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Chair

Mr. Ed Komarnicki

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): We'll start our committee meeting.

I'm happy to have with us representatives from General Electric Canada and Ontario Power Generation.

I understand that each of you will be presenting for five minutes. Then we'll have questions and answers from all parties.

I understand that we'll be starting with either Kim Warburton or Ross Hornby, I'm not sure which.

Kim, go ahead.

Ms. Kim Warburton (Vice-President, Communications and Public Relations, General Electric Canada Inc.): Thank you very much.

Thank you to the members of the committee for the opportunity to present. I am going to start, and then my colleague, Ross Hornby, will complete.

In January 2011, GE Canada launched a partnership with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce focusing on Canada's remote communities, and looking at them through a business lens. We conducted 11 cross-country round tables and an online survey that allowed us to hear from 500 business stakeholders. Our aim in so doing was to better understand the challenges of business, the successes, and the investment intentions of business in Canada's remote communities.

As you know, most of Canada's natural resources are in remote areas—our oil and natural gas, metals and minerals, forests and hydroelectric sites, and other untapped resources. These primary industries stimulate other sectors, such as construction and commercial services. With global demand for natural resources increasing, our remote communities are among the brightest spots in our economy. The relative attractiveness and strength of these communities are key enablers to effectively realizing Canada's economic opportunity.

We highlighted our study findings in a document called *Remote. Resource Rich. And Ready.* Feedback from our study suggests that Canada is at a tipping point. Our work noted abundant optimism; 93% of respondents believe remote communities will play an important role in Canada's economic future. We heard too that investing in remote areas shouldn't be seen as a subsidy for poorer regions, but as something that's vital to ensure Canada's overall prosperity for decades to come.

While there's optimism, our study also raised challenges in terms of attracting and growing businesses in remote Canada. Three major factors emerged.

The first is infrastructure. This includes affordable, reliable energy efficiency; reliable wireless broadband connectivity; affordable, efficient transportation; and access to clean and abundant water. These become the building blocks to business investment.

Next is the availability of a skilled workforce. Remote communities have significant labour issues. Future growth could exacerbate existing conditions and limit business investment opportunity. Businesses noted that while they're willing to train workers, poor literacy and numeracy are barriers.

There is also a need to match skills and training programs with market requirements. Too often, it was noted, these are out of step. One remote community, for example, had a lot of hair and aesthetic programs, but offered no training support for required mining skills-related training.

Tied to workforce availability and readiness is the third challenge: education. For instance, high school dropout rates are up to three times higher in remote communities. In Nunavut, barely 25% of youth graduate high school. Over the next decade, 400,000 aboriginal Canadians will reach working age. Improving graduation rates will help Canada develop a highly skilled homegrown workforce and the workforce needed in the resource sector. We heard there is often a significant difference in the education level achieved in remote communities versus the rest of Canada.

Another concern is that on a per-student basis, the federal government provides considerably less to first nations than the provinces in education. That was noted by business as well. Other barriers include a lack of connectivity, which places youth at a disadvantage for online learning and access to information.

Lastly, students in remote communities who want post-secondary education often must leave their communities to do so. This can be costly and stressful—a big disincentive.

● (1535)

Mr. Ross Hornby (Vice-President, Government Affairs and Policy, General Electric Canada Inc.): Thank you, Kim.

I'll try to sum up what Kim has presented as a result of the study GE did.

Essentially, the first point we would make as a recommendation is that there should be a much broader recognition across Canada of the importance of remote communities in Canada's economic development. This basic recognition issue is something that we tend to gloss over, but it needs to be looked at more seriously across a variety of government programs and business programs so that we recognize that prosperity is dependent on the efficient allocation of resources in these remote communities.

The second recommendation we would make is that we need to have an improvement in the high school graduation rate in remote communities, particularly among the aboriginal populations. We note that the Government of Nunavut recently brought forward a 10-point program to improve high school graduation rates in that territory. This is a good model for what needs to be rolled out across the country.

We also think—Kim referred to it—that for those students who do obtain a secondary education, there's a gap between their results and their competencies versus those of graduates from the south. We need to have a better focus on literacy and numeracy, so that all high school graduates have those basic skills—rather than graduating students that lack those skills.

Another recommendation relates to broadband connectivity. It's extremely difficult to do online training, including in a business setting, if you don't have online connectivity. Also, we think there needs to be better partnerships between business and government, and the suppliers and producers to improve broadband access in rural areas.

The fifth recommendation relates to developing and funding skills training programs. Here, we need to work with industry, government, and aboriginal bands to make sure we are funding skills programs that are related to jobs.

The sixth and final recommendation we make is that better community supports are needed for post-secondary students who leave remote communities and go to the cities to do post-secondary education. This is an extremely difficult task for them. The dropout rate is very high. There are social adjustment difficulties that students face, and we need to have community support there to assist these students to bridge that gap and meet that challenge.

I'll conclude there with the recommendations that flow from our work on remote communities.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation.

Certainly, increasing the graduation rate and encouraging the post-secondary movement is important—for sure—and many of our resources are in the remote areas, and developing them in a fashion that would work for the benefit of those who are there and for everyone else would be a good thing.

I know that Ontario Power has been doing some interesting things, so I look forward to hearing from you.

Ms. Keenan, go ahead.

Ms. Barb Keenan (Senior Vice-President, Human Resources and Chief Ethics Officer, Ontario Power Generation Inc.): Thank you.

Good afternoon, and thank you, honourable members of Parliament, for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon.

I thought I'd tell you a brief story about Ontario Hydro. Ontario Power Generation's roots were in Ontario Hydro. Prior to 1950 we were almost exclusively hydro. In 1999, when the system was going to be deregulated, Ontario Hydro split into five separate companies, and the generation division turned into Ontario Power Generation.

In terms of our company profile, we have quite a diversified mix of electricity generation, including nuclear, hydro, and thermal, and our organization is spread throughout the province. It is very geographically dispersed with plants in many of the rural and northern communities.

Like many other organizations, we will soon be facing a demographic challenge as one-third of our population is close to retirement. With a complex business and a long training curve for our employees, it's important to get out in front of this.

Given that we have a strong presence in areas that are close to aboriginal communities, it's incumbent upon us to capitalize on this as well as growing these partnerships. The aboriginal youth population is the fastest growing in Canada, and it seems like a natural opportunity.

One thing you're going to hear me talk about is the lower Mattagami River project, which is currently one of the largest capital projects in northern Ontario at $2.6 billion. What you will hear about is a partnership we have been able to construct there.

As a further backdrop, Ontario Power Generation has a presidential-level policy on first nation and Métis relations, and the whole focus of that policy is on building long-term mutually beneficial relationships with the aboriginal and Métis communities. One of the key thrusts of our policy is around business units engaging local first nation and Métis communities in order to bring about more capacity building, employment, and outreach. I'll give you some quick examples of each.

As to capacity building, we've created our own national aboriginal achievement award, the John Wesley Beaver. We take two aboriginal youth, one female and one male, who have excelled and have contributed to their community, and we provide them with a work term. It has proved to be most beneficial.

An example in terms of employment is developing unique partnerships to create jobs and training opportunities. Lastly, the outreach is around strong ties to local band offices.

The strongest partnership we've been involved in is the lower Mattagami. This is an initiative—Sibi, as it's called—that was established in March 2010 with the Moose Cree Nation, MoCreebec, TTN, and Métis. Through funding from the federal and provincial governments, and our partner, Kiewit, as well as the building trades unions, we have provided a training and employment initiative. What it has resulted in is the Mattagami aboriginal project. We have $250 million in aboriginal-only contracts in areas such as security and catering. We have over 900 first nation individuals in our database, and we are employing 100 to 200 through contracts for work on that project. Right now on this project, there are 600 to 800 individuals on any given day. At the peak, it will be 1,200, so it has been a substantial achievement. The breakthrough has come through getting the training. We have an employee readiness program where we've been able to assess people's skills, and then really key in on opportunities where critical skills are required and work with the communities to build that.

In terms of other initiatives, we also have worked with the Electricity Sector Council on a three-year program on aboriginal workforce participation. It's focused on two pillars. One is attracting, recruiting, and retraining aboriginals to industry, and the second is providing aboriginal communities with an awareness of the careers and the opportunities that exist in the sector. A great example of an initiative has been the aboriginal youth camps. We've opened up camps to not only help aboriginal youth explore career opportunities, but also to impress upon them the value of math and sciences in their academic training as they look to future careers.

● (1540)

In terms of barriers to skills development, the slide identifies some of them, but I want to give you a bit of a flavour of some of the things we've done to address the barriers.

Those start with something called the “native circle”, an employee resource group within our organization. They are all first nations employees. They provide support to first nations individuals when they come to work for OPG. As well, they provide some awareness-raising within our own employee group that has been very beneficial.

Second, when we're in our northern communities—recognizing some of my colleagues' comments about the lack of Internet access—we actually go out to the first nations locations and talk to them, help them with their resumés, engage them directly on what the opportunities are, and be a lot more proactive on that front.

