and the Winnipeg flood, so it was probably timely, but it was done on an individual basis by municipalities.

I'm wondering if there's a national role for household plans or individual unit evacuation plans, coordinated with each province and territory through their jurisdictions so that at least these things are similar, like the training we used to do when we were kids—if there's going to be a nuclear attack, you hide under your desk, and that pretty much will protect you.

In a more serious vein, in terms of coordination with other organizations nationally, it would drift right down to the individual units so that people really would have an idea of what to do.

Dr. James Young: Yes, there is a recognition, in fact, that the actual management of an emergency has to start with the individual, and then obviously it becomes very important at the municipal level and then at the provincial and federal levels. This is an area in which we've had some bursts and some success, but not nearly enough. PSEPC is currently studying this issue and is developing plans to do communication on a national basis, stressing the need for individuals to better prepare. And certainly 9/11, and in my mind the ice storm and the power blackout, indicated the value of people being ready.

I hate to admit it, but I got home after working during the power blackout and didn't have any of the proper things in my own house. I have since rectified the situation. Some of us are slower learners than others.

But there's a lot of work to do, and I think that's an area the department recognizes and is working on right now.

• (1230)

The Chair: When we adapt the need for some kind of coordinated national plan.... Last week, before this committee, we had people from the CNIB and the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, and we were talking about the fact that over 51% of the nation has difficulty reading, to some degree or another. So when we print these materials, we may have them in alternate formats, but in a disaster they may not be accessible; you may not get access to your computer or the things you might want. The type size and the font of even the first round of the majority of printed material tends to be done by municipalities as an insert in their newsprint format, so when people are trying to read something they have difficulty.

Has your organization actually gone to the sophisticated level of understanding that readability and font and type size is fundamental to the message getting through? You can have all the best words, but if it's too small to read or whatever....

Dr. James Young: I'm not sure. We can certainly carry that message back. I can't say yes or no, because I've been involved at a higher level, on some of the directions we might go rather than on the detail. But we can certainly carry that message back.

I would say to you that probably one of the best examples I've seen of the need to do that and the ability to do it at a local level was during the SARS crisis. Toronto Public Health published material in multiple languages in a rather rapid time, which served the community needs very well, and they did it while they were under enormous strain. So they certainly recognized it and carried it out very well. It was quite impressive to see how well they did it.

The Chair: That is my essential question.

We can have another round.

Mr. Goodyear, you can have five minutes, if you'd like.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: Sure.

I still remain slightly unconvinced that we have gotten right to the bottom of this process. It seems like we've started a plan, but we're not maybe right at the bottom of it. For example, there's the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is all about emergency preparedness and response programs, etc., from the local level right to the national level. Have you had an opportunity to maybe read that act?

Mr. Peter Hill: No.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: Okay. That's fine.

Ultimately, it's the American plan on how to do this right from the bottom line up. What I'm wondering is whether your department has issued guidelines or standards to help the provinces, territories, and municipalities. I do believe it's a federal responsibility to begin this initiative; otherwise, why do we even have PSEPC? What's the point of even having it if we're going to leave everything up to the municipalities?

Is there a plan in place, or guidelines, whatever font it's in, to actually go right down to these front-line people and instruct them on how to deal with emergencies? How do we get the message out to help people who are blind? A website is not going to help this person. Even if it's in audio, it's not going to help our deaf people. Again, how does a bus driver know to make sure that the medications for this individual with mental incapacities, like schizophrenia or whatever...how does a bus driver know to go back in the house, get the medications, and take this individual to this place of safety? The answer may be "we're working on it". If that's the answer, that's the answer.

Mr. Peter Hill: Essentially, that is the answer: we're working on it. As we have gathered and collected information on what the situation is across the country, we have identified areas that are obviously more advanced than others. It's a part of the national role, I think, to be fully aware of what's happening across the country and to facilitate some of the sharing and best practices.

We have provided support in terms of best practices, in terms of what the research says are good practices in relation to community vulnerability, in terms of how to approach the identifying of persons who are most vulnerable in your community, and integrating that information into the local emergency management process. Similarly, we've provided guidelines with respect to the planning and operation of emergency evacuation shelters.

