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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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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. I am bringing the meeting to order.

First of all, I would like to mention to the committee before we start that the briefing book that was provided to us at the beginning of the study contains a description of past studies concerning employment for people with disabilities, with links to those studies and their main recommendations. You may want to make note of that in the event you wish to have a look at those.

I would also inform you that the analysts have prepared a list of recommendations from the latest report of the committee on employability, which had a series of 10 recommendations. Those have been forwarded to the last witnesses from HRSDC, who will be reporting back to this committee with respect to what has been done or not done relative to those recommendations.

Keep in mind that previous studies are provided by link in the material that was provided to us, our briefing book, at the commencement of this study.

With that, I would like to welcome James Roots from the Canadian Association of the Deaf; Paul Cudmore, executive director of the Canadian Paraplegic Association; and Robert White, executive director of Spinal Cord Injury Canada.

Thank you very much, gentlemen, for being here with us. We will have each of you present—maybe not necessarily each of you, but I think two of three will be presenting—and after the presentation there will be questions and answers from each of the parties here.

With that, we'll start with the first presenter, Mr. Cudmore.

Mr. Paul Cudmore (Executive Director, Prince Edward Island, Canadian Paraplegic Association): First, I would like to thank everybody for having us here today. We're really excited about this opportunity to present.

We got our document in a little late and we didn't have it translated. It is being translated and will be submitted later, so we just have the English version now. We apologize for that. You can blame that on me, I guess—slow editing.

We'll get started here. We are with Spinal Cord Injury Canada. We were formerly known as the Canadian Paraplegic Association. We're in the process of changing that name all across the country. We're still the Canadian Paraplegic Association of P.E.I., but we will be changing in September. It just takes a little while sometimes for the process to work through.

We're really excited about presenting in front of you today, the House of Commons HUMA committee, pertaining to employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

We are pleased to see that your committee has devoted time and energy to examine this very important issue. We are also pleased that employment opportunities for persons with disabilities are being viewed as a priority in moving forward.

We would like to inform the House of Commons HUMA committee that we are in agreement with all components of the presentation the Council of Canadians with Disabilities did last week, on February 28. We would like to emphasize that the Government of Canada should develop a five-year strategic plan to address employment needs of persons with disabilities. Spinal Cord Injury Canada would welcome the opportunity to be part of any technical advisory committee that may arise out of that and to provide community input on this initiative, suggested by CCD, and to have a pan-Canadian representation.

We would also like to stress the five points of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities' key message pertaining to the federal-provincial labour market agreements for persons with disabilities. The federal government must emphasize program targets with provincial governments and ensure the necessary resources are made available to deliver programs to individuals with disabilities.

The sad thing is the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador recently announced they're cutting funding to Spinal Cord Injury Newfoundland and Labrador, in the amount of $900,000. This is going to be a loss of 23 full-time staff, and over 2,600 clients are going to be affected by that. So it's a sad and ironic thing, especially when we're talking about this today.

Today we're going to focus a bit more on an operational approach. There's a project that we did in P.E.I., to give an example of how things can work properly. It's a program called Discovering the Power in Me. This will really help people with disabilities reintegrate into the workforce. We presented this endeavour to HRSDC's call for social bond concepts in December of last year. It's a pilot project that was undertaken in P.E.I. by us and the PEI Council of People with Disabilities, beginning in January of last year, with 10 participants. The program was very successful. Initially, we had eight people out of the ten employed. Today, we have four still employed, and four realized that they wanted to upgrade their skills and returned to university for post-secondary education. It was a very successful program.

I'm going to give a little more detail about how it worked. People with disabilities—as you know, we had a great report—are faced with numerous challenges and barriers as they attempt to integrate into society and secure employment opportunities. The Discovering the Power in Me program, the DPM, was developed in collaboration with the Canadian Paraplegic Association and the Pacific Institute. It's based on decades of research in the fields of cognitive psychology and the social learning theory. It's aimed at people with physical disabilities who have been experiencing significant road-blocks in their journey to independence, self-reliance, employment, and community integration.

The program is designed to build an understanding, with a structured process, of how the mind works and how people can control the way they think to achieve success in any part of their lives. For those with traumatic injuries, for their families, friends, and caregivers, it is more important than ever to corral the power of the mind and focus on a fulfilling, productive life.

According to a major national employment participation study conducted in 1997 by Spinal Cord Injury Canada, formerly the Canadian Paraplegic Association, only 38% of people living with a spinal cord injury are employed. SCI Canada plays a crucial role in providing individuals with spinal cord injuries and other physical disabilities and their families with information through best practices, which give support in education and timely employment referrals.

While 60% of newly injured people integrate successfully back into society—they probably had previous employment and they reintegrated back into the jobs they had before—40% really struggle. That's where CPA and our best practices can come into play.

● (1110)

A lot of them work less than 20 hours a week and are actively seeking full-time employment, or are unable to work full-time and are actively seeking increased employment, or are in receipt of a notice of an imminent layoff, or must leave their current occupation for medical reasons.

The objectives of the Discovering the Power in Me program are to provide comprehensive skills enhancement for individuals with disabilities that will assist them to build and further develop the necessary life skills to better prepare them for future career goals; develop life and employability skills whereby individuals with disabilities strengthen their personal development and independence, and participate and gain employability skills in a safe environment that is conducive to positive learning and assists in building self-confidence before entering the workforce, which is very important; and enable individuals with disabilities to explore and develop the essential skills required for their career of interest through the career exploration component of the program.

The expected results are that all participants in the program will either be employed at the end of the program or will have begun the process to upgrade their skills or training through education in order to prepare them for a new career that they can be excited about. The results are easily measured.

We found with this project that when people went to employment, they weren't satisfied with the level of income they were at and they realized they needed to improve their skills. That's why four left their positions and returned to school. I think they'll be returning to the jobs they've had because they've had so much support there.

At Spinal Cord Injury Canada we have a two-year renewable licence to deliver the Discovering the Power in Me program, and eight provinces have formal training to deliver the program. Its main focus is to enhance employment opportunities for persons with disabilities by assisting them to identify that they have an internal locus of control and are not hindered by their external environment. That is so that people can understand that it's up to them to get through life's barriers and that they can't allow the environment.... When people tell them that they can't go or that maybe certain places aren't accessible, it's up to them to make sure that they get themselves out there, and that they're the ones who control their own lives.

We also work collaboratively with other provincial disability organizations, such as those that have an established employment services program. In P.E.I. we worked with the P.E.I. Council of People with Disabilities, which has 28 years of experience in employment-related services, to partner with our project, because we did the Discovering the Power in Me component of it and they had the life skills component of it. We worked together and we developed a 13-week project out of that for people with disabilities. We also place them in employment for 13 weeks.

In conclusion, Spinal Cord Injury Canada thanks you for the opportunity to present here today. We are of the opinion that our initiative is clearly in line with how the federal government is seeking to improve the lives of Canadians with disabilities.

We hired a facilitator and a coordinator to initiate this project, and they had 13 weeks of classroom training. I'm a trained facilitator for the Discovering the Power in Me component of the project, which takes a week to do, and that was a component that's always been missing in life skills programs in the past because people didn't really understand the way the brain works or what was holding them back.

They were allowed to see what successful people, such as the Rick Hansens of the world, or everybody sitting in this room, think about their future and how they set goals for themselves. That's a component that we found most people with disabilities were struggling with and was missing. They didn't know how to set goals; they didn't know how to think properly. It's that little voice that talks to you all the time. They would think, “I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this”, whereas this program trains their internal voice to think, “I can do this, and this is how I'm going to do this”, and they set their goals and learn how to get the energy to achieve the goals and to think about each step. You don't have to know how to do each step when you set a goal, but when you set your goal, you get energy to do that step. That's the way the project really works.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that, Mr. Cudmore, and for your explanation.

Let me just remind the members, as you pose the questions, to slow down a bit to give the sign language interpreters a better opportunity to interpret.

With that, I ask Mr. Roots to make his presentation to us.

Mr. James Roots (President, Canadian Association of the Deaf): I will attempt to use my voice. If you can't hear me, welcome to my world.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about employment and people with disabilities.

I am the executive director of the Canadian Association of the Deaf. We are the oldest national disability consumers organization in this country, founded in 1940.