Third, pertaining to the lower Mattagami project, two things have been done. One is that a social advocate is being employed when we have first nations individuals come to the lower Mattagami project. It is isolated, and the individuals are often away from their community. In a lot of cases when they are younger employees, it's the first time that they've been away. The social advocate provides a support system for them when they're there. Alternatively, our contractor, Kiewit, has engaged The Wesley Group to provide cultural awareness training to the rest of the community at the lower Mattagami project.

I would also note that we recognize the importance to Cree culture of hunting and fishing. During that season, the first nations employees are afforded additional vacation days to ensure that they can participate in that activity.

I thought I would also provide just a few recommendations from our perspective. Those are around three key thrusts.

The first is around ensuring the linkage between industry and partnerships with the first nations. The success of our partnership with Sibi was that we involved the community, communicated our skill requirements, and engaged the community members early to help integrate the local population into the workforce. We were very proactive. We provided career awareness and targeted education. Often we found that first nations people may have been interested in heavy equipment, for instance, and instead we had opportunities in other key skills areas, so we tried to refocus their energy into areas where their skills would be most required.

The second is in terms of sponsorship of placement programs. Practical work placements, especially for people who had not been in the workforce for a period of time, allowed them to check out the work opportunity and gain their confidence. That led to some very beneficial results, particularly in the lower Mattagami.

The last one is around culturally relevant skills and innovative training solutions, so ensuring, further to what my colleagues have said, the customizing of the skills and training required, and bringing some of those opportunities and training to the actual first nations location. Often we have found that it's difficult for them; they don't always want to leave. If we can bring the training to them, with good-quality results, then it really has made quite an impact in terms of our moving forward.

I would welcome any questions the committee has.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation.

We'll start our first round of questioning with Ms. Hughes.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Thank you very much for the great presentations. I think you've touched base on a lot of the issues we've been raising with respect to the cultural aspect and recognizing the needs of the first nations.

Ms. Keenan, I just want to touch base with you. You talked about how some people had their hopes on heavy equipment mechanic, but their skills were different. Based on the fact that you may have found them a different position somewhere else, is there actually an opportunity for them to move forward in being able to have the skills necessary for heavy equipment?

Ms. Barb Keenan: In the case of the lower Mattagami, we didn't have enough positions requiring that skill set of heavy machinery. So what we tried to do, if individuals had an interest, was to refocus them on something that might have transferable skills, so that the retraining efforts would be less and we could still end with a good result and them getting a placement in the project.

A lot of it is about getting out in front of it and making sure that people have an appreciation of the skills we actually require in our projects, and then tailoring the training to that need.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I'm trying to get some sense as well, and maybe you can weigh in on that, of the retention rate. What has been the retention rate, first of all, and what positions are the most required at this point in time?

Ms. Keenan, you mentioned Kiewit. When I was speaking with Kiewit just about a week ago, they were saying that they're having to fly in most of their skilled workers. There's a big shortage, and people are actually flying in from New Brunswick.

I'm just trying to get some sense as to where the demand is in your industry. Again, what is the best avenue for us to take with respect to being able to train people so that they would stay a bit more local and spend their money locally?

● (1550)

Ms. Kim Warburton: I can answer some of that based on the survey results.

Quite a number of the people we spoke to were in the mining industry. They noted several things. There are a lot of mines that will be opening in Canada. There is a lot of foreign investment for mining, and then there's the required skill set. It was described that there is a labour pool, but the gap is so wide between being able to train somebody to work in the mines, and the various skills in the communities that are around certain locations for mining.

There were lower levels of literacy than expected, for example. If you needed to read a training manual, there was sometimes an issue between literacy and comprehension. It wasn't so much, “We can come in and we have a lot of jobs“. We first need to address the gap around literacy and numeracy. So that was one of the things that really got talked about a lot in the round tables, particularly in the mining community.

When there were jobs and individuals were able and wanted to work in those areas, the employers spent a fair amount of time on the training initiative. However, some employers that went into the communities expected that there would be some local skills-training programs. That's where they were talking about this. I go back to the example that there was a lot of hairdressing, but there weren't mining-related skills. So a little bit of a mismatch was happening.

Ms. Barb Keenan: We have experienced the same thing. The majority of jobs where we have been able to employ first nations—particularly at the lower Mattagami project, which I'm most familiar with—are in the areas of catering, surveying, and working on the roads. They are more the entry-level, lower-skilled jobs. Through some training we were able to equip them with the skills so that they could engage in those positions. There was truly a gap.

One of the things we have been trying to do in some of the northern communities is provide some education. The skilled trades—things that require apprenticeships—are truly areas that we and the Construction Sector Council have identified as a real paucity of resources moving forward as people retire. That's an area where if we can help provide some support to the first nations, there could be a huge benefit.

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Daniel.

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming here today.

It seems that you've done a great job of doing the survey with businesses. But did you survey any of the communities to see where their skills gaps are and what they actually like to do? We've heard about some of the lower-level skills, but surely some of these people are capable of getting into IT, supervisory roles, etc.

Can you comment on that?

Ms. Kim Warburton: Absolutely.

That's a very good point. When we started with the survey as GE, we wanted to stay in the area we felt we knew, which was the business community and the business lens. There isn't really a lot of available current literature, so that's where we focused. Of course, as we did our round tables, members who joined the round tables represented their communities as well as businesses. We were also joined by a number of municipal and territorial government officials.

You're quite right. There are people who are available and looking for opportunities, but the communities themselves commented on the gap. They talked a lot about a population that is a little bit shy and feels that they're not up to southern standards, if you will. Along comes opportunities for jobs, and people feel that maybe they're not able to do them, when they actually can with some training. There's an inherent shyness about going for that, because of the perception that maybe in the south things are better and there's this huge difference. It's a matter of building the confidence to approach the opportunities.

● (1555)

Ms. Barb Keenan: There were other opportunities. There were fewer in terms of being able to capitalize, but we did have a number of apprenticeship areas. The building trades unions helped participate in this process. We did get a number of people who were starting to go through their apprenticeship in terms of plumbers, pipe fitters, carpenters, and trades along that path.

If I take it more from a corporate perspective, with our John Wesley Beaver award, what we try to do, through some of our summer or co-op positions, is bring in aboriginal students who are working on their university degrees in an area of discipline related to Ontario Power Generation to get them that work experience. There's definitely that avenue as well. My focus had just been on the lower Mattagami project when I made my original comment.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Okay. I will change the subject to an area you've all talked about, which is the lack of high-speed Internet and access to it. It clearly isn't beyond the wit of man to put high-speed Internet into these places. You have rights-of-way for cabling, etc. What barriers are you experiencing in providing this critical infrastructure to these remote communities? Anybody?

Ms. Kim Warburton: In terms of barriers, there are a couple of things that were expressed. One is that the population of the communities is so low that it doesn't make economic sense for companies to build a robust, broadband infrastructure. That was something that was expressed in the round tables. Some communities are a little more creative than others. You can do some satellites.

At the end of the day, we talked to a couple of businesses who were actually large graphic design companies, based in Nunavut and Yellowknife, who talked about the experience of having to be online first thing in the morning, knowing that their business was going to lack access throughout chunks of the day, and trying to do business around that kind of system. It's sort of the economic model more than anything else that was cited.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Okay. Are there any other comments?

Ms. Barb Keenan: I must say I'm not knowledgeable enough to answer that. I would have to go back to the project and see what the barriers were.

In the case of the lower Mattagami project, it is a residential project. It's literally out in the middle of nowhere. Anybody who works on the project lives there. They are actually driven or flown in and out of that project.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Again, I was assuming that if you have power lines going through, it isn't beyond the wit of man to put a fibre optic cable alongside and put in high-speed Internet without going wireless. That's just another thing.

Are there any regulatory changes you would like to see made at the federal level that would assist in the development of rural communities?

Mr. Ross Hornby: The recurring difficulty that we heard from business and also from our clients is really over the speed of regulatory approval for new projects. Any effort that can be made to both speed up the regulatory process and avoid unnecessary duplication between various federal agencies in the regulatory process is helpful.

Then, there's also the issue of overlapping processes in the south between the federal and provincial processes, and then territorial procedures as well. At all times, we heard that companies and the local communities are concerned about the environment, but they also would like to see—while protecting the environment—a faster decision-making process in the regulatory area. Anything that the government can do to help in that area will help get some of these projects off the ground much faster than is currently the case.

● (1600)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Ms. Crowder. Go ahead.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Patry is going to start first.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Patry (Jonquière—Alma, NDP): Mr. Chair, I'll share my time with Mrs. Crowder.

My question is for Mrs. Warburton.

You talked about very high dropout rates. Can you tell me why these rates are so high? What was done to reduce these rates and to bring those kids back to school?

[*English*]

Ms. Kim Warburton: We talked at length with the community about the dropout rates and why they were so high. There were a couple of things that were explained to us. One was the legacy of residential schools. Parents right now tend not to encourage their children to go to school. If kids are feeling they want to be off doing something else, there isn't anybody there telling them they need to be there.