We have some examples where we've already provided some helpful support at the local level. In Nova Scotia, we also have good

examples of collaboration with the RCMP and the Province of Nova Scotia, where they have the TTY machines. There's a 1-800 number set up so that concerns can be addressed. In this case, the RCMP attendant will be gathering the necessary information in Nova Scotia and will be communicating to the deaf person through the TTY connection. The committee in Nova Scotia is actively investigating if similar processes for other barriers can be addressed.

As my colleague Dr. Young has mentioned, there's a lot to be done, but there is certainly some very promising work under way.

•(1235)

Mr. Gary Goodyear: Let me just finish with a comment.

I have to tell you that I couldn't be more disappointed. Mr. Hill, you mentioned that you've been working, or the government has been working, on emergency preparedness for years, since long before 9/11. Thank goodness, 9/11 was a long time ago, but what I'm still hearing is that we're working on this, that we recognize that problem. I'm sure the people in Nova Scotia feel very comforted that at least they have some level of emergency preparedness, but the rest of us in Canada clearly do not. We have a promise for a plan.

Mr. Hill, you're the deputy director general for emergency management policy, and you have admittedly not read the Americans' plan on these things. I find that unbelievable. I understand that no one has heard of the Saving Lives program. I've heard of this. I'm a member of Parliament from Cambridge, Ontario. This isn't even my committee, and I've read that. Frankly, somebody ultimately has to have the intelligence to look forward, not go back and say we need this font size or this colour, or deaf people can't hear this program and our blind disability people can't read the Internet.

It seems to me, Mr. Hill, that you're waiting for a disaster in order to learn from it. Can you convince me that you're looking forward at disasters that are coming and that you have a plan in place after I don't know how many years? If you don't, is it the funding? What's the problem? Why does Canada not have a plan now?

Mr. Peter Hill: We are working on a plan. As I mentioned, the federal, provincial, and territorial ministers have an action plan that was developed last year, and we're working towards the implementation of that plan, which addresses some of the highest priorities of emergency management in Canada—indeed, the highest priorities. Not everything can be done at once. We're actively and aggressively collaborating with all of the various stakeholders to make as much progress as we can. That certainly does include mitigation, in terms of taking steps well in advance of all hazards to ensure that if something does happen, which it certainly will, measures will have been taken to either prevent that disaster from having serious impacts on people or at the very least to mitigate the impacts when they do occur.

So I can tell you that we are on the road. It's a long journey. But certainly we're far better prepared than we were even last year or two years ago. I guess that would be my response to your very important question about the state of progress and how rapid that progress is.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: I guess I'm going to go back to my question. What is it going to take? Is it funding? What is it going to take? Canadians can't wait any longer. We've had as many warnings as we need. You know, what rings in my head is the Deputy Prime Minister's words that "Canadians need to be psychologically prepared for a disaster". I think that's an abysmal statement for Canadians. Canadians require and rest on their federal government acting in their best interests. I'm not suggesting you have not acted in your best interest. It seems to me there's been enough time.

National security and the protection of Canadians is the number one sole purpose of this government. I'm asking if it's funding. Are you understaffed? Are you underfunded? Why do we not have these plans in place? Clearly, other countries are ahead of us. Why is this, in your opinion?

● (1240)

Dr. James Young: I'm not sure we can state that other countries are ahead. I think everyone started in different positions. If we look prior to 9/11 we see that this country and the provinces generally were unprepared for any sort of emergency other than ones they regularly manage, like forest fires, or, in the case of Manitoba, the very fine mitigation work on the system of ditches to save Winnipeg. But generally, it was very low priority within government. In our province of Ontario it was not necessary for municipalities to have a plan until almost three years ago. So we're coming from a long way back.

There are areas that we are probably behind in. There are other areas where we lead. If we look at the pandemic planning, the first Canadian pandemic planning—albeit relatively rudimentary—was in 1988. We were one of the first countries in the world to have a pandemic plan. Our current plan is as good or better than most plans anywhere in the world.

Is it adequate for what we face right now? No, and we're continuing to work on it. But in this area, money is part of it—funding—but part of it is that there isn't a lot of experience. There's a real paucity of people to do the work, because the municipalities, private industry, the provinces, and the federal government are all seeking the same group of people to do the same work right now. It's tremendously complex work putting together and building these horizontal structures. It's a question of setting priorities and moving ahead.