I want to emphasize that we are the Canadian Association of—not for—the Deaf. We are the people who are deaf in Canada. Every one of us knows first-hand what it is to be deaf and to face the unique barriers to employment that exist only for people who are profoundly deaf and who use sign language.

I want you to stop and think for a minute just how much you depend upon your hearing for your own employment. How are you going to function in the House of Commons if you can't hear?

To those of you who work as staff for this committee or for the government, how are you going to do your job if you lose your hearing?

To members of the media and anyone else listening to this presentation, what if you couldn't listen?

If you lose all of your hearing overnight, you will still be able to get along by reading and writing notes, because you already know English or French. You learn English or French or any other spoken language by hearing it.

What if you have never heard it? What if you were born deaf or you became deaf in early childhood, before you learned to read and write?

Our organization's research indicates that as much as 65% of the deaf populace may be considered functionally illiterate. It's not because they're stupid. It's because they're trying to learn a spoken language that they cannot hear.

Unfortunately, for the past century the education of deaf people in Canada has been obsessed with trying to teach us to “hear” and speak instead of actually teaching us academic and practical subjects in the one language that we can and do easily master: sign language.

Is it any wonder that less than 5% of deaf Canadians go on to post-secondary education, or that as much as 91% of them leave high school without a certificate, or a degree, or a diploma?

Now, what are the employment prospects for these people?

In 1989 the Canadian Association of the Deaf conducted an informal poll of service agencies, educators, and community leaders. The consensus of these knowledgeable people was that the combined rates of unemployment and underemployment for deaf Canadians was around 80%.

Ten years later, in 1998, we conducted what is still the only credible data collection with regard to deaf people ever done in this country. We found that the rate of unemployment and under-employment was completely unchanged. It was still 80%.

Let me turn that around and drive home the point. Only 20% of deaf Canadians are fully employed.

Imagine having to report to Parliament and the media and the voters that only 20% of all the people of Canada were fully employed. As I say, that was 15 years ago. No one has done a credible follow-up survey in the intervening years. We have repeatedly applied for funding to do it, but no government wants to provide money to hear that 80% of its populace has consistently been out of work for 35 years. Incidentally, the last time the Public Service Commission was willing to provide us with data on the number of deaf people employed by the federal government, it was 0.01% of the civil service.

I don't want to imply that there's a hierarchy among disabilities, but governments and the private sector are much more comfortable hiring people with just about any other kind of disability than deafness. The reason is simple: you know you will be able to communicate with them; you can talk with them. As long as you can talk with them, it's easy to pretend not to see their disability.

But what's the very first thing that comes to your mind, if you are an employer and a deaf person applies for a job? It's “How am I going to communicate with them?” And then there's the thought of safety issues: “How is she going to know that the building's on fire, if she can't hear the alarm?” There is the issue of expense: “Oh my god, we'll have to spend thousands of dollars on interpreters and visual alarms for one employee!”

Really, it all boils down to your making an assumption that deaf people would be a nuisance to employ. These are systemic and attitudinal barriers that still persist to a very depressing extent all across Canada. It doesn't seem to matter that there are quite reasonable answers to every one of them; we're a nuisance, and employers don't care to expend either the time or the brain cells to find out otherwise.

What are the solutions? Our researchers uncovered an interesting fact. A lot of working deaf people were self-employed, and what they were doing was delivering their services to the deaf community itself, not to the general community, except when they were teaching sign language to non-deaf people. In other words, the only place deaf people were finding jobs was inside their own community; the outside community would not hire them.

With these facts in mind, at the turn of the millennium the Canadian Association of the Deaf negotiated with the federal government to deliver a series of projects that we called the national deaf jobs strategy. With less than $600,000 over a five-year period, we created more than 150 brand-new jobs and training opportunities specifically designed for people who are deaf. That's a cost of just $4,000 per job.

Bang for your buck, anyone? Every one of those 150 people is still employed or self-employed, because we gave them exactly what they needed to succeed. We knew how to do it because we are deaf people ourselves.

All of the federal funding programs that enabled us to create these lasting new jobs have been killed off. They have been replaced by... nothing. Supposedly, relevant funding was downshifted to the provincial and municipal governments, but those have done nothing.

You have to be proactive in tackling the deaf employment crisis, and most importantly you have to be willing to let the deaf themselves design and direct the programs and the resources. I know that the idea of the federal government providing funds for a national body to meddle in provincial jurisdictions of employment and training is against everything the present governing party believes in. But just as in governing Canada, you need a trusted central authority to receive revenues and distribute them through provincial affiliates in order to deliver jobs and training at the grassroots level.

That is exactly the same structure that we have in the Canadian Association of the Deaf. That's why we were so effective and cost-effective in creating new opportunities with our national deaf jobs strategy.

● (1125)

The Internet is proving to be potentially the greatest ever self-employment outlet for deaf people. It is the greatest ever tool for making it feasible for deaf people to work outside their own community, whether for someone else or for themselves. It is the ideal way for us to overcome systemic workplace barriers, discriminatory attitudes and practices, and the tyranny of the voice telephone.

We need your help to maximize the abilities and resources of deaf Canadians to become Internet entrepreneurs, workers from home, remote employees, and mobile online workers. We need your help to utilize Internet-based video technology to deliver training and education to deaf Canadians in their natural language, the language of sign.

We have proved already that a deaf-controlled national deaf jobs strategy can deliver far more successful results than anything that any level of government or any private sector employer has ever delivered, before or since. We are calling on you to recognize this truth and to make recommendations to support the funding of a new national deaf jobs strategy.

Or do you want us to go back to our community and tell them that the government doesn't think an 80% unemployment and under-employment rate is such a big deal?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that presentation, for sharing with us some rather stark statistics, and for sharing the need for us to be proactive to deal with the deaf employment crisis. Using the Internet is an interesting tool. We certainly appreciate that and all of your other comments.

We will now turn to Madame Perreault, for five minutes.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): My question is for Mr. Roots.

I read recently that 5.6% of public service employees have a disability. And, as we know, the public service is being downsized. Since most people with disabilities are employed under contract, the number of them working in the public service will likely drop even lower. By the way, people who are deaf make up 0.1% of the public service.

The government is supposed to lead by example, when it comes to the private sector. But given this situation, what can it do to improve its employment equity policy?

[*English*]

Mr. James Roots: It has to be a targeted recruitment campaign. That can be done through certain service agencies that cater directly to us. Or you can always work with us, the Canadian Association of the Deaf, since we're the federal one. There are no national service agencies for the deaf. There are only provincial ones. We are the national agency for research, information, and community action, not direct services, but for something like this, we could provide direct services.

But it has to be a targeted effort.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault: It was said earlier that data was critical to understanding the more complex situations affecting the employability of people with disabilities. However, Statistics Canada's Participation and Activity Limitation Survey was eliminated in 2010 and replaced by a database containing information on taxes, social assistance and so forth. That new methodology will have an impact on sampling.

Given that the long form census was eliminated, do you foresee the new surveys being less and less reliable?

● (1130)

[*English*]

Mr. James Roots: It's never been reliable, from our perspective. When I joined the Canadian Association of the Deaf in 1986, my very first battle was with Statistics Canada over what was then the health census, the health and activities limitation survey. That was the first disability census.

I'm starting to lose my voice; I'm sorry.

The problem was with the question involved in the census—and in tax data too, with the disability tax credit. The problem there was that the wording does not match what deaf people understand. For example, on the long census my favourite question was, “Do you have a disability”, blah, blah, blah—“something that limits your activity” or whatever.

Deaf people don't believe they have a disability; they believe they are a linguistic and cultural minority, because we have our own language, our own culture. It's different, distinct, and is recognized by the United Nations and by the linguistic association.... I forget the full name of that place.

We are a distinct minority group, not a disability group. When people see that question, “Do you have a disability”, they say no. So they're not counted as disabled. You get a distorted portrait of how many deaf people there are.

Well, the long census is gone now, and I'm still fighting with Statistics Canada over the terminology to use. I had a human rights complaint against them, which was finally settled about one month before the long census was torn up. It was all based on the long census, on making it more accessible and compatible for deaf people. We got the agreement and then, boom, it was the end of the long census. The agreement is all dead now. I don't expect any other kind of household data or tax data or anything to come up with reasonable data.