One of the ways that this is being addressed—and I speak for Nunavut—is through the recent "First Canadians, Canadians First" policy document and plan for education. Of the 10 strategies in that, the one that Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, or ITK, has chosen to really pursue initially is a program for parents. It's getting parents connected with the schools and also encouraging parents to get their kids to go to school.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you to the witnesses. The study that GE and the Chamber of Commerce engaged in was, I think, a very important study for rural and remote communities. I think it highlighted the fact that the language needs to shift to being an investment, not an expense.

In your recommendations, Mr. Hornby and Ms. Warburton, one of the things that you talked about, recommendation number six in the brief that came to us, was the collaboration with community organizations and so on around transition programs. Part of the challenge is that the colleges are not funded to do this, so unless the federal government steps up with a pot of funding to do this....

I was actually speaking to some colleges last week and what they told me was that they actually have to try to find money from somewhere else, because they are concerned about the success of aboriginal students once they get into post-secondary education.

I just wonder if you have heard that as well.

Ms. Kim Warburton: Yes, definitely. We did hear a little bit about that, not so much around the funding in a big way, but the real need to have this kind of initiative. What a number of people told us as well is that the transition is almost a one-year transition. So people coming from northern communities need a year to acclimatize and be within a community, and then get into the university. Then there's a need for university-related support as the students go through a four- or five-year program.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Some colleges and universities have actually experimented with having students take only two or three courses in that first year and build the rest of the support around them. But then it becomes a challenge for student funding because they're expected to carry a certain course load in order to qualify for loans, grants, or bursaries. It's a huge problem in terms of the traditional funding models.

Ms. Keenan, and perhaps Mr. Hornby and Ms. Warburton, can you tell us how many first nations, Métis, and Inuit apprentices or tradespeople you have working in your organizations?

Ms. Barb Keenan: I could not tell you how many. I'd have to get back to you on that. However, I can say that we do have 139 self-identified first nations and Métis employees in OPG right now, and that's aside from the lower Mattagami project, which is a design-builder-contractor approach where there are around 100 to 200 at any given time. I can get back to you with that number.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I think it's an important number and you did make the point in your presentation, Ms. Keenan, that in the lower Mattagami project it's largely entry-level jobs. I used to be the aboriginal affairs critic for the NDP, so I spent five years on this file. One of the things that we fairly consistently heard from first nations was that they were always employed in the entry-level programs, and that often there weren't any mentoring and support programs to allow them to move into the skilled trades areas, middle management, or supervisory positions.

You're absolutely correct. If you can't graduate people from grade 12, you can't get them into these other areas. There's no question about that.

Aside from the trades area, do either of your companies have programs to take people into middle management?

● (1605)

Ms. Kim Warburton: What we've started doing is—and we're in our third year—we've switched our GE scholarship program and now it is focused on aboriginals only. For university students in year two going through to the end, we have funding that's made available in each of their years—so year two, three, and four. What we do then is match that with a mentoring program and we bring the students in once a year within GE so that we can get to know those students and they can get to know us a little bit, as well as the business environment. We continue the mentorships throughout the course of their program, so they always have somewhere to go in terms of business questions and that kind of thing.

It's not a huge program, but it certainly makes a difference. It's great for us as well because we mentor those students throughout their university programs, and from our perspective, they're potential employees as well.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Then, of course, they become role models for their own communities.

Ms. Kim Warburton: Absolutely, and that's the whole point, to have role models as well.

The Chair: Your time is up.

Mrs. Keenan, if you want to make a comment, go ahead.

Ms. Barb Keenan: I'll respond to that question as well.

In my comments, I mentioned two things. One was the John Wesley Beaver awards. What we do try to do out of that is have them in for a work term, and then when they graduate, we try very much to get them on full time and bring them up through the organization. We have been very successful. Four of the winners have been with us now for a number of years, post-university.

The other area that's proved most successful is the native circle. It's a group of individuals who have become leaders through the work they've done in the native circle, and actually we do have a number of engineers who are first nations. Through some of the awareness raising events they do, it really has made a difference. Among some of the things they have told me, which was an education for me, was that a lot of first nations individuals won't even self-identify because they're worried it will have a negative impact on their career. This was troubling.

Through the native circle and some of the awareness raising, I think, it has made people feel more comfortable with coming out and being proud of their culture, and within our own organization that's made a big difference.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Leitch, go ahead.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much, everyone, for coming today. I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedules to give us some feedback on what is a very important subject for the federal government, and obviously for your firms.

I wanted to really focus on what you think some of those barriers are right now on the infrastructure side. I read that GE report, but maybe you could highlight for my colleagues here today what you saw as the major infrastructure challenges that you heard about from those 500 individuals you took the time to go out and speak to across the country.

Mr. Ross Hornby: The first barrier related to energy. A lot of the new development in small northern communities is in areas that are off the grid. The challenge there is getting reliable sources of electricity to those communities to allow them to wean themselves off diesel, in particular, which is very expensive and very polluting. What they're looking for from both the mining companies building installations there, as well as suppliers like GE, is to have a variety of sources of energy—some renewable, some gas turbines, or a small generation hydro—that will allow them to go off diesel and have a reliable local source of electricity.

The other area relates to clean water. A lot of communities felt that they didn't have adequate water resources now, and particularly, if they are going to be developing new resource-based projects, whether forestry or mining, they needed to have the water system brought up to the right standards for development. Again, the mining companies are going to do a lot of that. The technology clearly exists to be able to do that.

The other area was related to transportation, in and out. Some of these communities are fly-in, fly-out. Others have a combination of fly-in, fly-out, and the local communities; others are communities built from scratch. The cost of transportation is something that holds back people who want to go there, and also people who are there from being able to get out to get the rest and relaxation, and the skills development that they may need elsewhere. So reliable transportation was another infrastructure element that was raised.

Essentially, it was energy, water, and transportation.

● (1610)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: I have a second question.

I know both firms made some comments with regard to regulatory affairs. If you could choose the three regulatory components at the federal government level that could substantially impact remote and rural communities, what would they be?

I know it's like having an orthopedic surgeon ask you questions. It's sort of like me at teaching rounds. If you have two or three questions that are quite specific so that we're not working in general....

Ms. Kim Warburton: Certainly, the first one—and we heard this right across the board, and I think Ross mentioned this as well—is streamlining approval processes. We heard from so many people who felt they were ready to go, and now there's another layer of approval. One person shared with us that after 11 years they learned they had to start the process all over again. That would definitely be one clear area.

Another area that came up a lot was the lack of data. To make decisions, a number of communities needed basic data and information about population growth, differences, what had been happening for five, 10, or 15 years, and there was a lack of that data or it was really hard to find or it couldn't be shared. Putting together a picture of what's going on over a period of time was difficult for individuals to do.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Just so that I'm clear, when you say it couldn't be shared, you're stating that data would be available somewhere but the recipient couldn't access it to make their decisions?

Ms. Kim Warburton: Yes, or it was hard to find.

If you come back to skills, a number of members who were in municipal government said to us that they have people on their staff. When they look for information and data, it's often difficult for people to find who even has a degree in this stuff. If you imagine people who maybe don't have advanced skills trying to find it and then knit it together to make a picture of that community and what they could potentially be looking at, it was difficult.

Mr. Ross Hornby: Can I just add the third area where we could see some change? This is a sensitive area related to aboriginal government. The schools are often administered at a very local level as opposed to a regional level. I think that is holding back addressing some of the challenges, particularly at the kindergarten to grade 12 levels, in terms of getting a proper curriculum that is directed at helping develop skills that are then useful in the workforce later. The system is so decentralized. It's a capacity problem that needs to be addressed.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thanks very much for being here today.

Mr. Hornby, I don't discount how frustrating it can be to go through the environmental processes, and sometimes it seems as if you're doing the same thing twice, provincially and federally, what have you, but loop that back into skills development.

Are companies apprehensive about raising an expectation in the community and investing in skills development in the community pending the outcome of that assessment? Is that the biggest drawback there? Can you tie it in with the regulatory regime?

● (1615)

Mr. Ross Hornby: GE is a global company. When it's making decisions about investments, the number one factor it looks at is the availability of skilled workers. That is more important than the cost of labour, for example. It's having the available skill set that allows you to be able to bring something online and then sell it globally and compete globally. I think what happens is that sometimes when you look at a project that is tied up in the process of regulatory approval, the companies....

GE is not a producer. It does not operate mines.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: No.

Mr. Ross Hornby: We supply high-tech equipment to all these different businesses. But if those businesses are tied up in a regulatory process that doesn't have a timetable, they're not going to start making the investment that needs to be made in the skills that they will eventually require, because of the high risk involved in it.

What I tie back to GE is that we know how important a skilled workforce is. When you talk to our senior people around the world, they will all say it is the number one reason why they go to one place and not the other.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: You bring good things to life.