I wouldn't argue with you that we have a long way to go. But I would say to you that it's not as simple as just within a couple of years suddenly being able to reach this level. We shouldn't be content that we will reach a level, because what's necessary this year, we're going to need even more of in the future. If we don't get the pandemic this year, we're going to get it next year or the year after. So the more time we spend, the better job we do preparing. But we could never say we're ready.

Mr. Gary Goodyear: That's fine.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Madam Poirier-Rivard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: I have a quick question for you. Have specific arrangements been made to help first nations? At times, members of first nations are difficult to contact.

[*English*]

Dr. James Young: Much of the work with aboriginal nations is done through the provinces because of INAC agreements with the provinces. If we look at recent events, for example, the federal government and the province discuss what's necessary for Kashechewan, and the province's EMO, in fact, acts on behalf of the federal government and carries out and does the actions. There's review under way in all of these areas. I know many of the provinces and the federal government are looking at better education and involving the first nations communities better in this whole process, so that they improve their situation.

The answer is that it's a work in progress, but there has been some progress made.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: So, what you're saying is that no emergency plan is in place to help these persons.

[*English*]

Dr. James Young: No. The plan is an all-hazards approach everywhere in the country. Then it's taken down to the local level, where a community assesses what its greatest hazards are and what it needs to do in order to plan and mitigate against them. So the same principles are applicable to first nations, as they are anywhere else.

If you're in James Bay, your greatest hazard is flooding. So the best of your plan must take into account that flooding will occur, what you will do, and what will be the sensors. There are obviously other threats as well.

We expect every locality in Canada to assess on the local level what their particular greatest risks are and then plan accordingly. The Province of Ontario, or Manitoba or anywhere else, works with the communities to try to carry out that same program with them.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: Would you care to add anything, sir?

● (1245)

Mr. Chaouki Dakdouki (Director, Regulatory Policy and Planning, Department of Industry): Yes. First of all, I would like to thank the committee.

I'd like to give you an example related to the public warning program that we are currently devising. We are working on a study with British Columbia to determine how best to reach aboriginal communities and rural regions. Our program relies on a multimedia approach, that is on the modern-day technical resources available to us, namely radio, television, the Internet and other public communications vehicles, to alert the public in the event of an emergency. We've observed that these media are not available in remote regions. We're conducting a study geared specifically to these regions.

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: Can you tell me when you expect to report your findings? We're facing an emergency.

Mr. Chaouki Dakdouki: We should be completing our study before the end of March. We're expecting to have some preliminary results before March, but this is a multidimensional issue. We will endeavour to take a special approach, since remote regions have their own special problems.

Ms. Denise Poirier-Rivard: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Powers.

Mr. Russ Powers: Mine is a comment. Coming from a relatively lengthy municipal background, but with some national involvement, similar to the chair's experience...things never come quick enough or as complete. But over the last number of years there has been a very positive establishment of relationships between all the partners involved and some delineation and important clarifications of responsibilities. So to say it's failed, I do not believe that's the case.

There is still a period of time to go, and I think that will happen. Hopefully we won't have.... I mean, you can plan for the worst, but you have only the resources to plan for the middle of the road, and then you deal with those other ones along.... So I think we're heading in the right direction. I encourage you to move it along, because as Dr. Young alluded to, the reality is there will be a pandemic some time, whether it's tomorrow, the week after, the year after—whatever is the case. Let's be as prepared as we can when it does hit.

Dr. James Young: I agree, and I think there's an agreement and a sense at the table now that the work between governments has to be seamless—and for the public, it's intolerable to have layers of government not agreeing and not moving. They've got to be there complimenting each other. That has really developed over the last few years, and it's much different than it was. So I agree with your comments entirely.

The Chair: Mr. Young, there seems always to be some sense that the federal government should be an omniscient and omnipotent director of all of these things, whereas it should be pretty clear to most people that in primarily emergency measures, when the mayors declare an emergency, they're phoning the province.

I'd like one of you to talk about this jurisdictional thing. Is it something that has been agreed, that each province and territory would set their own plans and then have them agreed to? Is the federal role one of coordination, or do we have some kind of national standards that we can impose on provinces, and if they haven't done them, they're not eligible for federal support in the event of a tragedy? Primarily, the first level of funding for a declared emergency is provincial, is it not?