That's why I said that this is the only credible data collection ever done about deaf people, because we did it ourselves. Deaf people went into the deaf community. That hasn't happened.... Nobody has done that before or since.

The Chair: Thank you for that intervention, Mr. Roots.

Your time, Madame Perreault, is up.

We will now move to the next questioner, Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for coming to Ottawa today and for being such strong advocates for the groups you represent here today.

I might have missed it, so forgive me if I did, but both witnesses here today have relayed percentages to us. Do you have actual numbers of people who are within your organizations or whom you're representing in the broad range of people with spinal cord injuries or who have the disability of being deaf?

Mr. Paul Cudmore: Do you mean the number of people in Canada who have spinal cord injuries?

Mr. Phil McColeman: Yes.

Mr. Paul Cudmore: It's 80,000 people, I believe—86,000 people—

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay, it's 86,000—

Mr. Paul Cudmore: —and there are 4,300 new injuries a year.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay.

Mr. Roots.

Mr. James Roots: There is no credible statistic. Again, I'm sorry to repeat myself, but there's no credible statistic. What we have traditionally done is go by the one-to-ten rule in comparing with American numbers. By that rule of thumb, there are 350,000 profoundly deaf Canadians using sign language, but there are an additional 2.95 million people who are hard of hearing and don't rely on sign language. They're usually lumped together with us, but they are disabled and we are not. We're a minority group; they're a disability group. Do you understand?

● (1135)

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you for that.

I'm curious to know, because you've been involved with this for some time in both cases, whether you have had successful partnerships. Mr. Roots has described one that goes back to one with the government. Have you had any other partnerships—outside of government, with non-government agencies—over the years to do the work that you wish to do for your communities?

Mr. Paul Cudmore: Usually, if you partner with another non-profit group....

We work with something called ParaSport. In P.E.I. we do peer events, such as sailing or something like that, or we have cooperatives and we work with the Council of People with Disabilities for employment projects.

But usually you have to have a funding source for these projects. When you say it's a government-type funding project, then you work in partnership with the other organizations to present the project and have success in it. That's usually the way it works.

Mr. Phil McColeman: On that note, Mr. Cudmore, is there any private industry or are there private corporations that partner with you on any programs?

Mr. Robert White (Executive Director, Spinal Cord Injury Canada): Actually, we partner with other organizations as well, from a national perspective. We have partnerships with banks. Our revenue across Canada to operate our organizations is $23.5 million. Fifty per cent of that comes from partnerships with the business community. So yes, we partner with different types of organizations, whether banks, local corporations, or national corporations. We also do a lot of work with MS, MD—all of those organizations as well.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Roots, what is the case in your community?

Mr. James Roots: The partnerships we've had for employment were part of the national job strategies. It's really a three-way partnership: the federal government, us, and a few employers.

There's one painting company that hired 10 people for us and kept them working. I believe there's a bank.... I had better not say or try to remember which one it was; I don't want to offend any bankers. There was a bank that we had a placement with.

But for the most part there's a very great resistance out there. They say, if we're going to train this person, we have to hire an interpreter 24 hours a day; we have to provide all the visible smoke alarms. That's not the problem, but there's such a resistance anyway.

Mr. Phil McColeman: To extend the question I just asked, do you foresee...? There's a recent panel, which the government put together, in the general category of persons with disabilities. I don't know whether you've read it, but *Rethinking DisAbility in the Private Sector* is the title of its report. It talks about champions within the private sector; it talks about companies that are ready to take on this challenge.

Do you see potential here, or is that just an unrealistic expectation? What's your view?

Mr. Cudmore.

The Chair: Mr. McColeman, your time is up. We'll let Mr. Cudmore answer, and Mr. Roots if he wishes.

Go ahead.

Mr. Paul Cudmore: It depends on the corporation and the culture of the corporation. To tell you the truth, it depends on, say, whether a person in charge knows someone with a disability or has someone with a disability in his family and understands the disability a bit. Then that person can change the culture of the organization. If it's left up to goodwill, it just won't happen.

Mr. Robert White: I'd just add that the project we're presenting here today, that we're calling the Discovering the Power in Me program.... Basically we have a bank that's interested in the project, interested in investing in it and bringing it forward. They like the concept. The idea is that we're working on this through the social bond concept to develop some type of partnership between us, this organization, and the federal government in order to deliver on that program.

I think there is an opportunity there. As to the extent that they want to engage, I don't know, but there is a willingness.

● (1140)

Mr. James Roots: My concern is that this is a government program; it's top down. As our example has proven, those who need the power and resources, those who need to manage the project, are the disabled people themselves—not government people, not bureaucracy. To put it crudely, give us the money, good-bye, we will spend it, we'll make all the jobs and report back to you. That's the way it works.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Roots.

We'll now move to Mr. Sullivan.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Yes, although my name card here reads “Ryan Cleary”. I just noticed that—

The Chair: I see that. I thought there was a substantive change—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mike Sullivan: I'm not from Newfoundland.

To start with, my question is for all of you. The nature of work in Canada and in the world has changed in the past 15 to 30 years. Many jobs are now contract jobs, short-term, and cyclical, and we have not changed our income support structures to match those jobs.

This will affect persons with disabilities and persons of a different linguistic group more dramatically than it will others. For example, the EI structure, the Canada Pension Plan structure, old age security, which is now two years later for persons with disabilities, and the provincial disability programs don't talk to one another, and they are not conducive to supporting persons with disabilities. What would you do to change that?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Cudmore, if you're going to comment. You and then Mr. Roots can comment.

Mr. James Roots: You're very provocative.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Cudmore.

Mr. Paul Cudmore: Especially with contract work, it's very limiting for a person with a disability. If you have a base income support that you're surviving on, and you can go back to work but it's a contract position, you're not sure what's going to happen after that. It's a disincentive to take that job.

A lot of the time, if you leave, especially if you have an insurance program, it's hard to get back to the income level you were at before. With a contract, maybe you're not provided with insurance within that company to provide for your medical needs. Then you're not getting all the benefits you would need as well to support your disability. It's really a disincentive for you to go to work.

It's true that the programs have to change so that they encourage people to get out and work and then accept you back in if that position fails. You need a safety net there in order for people to pursue employment.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Roots.

Mr. James Roots: I don't think we're likely to ever go back to the kind of employment situation we had in the past, when we had long-term, permanent jobs for life. But this is one more reason why people are moving more and more toward self-employment: they can control their own fate that way.

I can tell you that if you ever go to the Internet and google something like “deaf videos”, you will be absolutely stunned at the sheer volume of videos being made out there by deaf people, because we can see with signing now, and we don't have to rely on people talking. We can see and we can communicate with each other. There are millions out there, and, really, the potential for growth there is just amazing. If you can get sponsors or corporate sponsors involved in these things, they'd realize what's going on out there. Some 65 million people around the world are deaf, and they're all on the Internet. They're all searching for deaf videos.

● (1145)

Mr. Mike Sullivan: My next question is specifically for Mr. Roots.

The government indicates so far that a large part of their view of the problem is that it's an issue of education for employers and that enlightened employers will in fact hire people.

I'm aware of an employer who I dealt with for many years in eastern Ontario who employed a significant number of deaf people. I think it was in the order of 20 people in a workforce of about 70 or 80. Those people worked at the very bottom of the financial ladder in that workplace, though, and made very little money. When the enlightened employer was relocated, the next manager didn't have the same kind of loyalty. He discovered that he could find workers to do the work cheaper. He outsourced the work and all those deaf people lost their jobs.

Is merely enlightening employers enough to counteract the corporate greed that goes on in this country?

The Chair: We'll conclude with that answer and commentary.

Mr. James Roots: I'm not clear on what the question is.

The Chair: Did you want to restate it?

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Yes. Is merely enlightening employers enough or is more needed?

Mr. James Roots: Well, we've had employment equity legislation for, what, 30 or 35 years now? What kind of a dent has it really made? Not much.

Coercion doesn't work. Volunteerism doesn't work; we know that.

I really don't have a simple answer to that. What we've tried up to now has not worked.

It's interesting that you mentioned that company in eastern Ontario, because Boeing, in Winnipeg, for many, many decades was a fantastic employer for deaf people. They hired many, many deaf people to work in their noisier areas, and they did a great job.