Ms. Barb Keenan: Just as an example of that, we have a contractor and then we're an operator. In the lower Mattagami project, we're the people who are going to operate and we gave the bill to a contractor. So, for us, the 25% equity stake for the Moose Cree was really important, and putting our money and initiative into training and employment was very important, because we need a sustained workforce once those dams are up and running. It makes a lot of good business sense. It's right for the community, and it's just a good business decision.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: On post-secondary education for first nations, all that I've read has said that if first nations students get to the point where they enter into post-secondary education, the success rate is quite high, but it's getting them to that point.

In your situation it's trying to get the intervention, and to make the communities aware of opportunities even before they make that decision as to whether they are going to pursue education or drop out, or whatever their decision might be.

Could you expand a little bit on the aboriginal youth camps you mentioned? How long have they been going? What do they look like? The intent is obviously to make people within those communities aware of careers and opportunities within those communities. What kinds of successes are coming out of those?

Ms. Barb Keenan: To the best of my knowledge—and I will go back and verify this—the camps themselves have been going on for about three or four years, and there are six throughout Canada. They run for about a week and often engage either students from university or some industry people who give up their time to go and work with aboriginal youth around a curriculum to reinforce some of the opportunities that exist if you pursue math and science, and really to get them turned on to learning.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Are they targeted at a specific age group or grade?

Ms. Barb Keenan: I'm going to have to verify that, because I would be guessing.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: That's neat.

Are there other agencies? Are the mining companies doing that kind of stuff too?

Ms. Barb Keenan: Yes, the mining companies—

Ms. Kim Warburton: If I may just add something, GE supports an organization called Actua. Their offices are here in Ottawa. They have a special program for first nations, and last year it supported 20,000 students. They deliver programs in science and technology for 9- to 15-year-olds. The whole purpose is to get kids excited about science and technology, and they do that in a variety of ways.

For first nations, they're also culturally adapted, so for example, kids make gloves out of whale blubber and put their hands into freezing water and understand.

One of the great stories about this is that for one of the programs that was run in the far north—and you never know how many kids are going to come—the first day there were 50. The next day there were 100, and then 150, and then all the elders started coming as well. The comment was that this is what we tell you about climate change, and why we hunt two months earlier, and so on.

This kind of program is having a great impact, and the feedback from the kids in terms of now wanting to do something in science and technology has actually been quite compelling. We fund that program. We're in our sixth year with the organization, and they are increasing the number of outreach programs to first nations in very remote communities. They fly in university students. Many of them are first nations students who are in university, and who then go into the communities to take the camps with the students as well.

● (1620)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: That's totally funded by you guys?

Ms. Kim Warburton: It's not totally by us. There are other corporate partners who fund—

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Can we get some information on that?

Ms. Kim Warburton: Yes. Actually I do have some information, and I'd be happy to give you that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cuzner. Your time is up.

We'll move on to Mr. Butt.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, both OPG and GE, for being here today, and particularly to GE whose Canadian head office is in my riding in Mississauga. It's nice to have Kim and Ross here. It's nice to see you again, and I very much appreciate the great corporate citizenship and leadership GE and OPG have taken in the various communities where you are operating.

Now that the commercial is over, we'll get to the questions.

I was quite interested in what you said about, what I call, two potential types of skilled workers in these remote communities. One is young people going through school right now, and the other is those who have either completed or left post-secondary education, who are adults now, and who are either unemployed or don't have the skill level that would allow them to be hired to work in some of these companies, because the skills required are at a certain level and they don't have that skill level now.

My first question is about our younger people. I think you mentioned the very high dropout rate from high school in some of these remote rural and aboriginal communities. I'm wondering if you've made any recommendations to the provincial and territorial governments, which have the primary responsibility for off-reserve education in this particular case, as to whether or not they should be looking at it, and whether we should be encouraging provinces to amend some of the curriculum so that we're focusing a little bit more on skilled trade courses and apprenticeship-type programs when young people are 15, 16, or 17, rather than waiting for the post-secondary level.

I guess my view around that is that perhaps if these young people felt there was a job for them at the end of the day, the dropout rate wouldn't be there. Maybe they don't think reading Shakespeare—although some may think reading Shakespeare is important.... Maybe that focus isn't really what's going to motivate them to continue to stay in school and then be that skilled worker when they leave post-secondary education at 17, 18, or 19, depending on what province it is.

Did you look at that at all in talking to our friends in the provinces and territories just generally around curriculum and how maybe we could focus more towards moving young people into this skilled work?

If anyone wants to.... I think GE did a little bit more work, maybe, than OPG did on that.

Ms. Kim Warburton: We didn't get into the big details around the curriculum. What I can share with you are the comments we heard from business, and also again some of the municipal leaders, around the curriculum. There were a couple of things. One is about curriculum that relates to people and where they live. That was a comment that was made a fair amount. So your comment about Shakespeare....

Also there were comments about the fact that they are living in the far north, so it would be good to have a curriculum that relates to their environment. Also there were a couple of comments around language. Having curriculum that is in two languages was also important.

The other comment I would make is that a number of mining companies that we talked to, who hire lots of biologists, said to us that you will never get a better person than those who are first nations or Inuit working in the field along with the companies. In all likelihood, they haven't finished high school but have the best sense, absolutely. So they work with individuals who have that capability and ability, recognizing that these folks will never want to be in school and pursuing a degree in that. They are making accommodation on staff, and recognizing that there isn't necessarily the literacy and numeracy skills there, but there are fantastic capabilities.

● (1625)

The Chair: Okay.

Barb.

Ms. Barb Keenan: For us it's more from the province of Ontario perspective. We were engaged in work with the Electricity Sector Council, where actually a large focus was put on the need to make skilled trades sexy again, and to get out there and really raise awareness around the opportunities and how, in fact, you will be able to get a job and that's what you should take in high school, because there's going to be such a paucity of those skills moving forward.

On a broader level that was done, and specifically in Ontario, there was a package put together that was a joint effort between unions and employers to get out to high schools and to give good descriptions of all the things. That was not specific to first nations; it was a broader approach called Bright Futures.

More specifically on the first nations front, what we have been doing within the communities where we operate plants and specifically have proximity to first nations is going out and actually walking through the careers that will be available, the types of skills we will be hiring, and what it will take from an education perspective. Then we follow it up, and we work with the local colleges to try to ensure they appreciate where those opportunities exist. It's really a lot of awareness raising.

Mr. Brad Butt: Am I done, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: You can go ahead if you feel you want to ask—

Mr. Brad Butt: If it's less than 30 seconds or something, then I can yield my time.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Brad Butt: Okay, that's fine.

Of course, the second half of that was what about the age groups that are beyond secondary school, who perhaps are in a low-skilled job now, or are unemployed? We have an opportunity for a company that comes into town, and that's going to do work, set up a new plant, do mining, or do whatever else there.

Are there any specific things—I'm sure you've mentioned a few others, but I'll give you a chance if you've missed any—that we can be doing that would say to that person that this is an opportunity for them to get in the door now? What are the barriers to that happening? We are providing some apprenticeship grant money and loan money to encourage people to go. What is the major stumbling block, from your view, in moving that person into the skilled labour force?

Ms. Kim Warburton: Again, sometimes it's not all about money, it's match. What we heard was about the need to work with the business community, the individuals, and the community as a whole, to figure out what the trades and the jobs are and then match that funding. For example, don't have a whole bunch of programs that are training people to do something if those jobs will never exist, but really look at the economic opportunity and match it.

It wasn't always about money. It was about getting a better alignment and match by having more people at the table helping to make that decision.

The Chair: Ms. Keenan, do you want to make a short response?

Go ahead.

Ms. Barb Keenan: One was the employment readiness course we talked about. If people had been out of the workforce for a period of time, it would provide that support in terms of reintegration.

The second point was around the placement opportunities, providing for those points-in-time placements, where people could really get a chance to get back into that work environment and try out the skills to see if there's a fit. We found that was very advantageous and we had a lot of success with that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for a very interesting exchange, and some excellent questions and responses. Thank you very much for coming before the committee.

We'll now suspend for a few moments.

Thank you.

● (1625)

(Pause)

● (1635)

The Chair: All right, I'd like to commence the second half of our committee hearings.

I'm happy to have Kelly Lendsay, the president and chief executive officer of the Aboriginal Human Resource Council here; and members from the Assembly of First Nations. Thank you.

Normally you would each present for about five minutes, and then there would be rounds of questioning from each of the parties.

Who is going to be presenting first? Is that Mr. Lendsay?

Mr. Kelly Lendsay (President and Chief Executive Officer, Aboriginal Human Resource Council): Well, you can see that Peter and I are sitting on the outside because we know the place of our women in our communities. We should let the ladies go first.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Ladies first? All right.

Mr. Kelly Lendsay: Mr. Dinsdale, are you taking the leap?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale (Chief Operating Officer, Assembly of First Nations): I'm not sure how to respond.

The Chair: Perhaps it's best to leave that one alone and just go ahead with your presentation.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Absolutely. I'll just go ahead.