Dr. James Young: Yes. It flows to the province first and then to the federal government to see whether it falls under the federal categories.

What we are working very hard toward is saying to the provinces, let's organize ourselves in similar manners when it comes to emergencies and use what's called an ICS system of managing in a structure that is recognizable to each other. Then if we need to combine provinces and municipalities and federal governments, everyone is looking at it from the same point of view and managing it from the same point of view.

We're not establishing nationally—it's very difficult for the federal government to say that everyone must do things in a certain way when in fact most of the management and most of the things are done daily on a municipal level, and then flow up to the province when it gets bigger. The federal government's role is to provide expertise, to provide some funding, to provide areas that the province isn't able to do, or in the case of terrorism or pandemics, to provide national leadership.

The model we're trying to build recognizes that the federal role is different in different situations. One of the big changes is when something happens, whether it's national, local, or international, most of the layers of government spring into action very quickly and phone each other to ask what can be done.

When we had the London bombings, the operation centre in Toronto, the operation centre provincially, and the operation centre nationally all went to a higher level and all began to communicate to ask what the effect was on the TTC, what the effect was on the Montreal transit system, etc., what they needed to do, whether they were exchanging the right level of intelligence, and could the federal government improve on that. This kind of approach to managing things is becoming the norm now, rather than waiting to call each other in and waiting until the resources are exhausted. In fact, you begin to manage the problem down as soon as you recognize there is an emerging problem. So there are big changes in what we do and how we do it.

Rather than doing it by subscribed standards, we're tending to ask, "Doesn't it make sense to manage it this way?" And that's working.

• (1250)

The Chair: There is federal support for things, I believe, such as protective gear for certain types of spills and haz-mats and all those kinds of things. Can we assume that if we are saying we will assist... is it not that we should be saying we will assist if you are producing at this kind of level, if your plan meets this kind of standard?

Dr. James Young: We do that. Those are JEPP programs, and they flow through the provinces.

But essentially, yes, we set standards, very careful standards, with the JEPP programs. For example, when we were buying and supporting both the HUSAR teams and the CBRN teams, one of the issues we wanted to ensure was as much interoperability as possible so that the conditions for the HUSAR teams and the CBRN were interoperability across the country, the ability of HUSAR teams in Toronto and Vancouver to train together, to do exercises together and to interact in the event that something happened. That's being built in to those through the JEPP grants.

Mr. Peter Hill: With respect to the HUSAR, it also is aligned seamlessly with international standards. The Canadian program has been built seamlessly with international standards for light, medium, and heavy urban search and rescue so that we have a capacity that is not only helpful in the domestic context but is helpful in the international context, for example, in the United States, as we've seen fairly recently.

The Chair: It seems that the jurisdictions are understood. Is there national legislation needed to force territories and provinces into compliance or to give the tools so that the national government can rule with impunity?

Dr. James Young: I think the level of emergency preparedness and the money that's being spent is variable across the country from province to province. I think it's improved virtually everywhere, but to differing degrees in differing provinces.

I'm not sure I have the answer as to whether or not you do it by the national government. My experience in government, as yours, is that if one layer of government says to another layer of government, "You have to do something", the next question is, "Where's the money?" I think that's a decision for the people in this room, ultimately: if they want standards that are national, are they prepared to fund them? There is improvement everywhere, but I wouldn't pretend that it's been the same in all provinces.

• (1255)

The Chair: Mr. Julian, welcome. I know you've had time to prepare all weekend, so if you have any questions....

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): I do. Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to ask questions. Thank you for coming to the subcommittee. I'm particularly interested, because last year, as you know, we had the tsunami in Southeast Asia and there was a lot of criticism of the Canadian government for a complete lack of capacity in terms of communicating with people with disabilities, particularly deaf individuals who were Canadian citizens who were in that area at the time.

I would like you to tell me what measures you've taken over the past year following the tsunami that have made communications more effective, particularly for deaf individuals. What specific plans do you have in terms of communicating with deaf and hard of hearing, and deafened, Canadians, and those who are blind and visually impaired?

Mr. Peter Hill: I would have to say that with respect to the situation in Southeast Asia, I'm not fully aware of what that was and how many Canadians with hearing impairments there were. But certainly in situations such as that, it's the Foreign Affairs consular responsibility to support Canadians in areas and in situations such as that.