But when Boeing started cutting down, who was the first to go? I don't know how many deaf people were thrown out of work over the past two years when Boeing downsized, but there were over 20, I know that. They are an enlightened employer, and yet it didn't stop them from cutting deaf people first.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We will now move to Mr. Mayes.

Go ahead.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I know we're talking about employment opportunities and seeing how we can assist in making those opportunities more available in the Canadian economy, but one of the issues we've dealt with at this committee, in looking at skills training, is preparing young people to get the skills training.

I'm wondering if your organizations reach out to younger people with disabilities to give them ideas of the opportunities there might be, so that they can be looking at some sort of training where they could enter the workforce with their disability. Are there any programs that support that assistance?

Mr. Cudmore, perhaps you can answer that first, and then Mr. Roots.

Mr. Paul Cudmore: That would be a great project for us to do, and to make a funding application for to the federal government.

We do work closely with the transition coordinator who works with high schools and into university and post-secondary education. She deals with all people with disabilities. She has transition meetings, and she has member groups from all of our organizations come in.

If we're dealing with someone with a mobility issue, or with autism or whatever the case may be, we'll be there to let the person know what opportunities are available for them in the community and what training there is. But it's not an official skills program, and there's a real need for that. I think it's a need for employers too. They could have somebody, an ombuds-type person, go out and actually do the awareness training.

Some people call it sensitivity training, but I couldn't care less if you're sensitive; I'd just like you to be aware of disability and of what people can do in your organization. There really needs to be that, because it would answer a lot of questions about how to really take corporations and make them sensitive or make them aware of the abilities that people with disabilities have.

You actually do need to have somebody go out and physically do that.

● (1150)

Mr. Colin Mayes: Mr. Roots.

Mr. James Roots: We have very strong ties with youth groups across Canada. There's Deaf Youth Canada, and a deaf and hard of hearing association in the Atlantic area. Their executive director is on our board of directors. We collaborate with Deaf Youth Canada on what we call the Deaf Canada Conference and the Canadian Deaf Youth Leadership Camp every two years.

I can tell you that this generation of young deaf people is angry. This generation is very, very, angry. They basically feel alienated completely from society, because society has done nothing for them and is offering nothing to them now. Their education has been terrible. They have no employment prospects in society. They're very angry.

What they are doing now is they are building their own lives apart from society, and that includes setting up their own employment, finding their own jobs or whatever, mostly on the Internet. I have to say again that it's mostly Internet-based employment that they're doing now. A few of them have actually created their own online news channel. Everything comes out in sign language. All the daily happenings out there are in sign language so that everybody around the world who's deaf can understand what's going on. They came up with that themselves, and it's fantastic. They got sponsors for it, and it's good sponsorship, too.

That basically goes back to what I said in my presentation, that self-employment is almost the only viable prospect for most deaf people nowadays.

Mr. Colin Mayes: I don't think anyone here can truly appreciate, Mr. Roots, the challenges that not hearing has in a society in which we have a lot of noise.

I'm really interested in the technology today. I've watched workers on a work site have coffee breaks, and instead of talking to each other, they've been texting. They were sitting five feet from one another. Does technology really provide some opportunities, such as employing people with one language, the value of which employers need to really appreciate?

Mr. James Roots: We live with this stuff. We live with our BlackBerrys or iPods. We do. We were the first to see the potential of these mobile devices. I can remember I went to the World Congress of the Deaf in Australia in 1997. We were all laughing in the airport, because you could always tell who the deaf people were going to that congress. They were all buzzing around like that. People were walking by and looking at us, because at that time most hearing people didn't have a device yet; they were walking by and looking at people. You arrive at an airport, you get off the plane, and you say, “Oh, there's a deaf person”, and you go up and meet them.

I think I've lost the thread here. I'm sorry if I've gone off on a tangent.

The Chair: Thank you for that comment and illustration. Mr. Mayes is now done with his time.

We'll move to Mr. Cuzner. Go ahead.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank our guests for being here today.

We've heard that there is a perception that has to be dealt with, but there are also physical barriers and technological barriers. I think there have been advances made in accommodation through technology.

I worked at a fish plant one summer. There was a gentleman who had had an accident and had come back to work. He had worked at the fish plant before he had the accident. On the processing line everybody stood up. They actually got him a stool. He was able to sit down and do his work. He was better than anybody else at the work, so the technological advance was to give him something to sit on.

Are there opportunities for employers through grants and so on to address some of the technological barriers or the physical barriers and to make those accommodations? Are those opportunities there for employers?

● (1155)

Mr. Robert White: I can give you an example that I had last week. I was in Newfoundland, and I met with this employer who became one of our corporate partners. He has 100 fried chicken restaurants in Canada. He just did renovations for 15 of those restaurants to make them completely accessible, not only for people to come in and eat, but also for people who would want to come in and be one of his cooks, servers, or employees in any part of that operation. That's 15 out of the 100.

One of the things I told him was that there are programs through the federal government that can help him move on to maybe making his other facilities more accessible. His reply was that he didn't need the red tape and that he would just do it on his own. He left it at that, and I didn't push any further. That's a prime example that I had from an employer in Canada who has 100 restaurants right across the country.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Just to push that a little further, is that a common response you would get from an employer, that there is a considerable amount of red tape in accessing these programs?

Mr. Robert White: If I may say so, I think we get that red tape as well whenever we apply for grants. We're actually into that process right now. There's a lot of red tape, and it's very time-consuming. We have very small budgets and very small groups of staff, so we have to dedicate a lot of our time to filling out all this red tape stuff. So I think it is.

Mr. Paul Cudmore: As you just pointed out, for someone with a bad back or whatever—I can't remember how your story started—to fix their disability it took a stool. A lot of times, for $500 a business can make their place accessible for someone with a disability. But that's in a good place.

I want to challenge you guys on something. I came up here last May, when we were here for meetings. One of my beautiful stepdaughters lives in Ottawa, and my wife and I decided we were going to take her out for dinner. We went down to the Market, and I was shocked. If you guys walked down to the Market, you'd see that at least half, or 80%, of the restaurants down there are not accessible. You need to go up one or two steps to get into them.

I was in shock because we were in Ottawa, and there was a lack of accessibility in the Market, a place that draws people in. I was just stunned.

If you go to Vancouver, you will see that everywhere it's accessible, every restaurant. A friend and I went out there last year. He's a chef who teaches at the culinary...and he wanted to check out restaurants. He stopped asking after the first night if their restaurants were accessible or not, because they all were.

So a lot of it, in terms of whether your community is accessible or not, has to do with the attitude and the culture in your community. It's not whether there are grants or something out there, but it's the attitude and the culture of the community.

If you want to make Ottawa accessible, you have to change the attitude and the culture of the community. Everybody in the Market has to buy in when it comes to making the Market 100% accessible to everybody who lives here. That's what they did in Vancouver. Everything is 100% accessible for everybody who lives in the community.

It's all about the attitude of the municipality and of the governments in the community.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Did you want to comment, Mr. Roots?

Mr. James Roots: There are service agencies who meet up with employers or whoever to explain to them how, if they hire deaf people, they can do this, this, and this. But I prefer to tell employers to come and visit my office.

The employer arrives at the door and they knock. Nothing. Then they see a sign that says, “If there's no answer to your knock, flip the white light switch at the side.” The light goes on and off inside the office to alert me that somebody is at the door. I go out and open the door: “Oh, come on in.”

We have a softwood floor, and when someone bangs on it, I can feel the vibration. I'll say to the employer, “Just a moment, please, someone wants to talk to me.” They wonder about this, because no one has said a word: “How does he know that somebody wants to talk to him?” I feel the banging. That's why.

Then the employer and I are ready to sit down: “Here—I have a laptop ready for you to type out your responses to me. We're connected. What you type on your screen pops up on my laptop screen. We can go back and forth.”

Then they ask me how I even set up this meeting: “I did it on the phone.” When I tell them I called through the Internet Protocol Relay Service, they say, “Oh. You can do this.”

You're not going to be charged an arm and a leg for these things. Putting in a simple light switch outside my door costs you, what, $12? You could do it yourself if you were enough of an amateur electrician.

● (1200)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: You were doing okay up until “amateur electrician”.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'm not sure we'd want Rodger to do that.

In any event, your time is up.

We'd like to thank each of you, Mr. Roots, Mr. Cudmore, and Mr. White, for your invaluable contributions to our study. We appreciate your taking the time to be here and to share this with us.