I'd like to thank the chair and the committee very much for inviting the Assembly of First Nations to speak on behalf of first nations aboriginal skills and employment training strategy holders, or as they're known, ASETS holders.

The topic of your study, skills development in remote rural communities in an era of fiscal restraint, appears to be tailor-made for our ASETS holders. First of all, approximately 90% of Canada's population live within 100 miles of the U.S. border. The majority of our young and growing first nation population lives in those areas of Canada considered to be rural and remote. Secondly, our ASETS holders have been operating in an era of fiscal restraint dating back to 1996.

Before I go on, let me provide a little background information. Until last year our ASETS holders were known as aboriginal human resource development agreement holders or AHRDAs. The switch from AHRDAs to ASETS was made in order to bring focus to linking first nation training needs and labour market demands, which includes an emphasis on building partnerships with industry and government at the federal, provincial, and local levels.

For over 20 years, since 1991, first nation citizens across Canada have counted on their local ASETS holders to provide opportunities for training, education, skills development, and employment. For many of our peoples who are struggling to find ways out of poverty, our ASETS holders are the first people they turn to for assistance.

The assistance we provide ranges from support for child care, literacy, life-skills classes, and a variety of trades, first aid, and safety training. However, it should be noted that basic skills training, along with upgrading to specialized and technical training, requires more time and financial resources in order to move clients from their current situation to employment. Employment retention also requires a commitment from the employer that goes beyond wage incentives.

Changing from client-driven to demand-driven services is costly for our ASETS holders and makes additional demands on capacities and resources that are already stretched to the limit. The shift from delivering services to individuals and creating new partnerships with employers places more demand on the service centres, especially in remote areas where training delivery costs are higher and funds are limited for smaller communities.

Once our clients are more qualified, they can move on to training in various sectors, from tourism to transportation, mining to forestry, and energy to environmental protection. I should point out that "client" is a term frequently used by ASETS, and employment services in general. These clients are community members who, just like the people sitting around this table, want to have meaningful employment in order to provide for themselves and their families.

Unfortunately for over 15 years, since 1996, we have not seen any increase in much-needed investments by the federal government to our core programs and services, such as ASETS.

For the past decade our AFN federal budget submissions have called for a fair increase in funding, equal to the rest of Canada. Our greatest challenge is trying to serve a rapidly growing population that is failing to receive a quality education in order to prepare for the workforce. At the same time, the costs to deliver programs continue to rise, so we have to do more with less.

We are at a critical point, where more funding and resources are needed to meet the needs of our ever-increasing clients. This continued neglect has resulted in far too many of our young people not having the proper education and skills to obtain meaningful jobs to provide for themselves, their families, and their communities.

This has also placed a heavier burden on our ASETS holders. Far too many of our communities have far too many barriers that prevent people from prospering. We need to access those same building blocks to success that are enjoyed by most Canadians. Imagine if all of our ASETS clients lived in communities with proper housing, water, and even recreational services. Imagine if they had access to a high school in their community, and they were able to graduate at rates equal to the rest of Canada.

Our ASETS holders have the ultimate goal of trying to meet the needs of a growing population through long-term meaningful employment that will build better first nations and a stronger Canada. In order to meet that goal, we need this committee to strongly recommend that Canada invest in our peoples.

National Chief Shawn Atleo has stated on a number of occasions that if we can close the gaps in education and employment, first nations can add $300 billion to the Canadian economy, while reducing the social costs tied to first nation poverty by $115 billion.

Last month the Prime Minister echoed our goals during his opening speech at the crown-first nations gathering here in Ottawa. I quote:

> ...such will be the demand for labour in our future economy that we are positioned today to unlock the enormous economic potential of First Nations peoples, and to do so in a way that meets our mutual goals.
>
> Canada's growing and vibrant economy will require a skilled and growing labour force in every region: urban, rural and remote. Aboriginal peoples are Canada's youngest population. It is therefore in all of our interests to see aboriginal people educated, skilled and employed.

● (1640)

Earlier this month the Canadian Chamber of Commerce released the top 10 barriers to Canada's competitiveness, citing the growing skills and human resource shortages as a top barrier to overcome. National Chief Atleo responded to this report by stating that skills training and supporting a fair and equitable education for first nations young people are essential if Canada hopes to address the skills crisis and growing labour shortage in the next budget cycle.

Investing in skills and training in education is an economic imperative for Canada, particularly when we know that first nations have the potential to contribute $400 billion or $500 billion to Canada's economy by 2026 if the education and achievement gaps are closed between first nations and other Canadians.

As it stands right now, doing nothing will result in a growing annual multi-billion dollar burden of dealing with the social impacts of poverty and despair. However, the price of adequate funding will be paid back in building a dynamic future for the first peoples of our land.

Today the demand for ASETS services is higher than ever due to a growing population that is reaching a million, with half under the age of 23. Our peoples are in the best position, especially in rural remote areas, to be Canada's future workforce. We have many success stories, despite the fact that our clients have a variety of barriers and difficulties in many areas, from daycare expenses to overcoming drug and alcohol issues.

In closing, I want to emphasize that the strength and diversity of first nation ASETS holders has made them an essential asset to their communities. Every ASETS holder has a different delivery method, based on the knowledge and needs of their clients. Those regions with sparse, remote, and rural populations have set up offices and local boards. Those with larger concentrated populations have many services under one location and one board. Regardless of the location—rural, urban, or remote—each ASETS holder occupies the best position to both understand and serve their unique job market needs, whether they be in mining, transportation, forestry, tourism, or dozens of other sectors.

In attendance with me is Elvera Garlow, from Grand River Employment and Training at Six Nations here in Ontario, as well as Cheryl McDonald, First Nations Human Resource Development Commission of Quebec. In the limited time I have left, I'd like to allow them to introduce themselves and answer any questions the committee might have.

Thank you very much.

● (1645)

Ms. Elvera Garlow (Representative, Assembly of First Nations): Good evening, or afternoon, late afternoon.

I would just like to say that I am an ASETS holder and I've been with this file for the last 20 years, from Pathways to now. I've been the executive director of Grand River Employment and Training, and I've seen the evolution of the devolution of employment and training for aboriginal people, in this particular area, first nations.

And do you know what? I think it's the best thing that ever happened. After having worked for the federal government for 14 years prior to taking on this job, this was just up my alley. I really appreciate the opportunity to be working at Six Nations and working with young people. I just couldn't ask for better. I don't even look at it as a job. I just enjoy every day of it.

I can see the success that's there with that devolution that has taken place. I think ASETS is a great strategy. There's only one problem. I do not like the implementation of that strategy. We've been going along merrily. We don't need anybody to interfere and micromanage us, and say we have to do this, this, and this. We've already been doing it for the last 10 years. So don't put those little detailed things on us, because we have them already. In fact, I had to say to my project officer from Toronto, “Is this my plan or is it yours? It's mine.” She's telling me what to do, and I'm thinking, “This isn't right. This is my plan for my community.” I should be able to say that and not have any person tell me it's not right, or it should be this, or it should be that.

That's the only problem I have with the ASETS program. I have a lot more to say about it and what we are doing in Ontario. We have a really good model that I would like to share with you, maybe not tonight, but sometime.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. McDonald.

Mrs. Cheryl McDonald (Representative, Assembly of First Nations): Good evening, everyone.

I'm a Mohawk from the community of Kanesatake, but I wasn't born and raised on the reserve. My parents left when they were young and raised us in the United States. I can say that half my life has been in the U.S. and half has been in Canada.

When I came to Canada, one of my first jobs was at the local commission office, which is one of the local offices at the grassroots of the ASETS. I worked there about 10 years and grew in that job. I left as program director. I saw the ASETS take individuals from their situations, whether they were high school dropouts or people returning to the labour market, and help them to find meaningful employment.

On reserve, whether it's remote or close to a big city like Kahnawake, the challenges are there. In Quebec, many have first nation languages, but have to adapt to the French and English languages. That's a real barrier in Quebec.

I left and moved to the regional level. Now I work for the AFNQL at the regional level. We're looking at helping first nation communities. Over the 10 years that have passed since I've been away from the community, the challenges have become greater as the population goes up, as more and more people start to recognize their need for these services. I now see, regionally, the struggles that I previously saw only in my community of origin. I see them compounded across the province of Quebec and across Canada, because I'm part of a national working group with the AFN.

The dollars that we get aren't enough. The challenges and barriers that exist are real. I've also had the pleasure of going to conferences that are trying to integrate post-secondary students into great jobs with banks, and things like that. I'm realizing, in my work experience and life experience, that we need to have the funds to support our clients at their particular level. We're trying to do that all at the same time. We need more dollars.

In this last changeover to ASETS from AHRDAs, we're just filling out reports and showing how many times you can add two plus two and still get two. It's taking us away, that bureaucratic accountability, from helping our front-line workers receive the training they need to help these clients and make sure they receive the required support.

I'm honoured to be here today. I hope that I can offer you some insight into the grassroots levels and the challenges that exist so that my peers and my communities can start to prosper. We want to supply the demand off reserve to the different industries, and also use our ASETS dollars to develop our communities. We have to do both. We won't do one and lose the other.