I can tell you that PSEPC has been active in terms of developing tsunami and storm surge capacities on both the east and the west coasts, which includes the ability to connect and to provide information with the communities that could be affected if there were such an event in this country. That includes linking with fairly isolated communities, in particular on the west coast, to reach them to ensure that they are part of a program to enhance their safety through the tsunami work that's under way. I'm not sure if that fully answers your question.

Mr. Peter Julian: It doesn't. I'm specifically looking at communicating with individuals who are deaf, or deafened, or hard of hearing. This is a growing component of our population, as you may know. With the aging of the population, there are increasing numbers of Canadians who are deaf or deafened. One of the strongest criticisms of the Canadian government after the tsunami disaster was the fact that Foreign Affairs was not able to communicate with Canadians who were deaf or deafened in that area, and made no provision to do so. I'm wondering what measures you may have taken in the past year to deal with that issue, and what

plans you have in place to communicate with deaf or deafened Canadians as part of the emergency preparedness plans.

Dr. James Young: I was there and I certainly wasn't familiar with that problem. I would not say it didn't exist, because I was dealing with other things. But I would say communications in the middle of the tsunami were difficult, period, because generally in the countries, communications were wiped out. Just finding out who was there, who were Canadians and who weren't, and how many...it was weeks of work trying to sort out what happened. If we look at hurricanes or anything else, communications is the first thing that becomes a problem.

I understand what you're saying about having the ability to do it at a consular level. We'll have to take that back and ask the question of Foreign Affairs. I certainly did see first hand the work the consular officials were doing at the tsunami. They were working extraordinarily hard and going to extraordinary lengths for families. I can't comment on their ability to deal with specific situations, but I certainly was aware of some specific situations with specific families where they had gone to extraordinary lengths to provide information and emotional support to them. We'll have to carry it back, I'm afraid.

Mr. Peter Julian: Okay. Within your agency, what are the steps or plans around communicating with the deaf?

Dr. James Young: Well, PSEPC would not necessarily write the plan for Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Peter Julian: No, I'm talking about in Canada. Putting the tsunami aside—and I appreciate the fact they'll take that into consideration and take that back—what specific plans do you have in place for communication with deaf or deafened Canadians in the event of a natural disaster, or worse?

• (1300)

Mr. Peter Hill: There are a number of elements to that response. My colleague could talk about part of that response in terms of a national public alerting strategy that Industry Canada is developing.

Mr. Chaouki Dakdouki: Thanks for the question.

As part of our public alerting initiative, we are using a multimedia solution. So we can send voice text and, if we need it, image or video to the population. For example, if we have an alert message, we can use the scroll at the bottom of the TV to inform people who have some difficulties hearing, or send a message via text, instead of only sending it by radio or telephone, for example.

Mr. Peter Julian: This is through the emergency broadcast network?

Mr. Chaouki Dakdouki: Yes.

Mr. Peter Julian: So the emergency broadcast network would have captioning?

Mr. Chaouki Dakdouki: Yes. Right now we're working with broadcast engineers to ensure that people who rely on closed captioning will still get those messages. We are deciding which lines on the TV to put a large message, so we don't override other closed-captioning messages.

Mr. Peter Julian: So this is now a capacity that would be national in scope?

Mr. Chaouki Dakdouki: It's not there yet, but that's the plan.

Dr. James Young: It's in the works, I think.

Mr. Peter Hill: If I could add to that, through the collaboration that PSEPC undertakes with provincial and territorial emergency measures organizations, we are beginning to collect information in terms of what is happening on the ground to ensure that persons living with disabilities—whether they're physical, hearing, visibility, or intellectual—are taken care of properly. I mentioned that Nova Scotia has some interesting work under way, but by no means is it the only one. There is also Ontario, British Columbia, and others.

PSEPC is in the process of gathering information. Part of that work will entail our participation in the Government of Canada's social development disability agenda work. We've started to participate in that forum to better understand some of the needs of

these client groups—if we could call them client groups in that sense. So we have work under way to better address these needs.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you very much for your deputation. We appreciate the information very much and your time for coming here. Again, we're sorry for the delay. We appreciate your patience. Thank you.

We're going to suspend this meeting and go in camera for the next item.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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