I'd also like to thank the sign language interpreters for doing such a fine job. Thank you very much.

With that, we'll suspend for a few moments.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1210)

The Chair: We will bring the meeting back to order.

I would like to welcome everyone here.

We have Julie Flatt, interim national executive director, and Jean Beckett, president, with the National Network for Mental Health.

We also have Diane Bergeron, national director of government relations and advocacy, and Christine Robbins, government relations specialist, with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

Of course we welcome Lucie as well, who is here with you. She seems to be well behaved and rested there, I see.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): She looks like Colin Mayes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll leave that one alone. Thank you, Ms. Charlton.

We will start with a presentation from each organization, and then we'll have questions and answers from each side.

Ms. Beckett, go ahead.

Ms. Jean Beckett (President, National Network for Mental Health): Thank you.

The National Network for Mental Health would like to thank the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for the opportunity to speak on the issues that face the population we represent, and that is the population of people with lived experience of mental illness and/or psychiatric disabilities.

The National Network for Mental Health is a unique national organization that has a grassroots history and approach. It is the only non-diagnostic mental health consumer-driven organization that is national in scope and service in Canada.

Those who live with a mental illness face the highest degree of stigmatization in the workplace and the greatest barriers to employment. There are many employment obstacles facing adults with psychiatric disabilities, including: gaps in work history; limited employment experience; lack of confidence; fear and anxiety; workplace discrimination and inflexibility; social stigma; and the rigidity of existing income support and benefits programs.

One of the biggest challenges we face is that many of the mental illnesses that exist start when you're a teenager, and many people end up at their most ill during the years when they should be in school. Their education gets interrupted, and that has a great impact on the rest of their lives.

The unemployment rate for persons with serious mental illness reflects these obstacles and has commonly been reported to range from 70% to 90%, depending on the severity of the mental health issues. These statistics are very damaging, given the fact that productive work has been identified as a leading component in promoting positive mental health and in paving the way for a rich and fulfilling life in the community. Indeed, it's very difficult to be mentally well without it.

The benefits of employment for people with psychiatric disabilities are huge: it has been shown to be a source of identity beyond the illness and an opportunity to speak out and meet new challenges. The ability to work offers hope for and realization of the goal of social inclusion and participation in mainstream life.

Work can validate and enable the development of self-esteem and a sense of self-worth. Many people with psychiatric disabilities who have experienced the stigma and marginalization that are damaging to their self-esteem have connected the rebuilding of the self to work. Research has shown that, like others, most people with psychiatric disabilities want to work.

Literature illustrates the enormity of the problem of stigma and discrimination around psychiatric disabilities. Stigma and discrimination result in the avoidance of seeking health care by those who may need it and prevent the sharing of concerns with family, friends, co-workers, employers, health providers, and others in the community. People with psychiatric disabilities suffer greater stigmatization in the workplace than those with other disabilities and are more likely to experience long-term disability and underemployment.

Mental illness is a collection of disorders, including depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety. The symptoms can range from a loss of motivation and energy, changed sleep patterns, extreme mood swings, disturbances in thoughts or perception, or overwhelming obsessions or fears. Mental illness is not developmental disability, it is not autism, and it is not many of the other disabilities that we are lumped in with and that people assume we fit with. We are not that.

Types of mental illness include bipolar disorder, which is a mood disorder that causes people to feel intense, prolonged emotions that negatively affect their mental health and well-being, physical health, relationships, and behaviour. In addition to feelings of depression, someone with bipolar disorder also has episodes of mania. These symptoms may include: extreme optimism; euphoria; feelings of grandeur; rapid, racing thoughts and hyperactivity; and a decreased need for sleep and increased irritability.

Depression is a major depressive disorder that is not the same as “the blues”. We all experience the blues and sadness at times in our lives. You lose someone you love or a negative change happens in your life. That can be depressing. Depression as an illness is totally different. You can be having the best time of your life and still be depressed. Depression as an illness is depression at a time when you should not be depressed.

● (1215)

Schizophrenia has also been identified as a biochemical brain disorder that can affect a person's ability to determine what is real and what is not. People with schizophrenia can be affected by delusions or hallucinations and social withdrawal. Most people, when they think of mental illnesses, think of what you see in the media. They think it's schizophrenia; they think it's split personality, but in fact schizophrenia is a split from reality.

Then there are phobias and panic disorders that can cause psychiatric disabilities known as anxiety disorders. These are among the most common types of mental health problems, affecting one in every ten Canadians. In spite of this, anxiety disorders are not well understood, and those of us who experience these conditions are often regarded as weak, self-indulgent, or undisciplined. We're told to just get over it.

Is it possible to recover from mental illness? It certainly is. People can and do recover. Recovery is a very individual issue. A person with a psychiatric disability, and indeed every person, needs a feeling of belonging, a sense of hope and empowerment, and connections with others to recover from mental illness or a psychiatric disability.

In the consumer movement of people with disabilities, we have a saying: “a job, a home, and a friend”. Everybody needs a safe place to live. Your home is where you go to be safe from the world, and everybody needs one. We also need a job, a paying job preferably, but if not, people benefit even.... You need a purpose to get up in the morning. Everybody needs a reason to get up in the morning and something to do. That's where our job comes in. When we speak of a friend, we are talking about peer support. We talk often about family of choice rather than biological family, because often when a mental illness affects someone it damages the family relationships, and quite often people are separated from their families. So we develop families of choice, people we trust who support us and we support them.

According to the Center for Reintegration, in its article on mental Illness and the workplace, there is a growing awareness that a disability is not so much an impairment as it is a product of the environment in which a person lives. I think Mr. Roots would agree with that.

While the treatments of holistic and alternative methods of recovery have advanced, much of society's thinking about psychiatric disabilities has not changed. There are many myths. First, people think mental illness is the same as a developmental disability, or an autism. A developmental disability is an impairment in the person's ability to learn, or in their intellect. Mental health issues are about thinking, not about understanding. Autism is not a mental illness; it is a learning disability.

The second myth is that recovery from mental illness is impossible. But while these illnesses can be persistent, research has shown that with treatment and the proper community supports, the majority of people can achieve genuine improvement in their symptoms over time and lead stable, productive lives, as long as they have “a job, a home and a friend”.

Myth number three is that mentally ill and mentally restored employees, i.e., those whose mental illness is effectively treated, tend to be second-rate workers. This is far from being true. Far from being inferior workers, individuals with mental illnesses may in fact be superior in many ways to their co-workers without mental illness. Employers who have hired these individuals report that their attendance and punctuality exceed the norm; their motivation, work quality, and job tenure is as good as, or better than, that of other employees.

Myth number four is that people with psychotic disabilities cannot tolerate stress on the job. That's not true any more than it is true for the average individual. Stress on the job is a problem for everybody, and it's not a greater problem if you have a mental health issue. If you have a mental health issue, yes, stress can be a bigger problem, but that's why we get treatment, so that we can deal with it at the same level as the average person. But we do need to educate employers that our workplaces are too stressful for anybody, not just for someone with an illness, and in fact workplaces have caused many mental illnesses. We're very aware of the workplace shootings, people who shoot up the place. That generally stems from too much stress and problems in the workplace that have nothing to do with disability.

● (1220)

Myth number five is that mentally ill and mentally restored individuals are unpredictable, potentially violent, and dangerous. Again, this goes back to the media portrayals of people with mental illnesses as frequently and randomly violent. A research literature review conducted at Cornell University found absolutely no evidence to support such portrayals. The fact is the vast majority of individuals with psychiatric disabilities are neither dangerous nor violent, and they are more likely to be victims than perpetrators.

A stakeholders' engagement on employment barriers for Canadians with disabilities was organized by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's Office for Disability Issues on February 8, 2012. The objective of the meeting was to bring national disability stakeholders together to discuss the challenges and barriers. The meeting was part of HRSDC's ongoing engagement with Canadians with disabilities.

Long-term stable funding is probably our biggest need. This would allow us to better establish relationships with partners such as employers and to provide the long-term support that people with disabilities with more complex needs require to obtain and keep employment.