Thank you.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

For those who are wondering, the ASETS program is the aboriginal skills and employment training strategy program. We have heard a lot of good reports about it.

Mr. Lendsay, go ahead.

Mr. Kelly Lendsay: Thank you.

Respected leaders, and Ed, it's good to see you. You've had a chance to be at our inclusion works events, and I look forward to responding to this report.

There are three recommendations in this report that I have chosen to highlight.

To my esteemed colleagues from the Assembly of First Nations, they serve on our board of directors—Chief Roger Augustine and the national chief are champions. I think that there are really three challenges in this report: partnerships, education, and the area of skills and training.

One of the recommendations states that we need to build a business case for investing in remote communities. Communities must offer a product or products that have a market, access to a skilled workforce, and critical infrastructure. Here, I think the theme puts the focus on communities, instead of looking at what the economic drivers are in the north and looking at the communities as a collective resource. Let me give you an example. If you look at the size of the aboriginal market, currently it's about $24 billion per year in the spending power, or the GDP power, of aboriginal peoples. It's going to grow to $36 billion by 2016.

That GDP is the size of Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland combined. What would be interesting would be if you would look at the GDP of the north—all of those rural and remote communities—and Canadians would wake up and say that it's large, it's significant, and it's growing, because we have a growing workforce.

We have a growing workforce in the north for two reasons. The first is the resource sector. We have more and more of our economy becoming a commodity-based economy. We're going to be developing more of those resources in the north, and as that waterway melts up north, we're going to be opening up waterways through the north and through the Arctic, and I see tremendous opportunities for growth. We're going to need more human capital going to these remote and rural areas.

In fact, put it in reverse. If there was nobody up there, we'd need a strategy to figure out how to get people to move up there.

The second area is telecommunications and ICT. We all know how many dollars and how much activity we have with India. On a micro-scale, if you can think of the north like India, why can't we invest in the infrastructure for ICT so that our northern communities, many of these aboriginal communities, can be a solution in delivering products and services in the ICT sector? Surely if we can transmit this knowledge from India, we can do it from the north to the south, and indeed to the rest of the world.

Canada could actually be positioning our north as an innovator in the circumpolar area to be a real leader in ICT. A related theme in the report is that we need to stress that this is an investment versus a subsidy, it's a hand up, not a handout.

I think that the cost of doing business is simply just larger in the north.

What Canadians do understand is that when you look at aboriginal Canadians in the United Nations' human resource index, they rank about 48th in the world, compared to the top 5 for all other Canadians. If you look at first nations on reserve, we rank around 63rd.

Put the costs aside for a second. We should be investing so that every Canadian, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, has the same standard of living. If that means it costs more to get potable water, it costs more. If it means it costs more to build the roads in the north, it costs more. I think this is something that Canadians believe in.

The third area of the report was in skills and training. The federal government needs to be flexible enough to accommodate the economic realities of individual communities and the alternate training models that may be required to deliver effective results. In the report, they talk about—you've heard about ASETS holders—aboriginal skills and employment training initiatives, and there are more than 300 across this country. They are a source of the community intelligence that you are looking for.

What's missing is the fact that for many of these ASETS holders, the majority of their funds flow to colleges primarily to invest in the skilled trades that we need. It's actually a tremendous relationship between ASETS holders and the money, where it goes to colleges and trains people for the workforce that employers need.

A third point in skills and training is that you definitely must have employers at the table. Earlier you were talking about training for training. We have to be training for where there are jobs. We have to be aligning our education system with the training for where we think those jobs might be. If they don't happen, at least we had some plan where we were educating people in areas where we thought the economic drivers would actually deliver some jobs in the future.

Lastly, we have a group called the young indigenous professionals. These are young aboriginal Canadians who advise on what we're doing, and just like you, all of us sitting on the inside circle are part of the baby boomers, and many of the folks sitting on the outside are part of generation X and generation Y. You need to start looking at aboriginal Canadians in much the same way. They have views and ideas about their world, and to get their insights on what they feel should be the economic opportunities of the future is very interesting.

● (1655)

Another point made is that we have to ensure that programs are efficient and meet the needs of employers, and they should be delivered in partnership wherever possible. That is from the report. One of the things our organization stands for is employer-focused strategies. Earlier there was some talk about misalignments. I think the ASETS holders have done a great job aligning their training investments to where there are jobs, from catering and surveying, through to the chemists, the trades, entrepreneurship, and right up to the ICT world.

The third and final point I'll make is in the area of partnerships. The report states:

> In an era of deficit reduction, often government funds will not be available and/or sufficient to meet the infrastructure requirements of remote communities. If the federal government cannot provide all or any of the necessary funding, it can assist others in pooling their resources by—

I'd like to offer some suggestions. In the report, they suggest that the government could offer up these resources through:

> ...an online forum for potential business and community partners to share their infrastructure gaps and excess capacity....

I couldn't agree more. Our council has launched the first digital strategy, and it's exciting. It's about how to connect people faster and more economically. It's amazing what happens when information and knowledge are exchanged.

We're building an inclusion classroom for employers, and the inclusion classroom is going to be an online tool, not just here in Canada but our friends in Australia, the States, and other places will be able to access it. To consider ICT support for the north, the infrastructure has to be there so that we can make these types of collaborations happen.

We have a lot of silos in this country; they're called provinces and territories. We also have our silos on the aboriginal side. We need more criss-crossed networks and the ICT technology is one of the ways to do that.

Often employers find that working with aboriginal people is frustrating and can be fragmented, and there needs to be more investment. My friends here who work in the ASETS program will tell you that the dollars are not there to build the partnership mechanisms. We did something with the ASETS holders about five years ago called Work Force Connects. We put on a dating game in which we brought employers together with communities. We did it in 11 provinces and territories and generated tremendous results. It was a tremendous ASETS success. It led to jobs, to training, and to networks. We think the time is right to bring back another type of Work Force Connects to connect people, especially through our north.

We have a group called the Leadership Circle. These are real employers such as the ones you heard from earlier with OPG, who are really committed. I was saying earlier that 10 years ago this conversation would not be happening; you would not be asking these types of probing questions. I congratulate you, because I think it shows that things are changing. Employers are actually doing things, and you have very probing, direct questions. The quality of the dialogue has gone up significantly over the last decade.

My last point on the report concerns the first recommendation in the long list of recommendation summaries, which says:

> Review the funding formula for education in First Nations communities to ensure parity with the provincial financing model in each of the provinces...to ensure that the education needs of all First Nations communities are met.

Ladies and gentlemen, I value public education. Sitting Bull said: “Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can make for our children.” He meant all of our children, collectively. I think, as you think about your children and your grandchildren, that they should be able to go to a first nation on-reserve school and get the same quality of education as a native child going to a school here in Ottawa. If we really believe in public education, that's the measure, and that is why that deficit of about 25% that exists between first nations on-reserve schools and off-reserve schools has to close.

My friend Mary Simon tabled with you the Inuit report, “First Canadians, Canadians First: The National Strategy on Inuit Education” from 2011. That phrase, “First Canadians, Canadians First”, was developed by Jose Kusugak, a good friend of mine. Jose has passed on, but I think that focusing attention on the Inuit, where some of the suicide capitals in the world exist.... There are some major challenges there.

Last, the report refers to closing the gap in Australia. I've been there and have been working there. We know the challenges. Be careful what you read. They've been slipping in the last two years and they're still pleading to follow Canada's models to see what can be done. This is an indigenous issue worldwide, and that's why our national chief, Shawn Atleo, speaks about the leadership that Canada should be demonstrating—because other countries are watching and connecting with us.

● (1700)

Finally, we did a new innovation last month. We did a virtual recruitment fair. That has never been done in Canada. We had 33 employers willing to risk it.

We gave it a try. We had 33 employers and 602 aboriginal job seekers, of which 218 actually participated.

I have two quotes. Sacha DeWolfe from New Brunswick said:

> The National Aboriginal Virtual Recruitment Fair was absolutely wonderful. I'm totally impressed. I've been searching for jobs online constantly that suit my qualifications as well as my interests with no luck so far. I found three possible connections in one hour on your site. Thank you so much!

It turns out, by the way, that Sacha is Chief Augustine's niece. I flipped him this, and he said, “Oh, that's my niece”.

The second quote is:

> It's nice to have a place for aboriginal people to feel free to job shop without the possibility of being rejected due to race.
>
> John

Now, someone doesn't write that unless they have had some race issues. Going forward, I think that trying to create real social and economic inclusion is our collective challenge. As I was flying here from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where our national head office is—I'm in Ottawa once or twice a month—I was wondering if the northerners are thinking about a report called “Creating Social and Economic Inclusion with the Remote South”. It's sort of a play on what we're doing here, because for many of the issues and some of the questions that came earlier, when it comes to education, training, and social and economic inclusion, the issues are the same, whether it's the north or the south.

With that, I'll conclude. I look forward to the dialogue. Thank you.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation, which was fascinating in a lot of respects. I know that you said “lastly” and “finally”, and you concluded, but we gave you extra time because I think it was important to hear what you had to say. We may have to shorten our rounds a bit, but I thought it was important to give you the opportunity and the freedom to speak on this issue.

We'll start with Ms. Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I'm going to start with the ASETS piece and give a real quick summary.

From what you've said, but also from communities across this country, what we've heard about ASETS is that on the ability to deliver programs, the program length is too short, because often you have people coming in who may have multiple barriers to employment. Also, ASETS programs are not necessarily responsive to the needs of the clients themselves because of the restraints that are put on them by the department that funds it. There's not enough money. I understand that the money was capped at 2% back in 1996 and hasn't recognized the increase in the population, particularly the younger population. We've also heard that it's far too complicated to administer because of the number of reports and whatnot.

The other thing you didn't mention, but I've heard, is from the Coast Salish Employment and Training Society, where I live. They represent 19 bands on lower Vancouver Island, and what they've told me is that people keep talking about partnerships, but sometimes when they have another government agency that partners, they actually suffer clawbacks. If they have private sector partners, they don't have a clawback, but they've had money clawed back because of other government funding.

Finally, child care is a big issue. CSETS is finding money from somewhere else to provide child care, but many of the students who are coming back have children. They're older students, and they have family responsibilities, and it's not possible.

You've made one recommendation about sustained funding. Do you have other specific recommendations about improving the ASETS program?

● (1705)

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Maybe I can start and then ask Elvera to chip in as well.

I certainly thank you and acknowledge the challenges that you've raised. I think as well that the child care is a very big barrier, with so many single families.

The one you didn't mention in your list, which I think is an important consideration, is a particular focus on first nations people with disabilities. In fact, as you know, there have been a lot of studies on it, looking at the prevalence.

Twenty-three per cent of all first nations living on reserve have a disability. If we are to create meaningful employment and training programs that are going to benefit them, we need to have a focus. We need to have some mechanism to address it. So I certainly would encourage the committee to consider, as part of their study, the need to pay attention to that barrier specifically.

I think the other ones that you've raised certainly stand as well.

We're also cognizant of the fact that—it's right in the title of your study—we're in an era of fiscal restraint, and I think we have to try to do as much we can with what we have. I think those are significant barriers that are preventing us from being as efficient as possible.

I think Elvera has some more practical, on-the-ground experience, so maybe she can speak to some of these as well.

Ms. Elvera Garlow: I like to meet that Les someday because we always have to do more with him. Do you get it? Do more with less. We were told that when I worked for the department, so I still remember that part of it.

Definitely, child care is an issue where I come from at Six Nations. There are not enough spaces in the daycares—we have two of them. We don't have.... You see, they don't allow for a private sector employer to come along. It always has to be the band council, and that's not something that always works. So having private sector people get in there and start building businesses to address some of the issues would really help.

It's the same with transportation. My organization has gone miles ahead of what they should be doing in terms of our mandate just to address some of those issues. We've had a study done on transportation. We have a minibus now to take our students to the unions in Toronto, so that our young people can get exposed or oriented to the different unions, jobs, and stuff; and actually, they get hired by a union employer. That's the whole idea behind it.

As far as assets go, yes, you're right in some of the things you said, but sometimes you have to stretch it because it doesn't work. One of the areas you mentioned was not having enough time for the intervention. Well, you take your time. You might start with a person in basic skills, in literacy and all that, then you move him onto the next one, which is high school, then you move him on to the next one, which is skills training, or they may just go on to university, or return to school. We do that kind of thing. We're not stopped by what doesn't make sense. We're reasonable people, and if we think that's the way it should go, that's what we do.

I don't think our funder can say that's wrong, because we are addressing the issue. It just takes longer, but they have one intervention each time.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

Your time is up, and we'll move to Mr. Mayes for another round for five minutes.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I really appreciate the leadership you have shown on this file and moving forward. I think there have been some great gains and successes. We see many of the resource communities embracing aboriginal training and using them in the workforce there, and I think it's been very positive.

Madam Crowder and I were on the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. There was a report put forward to the House on post-secondary education for aboriginal students and looking at recommendations to help the outcomes. What was found during the time we were putting the report together was that, as far as the outcomes on post-secondary education were concerned, the same percentage of aboriginal students who got to grade 12 went on to post-secondary education as non-aboriginal students. The outcomes to grade 12 were the problem.

In putting together that report, one of the things discussed was the opportunity of trying to connect students at a younger age—those in high school, junior high school, or middle school—with the opportunities in the mining, oil and gas sector, or whatever, and that economic opportunity is around the more remote rural communities. I was wondering if anything has been done to try to make that connection at an earlier age, especially with male students because they respond better to getting their hands dirty and doing mechanics or electrical, and that type of thing.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Kelly Lendsay: Thank you for your question.

The statistic is that something like 96% of aboriginal kids go on to post-secondary education if they get through to grade 12. We should not be focusing on grade 12. We should all be focusing on post-secondary because that's what employers need—people in Canada with post-secondary training.

The real conundrum is the one you've nailed, which is getting them from early childhood development into K to 12, and a good quality K to 12. Part of it is removing these caps. We don't do a cap on immigration. If you get 100 immigrants, you're going to get the funding to train 100 immigrants, yet the same type of thing does not happen when it comes to education with ASETS holders.

We know that 400,000 aboriginal youth are coming into the market. They're going into schools. It wouldn't take an economist very long to figure out what the forecast will be on spending on education, and eventually, through ASETS, and into colleges and universities. It probably should be a pretty simple formula.

The imagination inside communities to get the curriculum adapted, modified, and shaped so that it excites people to stay in school.... This was a question that I believe Brad had earlier. There are tremendous things happening. It doesn't change the merits or the outcome of education. What's happening is the context of the education. It's like figuring out the surface area of a buffalo hide or a deer hide, or the surface area inside a cone of a teepee. What employers want are the people who actually have the essential skills, so that they can analyze solutions and solve problems for their companies.

I think the productivity gap is really an education gap, first of all. If we look at it as a productivity gap, I think it will get people thinking about who should pay, and whether it is an investment or not. No, it's about productivity. Canada needs to do more on our productivity agenda. Investing in northerners through, perhaps, a productivity fund would be a more innovative way to really bring up the quality of education, the employment, and eventually those outcomes.

The Chair: Is there anybody else who wants to add to that really quickly?

Go ahead.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Yes, I think we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge that national panel on education that has just been completed. It had some very significant recommendations with respect to emergency funding. Funding parity doesn't mean exactly the same funding level per teacher. It also means a level of secondary supports available, like guidance counsellors and science laboratories. Parity is a complicated question. You talked about systems; I think that's important.

The other issue is that a post-secondary supports program that funds those who happen to graduate from high school seems to be under constant attack in expenditure review processes.

I remember I presented to that committee on post-secondary supports. INAC officials, at that time, were asked directly if this was a discretionary program. They said yes, it was. With all of the success of the people who graduate from high school, those who move on only can with the supports that are made available. I think it's important for the committee to maybe reflect upon that.

● (1715)

The Chair: Thank you. I think Mrs. McDonald had a comment she wanted to make as well.

Mrs. Cheryl McDonald: I wanted to add to what Elvera had said. What's missing, too, are the O and M dollars—the cost that's given to the provinces to take care of the administration. We have to do that with the little budgets that we have. On top of that, in Quebec, with language, we have to translate everything. All of our meetings are translated as they are here. That's costly.

Every document we produce for the 29 communities in our ASETS has to go through that same system. Child care costs go there. The communities are far away from urban centres where the training sites are so we have to pay for that transportation.

That just reduces the number of people who we can really help, when we know, as she mentioned, that the duration of working with someone from the state that they are in to being employable....

Aboriginal kids who graduate from high school and who make it to the post-secondary level, I'm willing to bet had a foundation around them that nurtured them to stay in school. The issue is that we're dealing with the other half of the population that is living in poverty and living in social disarray with suicide, alcoholism, drugs, crime, and violence. Those are the students who need our help. Those are the clients who come to us and they want to work, but we realize afterwards that they have all of these other hindrances in their lives.

Even when we get someone through the whole scope of employment—just socially integrating into a job can be very challenging for an aboriginal. It's a culture shock, and many of them return and say, “Do you know what? I can't make it in that industry”, and they want to try another field. This compounds what we're trying to do overall with the limited dollars we have.

The Chair: Thank you. Colin. I know you have more questions, but your first question was so good and the response was so outstanding that we went well past your time. We'll have to move on to Mrs. Hughes. Go ahead.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Thank you.

First of all, a lot of my first nation constituents have spoken about the aboriginal-specific allocation of Canada Summer Jobs and how it provided employment skills for young people. I'm just wondering what the impact has been on your first nations. Did you see a decrease in the number of first nations people being able to get those summer jobs?

Second, because you're talking about the ASETS agreement, I'm wondering if you've been experiencing a significant turnover and reassignment of Service Canada project officers and senior development officers, and whether or not there has been a backlog in processing and payments.