There are employment models that work out there, or there have been. An article from the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health reports that every one of us has his or her distinct background that makes us unique, with varying abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Canadian laws and customs celebrate these differences. Sometimes these invisible differences affect a person's ability to do a job or to interact with people, and mental health issues are one of those invisible disabilities. The Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health revealed that employees believe the workplace is where they are least likely to get support, so 64% of employees with mental health problems keep their conditions secret from their employers. Think about that. How do you do that when you have to see the psychiatrist every Tuesday and every Thursday you have to see your therapist, and on Fridays you get a little overwhelmed in the morning if you don't have an extra 15-minute break? How do you keep it a secret from your employer without it impacting your work?

Statistics show that approximately one in five Canadians will be affected by a mental health issue in their lifetime, which means that almost every Canadian will be touched by it, either themselves or through someone they know. So let's do the count-off. One, two, three, four, five—statistically, three of you are afraid to speak up about your mental illness. We won't ask you to—

● (1225)

The Chair: You're well past your time, Ms. Beckett, do if you could bring your remarks to s conclusion, that would be good.

Ms. Jean Beckett: Okay.

In the past, employment models have worked very well for the mentally ill and are very fiscally responsible, and as Mr. Roots says, they give the bang for your buck. A huge burden is created by the mental health issues in this country when people are not able to work. If we can have employment models that work, then we can reduce that burden. The National Network for Mental Health used to have such a project called BUILT, Building Up Individuals through Learning and Teamwork, whereby we offered job readiness training for people and job coaching so that people could get jobs and maintain them.

The Routes to Work program was a project of the Canadian Mental Health Association's national office. It also assisted people to find jobs and to keep them.

There have been others, but I want to bring your attention to one thing in particular. *Out of the Shadows At Last* was a report done by a Senate committee that led to the creation of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, and that report had some recommendations. Among them, first, was that the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, through the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, facilitate the establishment of a nationwide supported employment program to assist persons living with a mental illness to obtain and retain employment. Second was that this program promote the development of and provide support for alternative businesses that are both owned and operated by people living with mental illnesses. Third, the report recommended that the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development report on how many people living with mental illnesses are successfully assisted through the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities.

Unfortunately, these recommendations have not been followed, and some of the programs have been de-funded.

Thank you.

The Chair: Your time is up. Thank you very much.

We'll now move to Ms. Bergeron.

Ms. Diane Bergeron (National Director, Government Relations and Advocacy, Canadian National Institute for the Blind): Thank you very much.

I want to start by thanking you all for having us come in to make a presentation to you today and by explaining how I'm going to make my presentation.

I have my speaking notes on my computer, and I have an earphone in, so my computer is going to be talking to me while I talk to you. It's a skill set that some of us have to develop, given the fact that our ability to read print is not readily available.

Thank you again for inviting me and Ms. Christine Robbins from CNIB to come and present to you today.

The most recent PAL study indicates that only 35% of working-age Canadians who are blind or partially sighted are employed, compared to 56% of working-age Canadians with disabilities as a whole.

CNIB's 2007 “The cost of vision loss” report found this low employment rate costs the Canadian government approximately $886 million a year in social transfer payments, forgone tax revenue, and reduced productivity.

Although the graduation rate of people who are blind and partially sighted is comparable to that of the general population—19.9% compared to 23%—educational attainment for blind and partially sighted job seekers does not transfer easily into employment. CNIB's unequal playing field studies found that of blind or partially sighted clients who had graduated with university degrees or higher, 49% were unemployed or underemployed.

There are three main barriers to academic and employment success for Canadians who are blind or partially sighted.

One is access to pre-employment skills training and career exploration. The second is access to adaptive technologies and accessible information in the workplace. The third is the lack of awareness among employers of the workplace capabilities of Canadians who are blind or partially sighted.

Pre-employment skills may include orientation and mobility skills to navigate various environments independently. These include white cane training and the ability and understanding of how to use other senses to get around. There are organizational skills and communication skills—these are the soft skills employers are seeking in their employees when they are seeking the best fit for the position in their organization—as well as career exploration opportunities and adaptive technology training.

Access to adaptive technology and alternate format materials is key to access in the workplace. Currently there is very little support for employers and potential employees to access the adaptive technology for their accommodation needs in the workplace, i.e. screen readers and screen magnification software for computers.

In previous studies looking at employment barriers for people with visual impairment, employers have identified two major challenges. First was their lack of understanding and knowledge of the workplace capabilities of people who are blind or partially sighted. Employers often lack the tools and resources to properly evaluate how a job candidate who is blind or partially sighted can perform the hard and soft skills the position requires.

Second, employers have limited resources and time to investigate the workplace capabilities of people with visual impairments. This is especially true of small and medium-sized businesses. As the panel on labour market outcomes for people with disabilities stated, more training and education are needed to help overcome hesitation and to dispel myths employers may have regarding workplace capabilities of Canadians who are blind or partially sighted.

While education and awareness are important, employers need the opportunity to work with people who are blind or partially sighted. This may be the most effective way for employers to overcome any hesitations they may have in hiring a person who is blind or partially sighted.

Studies in the U.S. have shown that employers who have hired people with disabilities for an internship are 70% more likely to hire a person with a disability into a permanent position.

● (1230)

CNIB recommends that the federal government implement the following targeted initiatives for persons with disabilities through the Opportunities Fund and the labour market agreements: internship programs for Canadians who are partially blind and partially sighted in the private and public sector, and as part of this initiative, CNIB also recommends that an adaptive technology bank be created for employers providing internships to blind and partially sighted Canadians in order to ease the transition into the workplace; and pre-employment skills programs specifically tailored to Canadians who are blind or partially sighted, and such programs would include organization and communication skills training, orientation and mobility training, and adaptive technology training.

Thank you for having us here today.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation and for being able to use the technology in an interesting way to be able to present in the fashion that you did.

We'll start our first round with Madame Boutin-Sweet.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you ladies for being with us. Earlier we had only men, and now, we have only women.

We learned that the number of people with disabilities who had started receiving social assistance went up 38%. That appears to be the usual pattern after the age of 19. Education is important, but when people have trouble entering the workforce, it calls for more than just education.

Ms. Bergeron, you've already commented on this, and I'd like to know what the others think.

How can the federal government support the transition from school to the job market?

Yes, Ms. Beckett?

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Beckett: Yes, as I mentioned earlier, it's very difficult sometimes when people develop mental illness during their teens. It definitely interrupts education. They start to get better and are told they need something to do, so they end up volunteering instead of getting a paid job.

I've been volunteering now for 30 years. I need to be paid, as do people with mental health issues. We need paying jobs, and we need technologies as well. When people's education is interrupted, they not only miss the education piece, but they miss a lot of that experiential stuff that students go through. They become isolated and no longer part of the group. Anybody who wasn't popular in high school knows what I mean by that.

What we need to do is huge public education; yes, we need to deal with that. We need to address youth issues if we're going to deal with mental health issues, because they quite often strike in youth.

We also need to help people be connected with technology. Many people with mental health issues end up very isolated because they're living on income security programs that don't properly fund them. They end up living in a dump or on the streets, or they end up living in a house that you wouldn't wish upon your worst enemy, or they end up moving up north, where I am, and they live in hunt camps; they live in the bush and they live in substandard housing. That enables them to have a roof over their head, but it creates problems in and of itself, because there's no transportation when they live out in the bush, so they're really isolated.

People need connectivity. There are lots of programs in which we, as grassroots organizations, give refurbished computers to people, but they can't afford the Internet access, or the phone, or the BlackBerry. If we had programs that helped provide those things for people, they could further their education, they could volunteer, they could work.

What if every municipality in Canada put in $100 a year? How many municipalities are there?

● (1235)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Ms. Beckett, we hear from a great many witnesses, and we've realized that disabilities run the spectrum. Witnesses have suggested that the federal government work with community agencies in order to better identify the needs that exist.

I'll give you an example of a completely different program, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. Under that program, local communities work with the government. They are familiar with the local realities.

Could that kind of cooperative approach help people with disabilities?

[*English*]

Ms. Jean Beckett: It certainly would help, but it's no good without the consumer involvement. You really need to talk to the people. You need local participation.

As a national network, we have tried to network people across Canada so that they're able to have a voice. Unfortunately, as things go, as funding erodes and erodes, we have less ability to do that. The technology could help us, if we had the technology. It's very easy. We came here because we got an e-mail. If we can connect people, then things will work, but you have to do that locally, regionally, and nationally.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Both cases present specific needs. Episodic mental health issues come to mind, for example. There are specific needs in those cases as well.

How can the federal government know what those specific needs are if it does not communicate with groups on the ground?

Do you think partnerships with groups doing the work on the ground, who know the reality, could prove useful?

Ms. Bergeron, Ms. Flatt or Ms. Robbins, would you care to comment?

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Boutin-Sweet, your time is up.

I think Ms. Bergeron has a comment. Then we will move to Ms. Beckett or Ms. Flatt.

Go ahead, Ms. Bergeron.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I think it's really important to work at the grassroots level with the organizations that provide service to people with disabilities, regardless of what the disability is. It's the people on the ground who understand best what services they need. It's the people who are providing services who understand how they can provide the service to those individuals. Absolutely, working right in the community and in partnerships with the community is the best way to go.

● (1240)

The Chair: Ms. Flatt.

Ms. Julie Flatt (Interim National Executive Director, National Network for Mental Health): I would reiterate what Diane just said. That is part of our organization. We're trying to reignite our grassroots and develop the membership again so that we can get the interconnection with communities going to the national level. Then the national level comes to you. But we're speaking with one voice because we're all consumers. We very much want to get back to the grassroots, with the members telling us what their needs are in the communities, and us giving the information to you or whoever needs it.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Does anyone else wish to comment?

I thought I heard Madame Boutin-Sweet say she liked the homelessness partnering strategy because of the local community interaction at the grassroots level. I did, so that's good.

We'll now move to Mr. Daniel.

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the witnesses for being here.

My questions are going to be mainly directed to the CNIB folks. One of the things that's not clear to me is what sorts of jobs the people who are blind or severely visually handicapped are getting. You said 30% are being employed. What sorts of jobs do they have?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I don't have exact stats. What I can say is that the majority of the people I know work in situations where computer technology is important. The majority, as far as I can tell, would be around office work and working within organizations. It doesn't stop people. The technology now is so amazing. People with disabilities are doing so many things. I know in the United States there's a medical doctor who is visually impaired. We have two partially sighted researchers in Canada working in research for cancer. There's really no limit to what someone with a visual disability can do if the technology is there to help.

Mr. Joe Daniel: The CNIB has been involved with the World Blind Union in creating Project Aspiro. It's a career planning and employment website for people who are blind or partially sighted.

Can you tell us a bit more about this project? When did the CNIB launch this website? How many people may have actually visited the website?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Project Aspiro was jointly funded between, I believe it was, the Ontario government, CNIB, the World Blind Union, and one other partner that I cannot remember off the top of my head.

It's a website that employers and employees who are blind or partially sighted can go to for information about what employees may need if they have vision loss. It's also for employees to understand what they can do to make themselves more employable and give them more skill sets. It's an online resource that provides education and awareness to both employers and employees. I don't have the stats on how many people have visited it, but I can get that for you.

Mr. Joe Daniel: How many blind or partially blind individuals do you think will find employment through this assistance program of your website?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I would like to believe that 100% who are looking for work will find employment, but I don't know because I'm not really sure how many individuals have gone on it. The key to any educational or awareness website is that people need to go there to find out the information.

We are promoting the website, but it was only launched last October, I believe. Like anything, it takes time for that information to get out into the community and for people to get out and use it as a resource.

I can't help but think that anybody going on there will learn something that will hopefully translate into jobs.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Does the website provide information, for example, on tools and resources that employers need to have to be able to confidently hire people who are blind or partially sighted?

● (1245)

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Yes, there is a link there for employers, and it talks about adaptive equipment, accommodation needs. It does some sensitivity training and it provides resources for employers to be able to go on and see different ways to accommodate people with different types of vision loss.

Mr. Joe Daniel: One of the things we've heard about many programs, including some of the apprenticeship work we did earlier, is the importance of mentorship. Presumably, mentorship is also good for folks with impaired visual issues. Do you have a mentorship program where you can actually help people who are already in a job, or help people who are not?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: We don't have a formal mentorship program, but within the CNIB itself—and we hire people with vision loss—we do help support each other, and also out in the community on an informal basis. We're starting to put together a youth council for CNIB. There are already a couple started in some of our divisions. We're trying to work that out across the country. Part of that youth council is looking at mentorship within board structures and so on. That's providing our youth with mentorship to learn some of the soft skills that are necessary. But at this point, that's all I know of that we have.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move to Ms. Charlton. Go ahead.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thank you very much.

Thanks to all of you for being here today. I really appreciate your presentations. I think even for people who don't believe that a diverse society necessarily strengthens our community, who have a rational self-interest, ought to be taking an interest in these issues, because any one of us could be disabled at a moment's notice.

I want to explore that thought a little bit. Although we don't get very solid data anymore, particularly since the suppression of the PALS, do you have a sense of whether it's easier for folks who become disabled while they're already working, whether accommodation is more readily made?

When I think about people in industrial plants, for example, who end up being injured on the job, if they have an active union, accommodation is more likely than not made for those individuals, and they're able to continue to participate in the workplace, whereas employers are much more reluctant to make those accommodations at the front end. But that's purely impressionistic, and I'd be interested in your thoughts.

Ms. Jean Beckett: For people with mental health issues, that isn't always the case. I do a lot of volunteer work, as I mentioned, and I sit on boards of directors. I have been on boards of directors where I've seen bylaws that state that you must be of sound mind to be on that board, so people look at me funny if I mention a mental health issue. This is the challenge we face. I think you're right that it's easier once you're in the job, but I think that depends on the job as well. Unfortunately, for a lot of people with disabilities, the jobs we get are front-line, menial jobs, where you're just a pair of arms and legs, and if you develop a problem you're out the door and somebody else will take your place.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thanks.

I think to some extent that speaks to the other part of my question, and perhaps I'll turn it over to Ms. Bergeron. From your experience, is it easier for people who work in a unionized environment to be accommodated than it is for folks who, as Ms. Beckett just said, are first in, first out in relatively menial jobs?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I don't have any statistics on that, so I can only speak from personal experience and knowledge from my own personal work.

I have been in both unionized and non-unionized environments. I have been in a unionized environment as a manager, so I didn't have the union to back me up. In the unionized environment I had a group of people who were supporting me, to whom I could go to if I had a problem, and they would fight the battle for me. In a non-unionized place and as a manager, I was on my own. The difference is not so much whether it's better to be part of a union; what it comes down to is having the networks and the people around you to fight with you.

When I was in my management position and had an issue, although I didn't have the union and I was on my own, I had a lot of people who surrounded me who were also managers and who fought the battle with me. It's probably easier if you're in unionized work because they are organized around it, whereas if it's non-unionized, you have to build that network; you have to build that understanding.

With regard to the previous question you asked, about whether there is more support if one gets the disability after employment or coming into a workplace as a person with a disability, as in my case, specifically with vision loss, people don't understand. If I go in and say I need to use the computer, they look at their own world and say that they look at the screen all day, so how is that person going to be able to use a computer effectively? How are they going to get around? Is there going to be a problem with the dog? Is the dog going to damage things in the office? There are all sorts of questions they have, and it's too much for them to think they can solve all those problems, so they go to the next person.

If you're in the job and you suddenly have a disability, you've already established your credibility. You've already established that you have knowledge, expertise, and competency in the area. I think the employer is more willing to provide that accommodation and support. The barrier there is that the person, before getting back into the workplace to accept all that support and accommodation, now needs to be supported in that pre-employment because it's like going back to the beginning. They now need to learn new skills and new technologies in order to get in and do the job differently.

● (1250)

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thank you.

The Chair: Your time is up, but if anybody else wishes to make a remark—

Ms. Chris Charlton: Can I just make a 30-second comment—or less?

The Chair: You have a 30-second comment, and then the response by Ms. Flatt.

Go ahead.

Ms. Chris Charlton: I just want to say, Ms. Bergeron, you are absolutely right. What happens when somebody has already been in the workplace is that employers actually see the person as opposed to the disability, whereas for people who are trying to get into the workplace for the first time, perhaps employers see the disability instead of the person.

Thank you.

The Chair: That's a fair point.

Go ahead, Ms. Flatt.

Ms. Julie Flatt: I'll try to make it quick.