Ms. Elvera Garlow: Yes to all of that. We've had three finance officers since the beginning of ASETS. Within the first six months, we had three different ones. We could do their jobs without thinking. We know what it's all about. I have trained people who work in finance training them. They come in and ask what to do. We have to tell them, so it is bad. There's a lot of turnover. They try. I'm not saying they're not trying. It's just that it's going to take a long time for them to get the experience. For example, we had to hold back cheques to give to employers, because we had no cash. It wasn't our fault. All our reports were in. Everything was there. So it's a matter of speeding things up.

The Canada Summer Jobs is definitely a problem. We were used to getting so much money every year. Ontario and Quebec were the only provinces that got Canada Summer Jobs funds. So they had to make us like everybody else. We got nothing, just like all the rest of the provinces. That's their reason for doing it.

The first year—this is the second year with no funds—I took money from our programs and still had the Canada Summer Jobs last year, but we paid for it. We got word at the end of January that there would be no funds. There wasn't enough time to let our employers know they had to apply to Canada Summer Jobs themselves. It was a whole new system. That's what I did to help my community. This year it will be different because they had to apply. We had a whole year to tell them how to do it. So I don't know that, but I know many of our people in Ontario were concerned about not having those funds and how their students were not getting the work experience they had gotten in the past.

● (1720)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: It has come to my attention through one of the first nations in my riding that they got the ASETS agreement on September 29, 2011, and were advised to return it by September 30, 2011, in order to have it legally implemented on October 1, 2011.

Have you heard of other instances where there has been only one day to look at the agreement, sign it, and move it forward? What's the impact of that? How far behind are you right now in getting your allocations back?

Ms. Elvera Garlow: I've had discussions with the regional office, the finance manager. They're telling me that we're not spending our money. The expenditures aren't there, and it's because they're not giving us the money. We can't spend the money, if we don't have it.

I have one outstanding—it's the CRF dollars that we've spent. It's $800,000. We need that cheque any day, and he's supposed to give it to me any day, and then we would have spent all our funds.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: How difficult is it to retain employers when you're not able to have those dollars there?

Ms. Elvera Garlow: It is difficult. They have to wait. Sometimes it's difficult for them. That is one of the impacts. Training centres are affected as well, or it could be a college. We don't always deal with colleges, because we have our own training institutions. But you're correct—they just have to wait.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll continue with the next round.

Mr. Shory, go ahead.

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, witnesses, for being here.

I honestly couldn't agree more when you talk about the importance of education in the community. This is a must.

I'll touch on some economic opportunities rather than going to that side, because we have talked a lot about that. We all know that the aboriginal population is fast-growing and is also the youngest segment of the Canadian population. We do recognize the tremendous economic potential of aboriginal Canadians. That is why in 2009 our government released the Federal Framework for Aboriginal Economic Development that reflects the significant, real, and growing opportunities for aboriginal Canadians to take an unprecedented step toward becoming full participants in the economy as entrepreneurs, employers, and employees.

I'm a little confused when I read the report of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, which is called “The Business Case for Investing in Canada's Remote Communities”. When I read the executive summary, under the heading“Remote communities' place in Canada”, it states:

> Not only does more of our untapped natural resources [wealth] lie in remote communities, the people who can most help us leverage it live in them as well.

It further goes on to say something that is a little confusing:

> Despite many sources of government support and significant federal spending directed at rural/remote areas of Canada, consistent progress in building strong, self-sustaining remote communities is not evident.

What are we lacking in all this? Why aren't we getting the intended results? You may want to address those questions.

● (1725)

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Thank you.

I do. I think the 2009 Federal Framework for Aboriginal Economic Development was an important first step. I think what it didn't do is focus on communities and nations, and their abilities to develop economies. The joint action plan agreed to by the Prime Minister and the national chief has a part looking at a task force to unlock first nations economies.

It's not simply a typical economic development argument when you have a resource and access to market, and you need to provide equity to leverage that and there may be political deals depending on where it has to go in the world. First nations are a rights-bearing community. For far too long, first nations have gone to court to determine and have their rights affirmed. We see concepts like the duty to consult. We're seeing first nations have legal title and then challenging the ability to develop that.

We're in this challenge right now, where we have certainly economic potential, but also communities wanting to protect their rights to, and interests in, their lands. If we just reflect briefly on Attawapiskat and all those diamonds so close to it being mined out of their communities, what is the resource and what is the connection with the community? How are those billions helping to support what's happening just down the road? What can we learn from that?

I think we have a lot of work to do together and I think we're starting that work. The missing point simply isn't a federal government program that is going to enable access to individual economic opportunities; I think it's about group and nation economic opportunities. How do we reconcile rights with the use and extraction of those resources? I think we're developing and beginning that conversation together, but it's going to take some time for the task force to do its work and then for us to come together and find ways of enabling that through these federal programs that are less focused on the individual and more focused on the community.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Shory.

We have about three minutes left. I can tell the committee that we had allocated 15 minutes with respect to our future study and the witnesses who were proposed. We'll simply move that to the next meeting.

Rodger, if you have some questions you want to ask in the next two and a half or three minutes, we can maybe conclude with you and go from there.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I'd like to have you guys here for two hours, to tell you the truth. I think it would be very worthwhile.

I'm going to make a little statement and then just throw it out.

Since Paul Martin finished up with politics, he has remained committed to trying to help first nations communities. He came down to Eskasoni and met with high school kids in Eskasoni, and he asked them to give him their problems and their solutions. One gal who was in grade 12 said her baby got sick the other night and they needed more money for doctors. Paul Martin said it wasn't about the money. He asked, if the money were there, who in that room was going to study to be a doctor or nurse, and come back to that community to help out. There was silence.

Then she said that they went to institutions and that English wasn't her first language. They needed more money for teachers so she could learn English. He asked what if the money was not a problem. Let's say the money was there. Who was going to study and come back to the community and help with English, so that they could go and study to become a nurse or doctor and come back and help with the health care? That was the approach.

Then she asked him why he hadn't come there when he was Prime Minister, and Paul said he had thought he was going to be there a little bit longer, but that's a whole different story.

I'm looking at these kids. My wife teaches school. Say it was these kids here—and it's a beautiful picture. I know if I were to talk to the kids in my wife's class and ask those kids what they wanted to be when they grow up, the girls would say they wanted to be a nurse or a doctor and one guy would say he wanted to play for the Toronto Maple Leafs—and I'd say well, maybe you should have higher career ambitions than that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: But there'd be a fireman, and a policeman.

What do these kids want to be when they grow up?

Are the hopes and aspirations of the kids in remote communities the same as they are...?

I'll just throw that out, because I'm trying to link it with Colin's question about how once we get them out of grade 12, the success is fabulous, but it's that gap.

Do they have the same aspirations in remote communities? I'll just let you guys—

● (1730)

Mr. Kelly Lendsay: The short answer is yes. We've done studies. We've done career studies. In one case of Ontario and Quebec, four kids out of 444 said they wanted to be an astronaut. Whether you're aboriginal or non-aboriginal, if you're a child of poverty, you lose hope by age five. So this is an issue of poverty, not an issue of being aboriginal or non-aboriginal.

What we are building—and we have examples we can provide to Mr. Shory in terms of evidence from Diavik to Syncrude. The northerners are way ahead of the southerners when it comes to really building partnerships. They're building leadership schools. They actually see a vision of getting people, like Dave Tuccaro, who was just inducted into the Business Hall of Fame.

We now have and are starting to build millionaires. We're building a middle class, just like the African-Americans did. It's at a turning point. It's not a tipping point yet, but there are some turning points in this country.

I know the economic development strategy very well, Mr. Shory. Three of those pillars are partnerships, entrepreneurship, and human capital. I think the partnership framework is the right one, the economic framework. I think what you've heard here is some of the frustrations when it comes to the funding. I'm saying, “Look ahead and forecast”.

There are only three places to put the money: social assistance—and I'm glad you brought up disabilities. I also want to bring up inmates. I'm on Mr. Toews' CORCAN, Corrections Canada national advisory group. It's social assistance, prisons, or education and employment.

Aboriginal people want to work. They've worked for hundreds of years, thousands of years. There's a proud tradition of work from the fur economy to the iron workers to today. What's really making another difference is aboriginal entrepreneurs, because they're running right smack into the same issues any employer does. You want to hire your own people, but you have to have the skills, the education, and the attitude. So the beauty of aboriginal entrepreneurship and all the procurement that's been happening is that they've pulled people to the same issues: education, employment, and, of course, development of that work attitude.

That's why summer jobs, by the way, are so important. All of us have had opportunities to learn those work skills somewhere through part-time jobs and through summer jobs. If we erode those types of programs, we're actually eroding that productivity agenda I mentioned earlier.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lendsay, and with that, I think we'll conclude.

We really appreciate the testimony. Maybe we haven't turned a corner, but we're certainly entering some very exciting times, and we'll see where that goes.

The meeting is adjourned.

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