For our population dealing with mental health issues, it's more difficult to get into the workplace or get back into the workplace after an illness because of the stigma attached. As soon as they hear that somebody's had mental health difficulties, they may go to the media and what the media says about violence, and that sort of thing. The stigma is so great that it's hard to return to the same workplace, even if you can. I've heard of lots of instances where people who returned were not around long. It is very difficult.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Ms. Leitch, go ahead.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much for taking the time to speak to us today. It is greatly appreciated.

I have a health care background myself, albeit I'm a pediatric orthopedic surgeon, so I've had a number of patients who have had associated issues, whether on the mental health side, or lacking a faculty, or sight, or they may have been deaf or other things like that.

The one thing that I've encountered among the young people with whom I've worked in the past with respect to employment are those first steps. What are those first things they should be doing or they should be asking their employer as they try to enter the workplace? It is a huge first step. For the children from my practice who have cerebral palsy, many of them are full-time wheelchair users. They don't even know what to ask.

I want to get your perspective on those first steps, those first questions they should be asking and the things we should be focusing on initially, so that they get their foot in the door, because it is even more challenging for them frequently than it is for able-bodied young students who are looking for their first jobs, and even they sometimes have anxiety about taking those first steps.

What are your thoughts? As a young person entering the workplace, what are those first questions they should be asking, and what should their first expectations of employers be so that we can better educate employers about these young people?

Ms. Jean Beckett: The programs I mentioned earlier, Routes to Work and Building Up Individuals Through Learning and Teamwork, were programs that addressed those kinds of things. If you have had mental health issues, it can damage your social skills. The medications we take can cause all kinds of side effects that make people kind of back up a little bit.

Through the BUILT network, we were helping people with these pre-employment skills so that they were coming in at least on an even playing field with other people who don't have the additional challenge of the mental health issues. These programs work very well. Unfortunately, many of them have been de-funded and no longer exist.

What we would like to see is some of these programs reinstated, but with a new flavour and utilizing technology so that people can learn to fit better before they even get there. In the past, we were told that if you want to get a job, you should volunteer. Well, I did, and I'm still volunteering. I'm a volunteer today. That is a valid suggestion, but we need to look very carefully at where they volunteer. Just volunteering in itself will not necessarily lead you to employment. You have to be very calculating and educated about where you volunteer and how you volunteer.

Grassroots programs are a huge benefit. We've been there. We've walked the walk. We know what employers are going to ask, and often all people need is more confidence. We can help them build that confidence if they do a pre-employment program with us.

● (1255)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Ms. Bergeron or Ms. Robbins, do you have any comment with respect to this?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: The pre-employment programs are essential. You can't get a job if you don't know how to cross the street safely or if you lack orientation and mobility skills. You can't get a job if you don't have independent living skills. If you don't know how to feed, dress, and take care of yourself, you're not going to get a job. If you don't have the communication and soft skills, you're not going to get the job.

It's really important for people, especially those who are blind or partially sighted, to learn all of the skill sets around adaptive technology, Braille instruction, and so on, because if you can't communicate through computers, you're not going to get the job.

The first thing I would suggest to anybody with vision loss is to go get your pre-employment skills taken care of. Practise them. Get them the best you can, and then once you've done that, I would say that you should volunteer. Get educated and network, network, network. It really doesn't matter who you know; it's who knows you. So get out there and make sure people know you.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Following on that, this may not be quick to answer, but it's a quick question to ask.

What do you think are the two primary things we should be educating employers about in order to facilitate their considering hiring individuals with a handicap or disability?

Ms. Julie Flatt: My response to that is something that the Mental Health Commission of Canada just told us. What they're telling employers now is, pay now or pay later. You have to have people with disabilities in the workplace. By 2030, mental health issues will be the leading cause of disability in Canada. We have to get employers onside to realize that they have to take people on. If they don't pay now to have that person accommodated, and given the needs they have, later it's going to be much more serious. They have to get on board in a way that sensitizes their own workplaces. They have to understand the fact that disability is on the rise and that it's an economic drawdown for the government in order to pay for all of this.

The Chair: Thank you.

A quick response, Ms. Bergeron.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Breaking down the myths of people with vision loss is really important for employers. People need to understand that just because someone can't see doesn't mean they're not first a person, capable and competent. They're just like other people. We just don't see the world in the same way as other people do.

I remember speaking to a minister out in Alberta, where I'm from. He said, “What do you think the issue is?” I said, “Well, you know, there are a lot of people who think accommodation costs a lot of money. They're quite concerned that taxpayers' dollars are going to be spent on accommodation.” I said, “Quite frankly, I'm a taxpayer, and I'm appalled at the amount of my hard-earned dollars that go to paying to keep the lights on all day to accommodate the retinal dependence of the world.”

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I think we have to look at it from a different perspective. We accommodate the majority of this population every day. I could save you a ton of money by turning off the lights.

● (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bergeron.

Rodger, could you take us—

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Take us home?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I'll make a couple of comments, but first off, I think I'll use that line—that one and the “It's not who you know, but who knows you”.

We're politicians who dine out on clichés and try to pass them off as insight, so...but it's not really stealing if I take two: that'll be market research.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: At any rate, they're both great comments.

I'd like to get back to “job, home, friend”. It's not a simple problem, because it's all interrelated. The aspect of affordable housing for persons with disabilities is critical. I'm sure that anybody who will address the committee here will reiterate that.

I want you to comment on this. Persons who live with mental health issues disproportionately represent Canadians living in poverty in this country. Disproportionately they represent those housed in jails across this country. If we don't do our utmost as a country and as a people to understand and accommodate, then the way the challenge is manifest is that we find people on the streets. We find them incarcerated. Inevitably the problem costs us far more.

Could I just get your comments on that? Diane and Christine might also want to comment.

Ms. Jean Beckett: You've hit me right where I was hoping you might.

There's something that many of you may be familiar with—the physician at the end probably is—and that's Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow was a social worker who identified what people need to live and to be happy and healthy. He set it up as a pyramid. The things we need the most are on the bottom. They're the basic foundation. The things we need the least are on the top. At the bottom two or three—I'm trying to picture it in my mind right now—are safety and security. If you don't feel safe and secure, you cannot be mentally well.

So you're right about the poverty. Unless we address poverty, people are just going to get sicker and sicker. As long as we live in poverty, that fights against mental health: it makes us ill. You're right that we need to address poverty and that we need to address housing issues.

One of the problems in housing issues for people with mental health issues, though, is that sometimes our symptoms are not very pleasant. Sometimes people are having a lot of symptoms, either of their illness or of their medications, and they might not be really good neighbours. We struggle with those issues all the time.

We need to address poverty to begin with, and you can't address poverty if you're...especially with the episodic things. I heard mention of episodic disabilities earlier. We call it “episodic employment”, because that's all you get. I just finished a contract. I worked 18 hours over 14 weeks. That was a contract I got—a paying contract. How can you live on that?

As well, you're constantly having to fight with your income security program, because if you made 3¢, they want to know about it. I don't know what it is in other programs in other provinces, but in Ontario, with ODSP, at any given time they reserve the right to call you up and say, “Be here tomorrow, and bring your paperwork. We want to look at it.”

That would put me in the hospital.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: They'll come visit you now and the federal government will come visit you now.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Chair, can I ask one last question?

The Chair: You can.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: This is off the topic completely, but I want to ask you, does *Silver Linings Playbook* do a service to persons living with mental health issues?

● (1305)

Ms. Julie Flatt: Bipolar?

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Yes.

Ms. Jean Beckett: I haven't seen it yet, but I've seen some clips. I also saw a talk show where they had the stars and the producer together. I'm very hopeful that it's very good. I think it is.

There are others that are very bad. There's a series out, which I saw not too long ago, called *Do No Harm*. It was about a physician who supposedly had a multiple personality. But it was nothing like multiple personality: it was a Jekyll and Hyde. Every night he turned into this party animal. That has nothing to do with mental health issues.

I saw a preview the other day for another one, called *Cracked*. It's supposed to be about a hockey player who has some sort of mental breakdown. In the preview I saw, it shows him skating when all of a sudden his face changes and he gets this scary look like, “Oh, oh, here he comes now.” That is so unreal, and it is so wrong that we are portrayed like that, because people believe it.

The Chair: Thank you for those comments. We'll leave it at that.

Thank you very much for coming.

With that, we'll adjourn.

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