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# **Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri- Food**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, October 30, 2018**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Pat Finnigan**



## Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

Tuesday, October 30, 2018

• (0845)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.)):** Welcome, everyone.

Today, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we have a study of the mental health challenges that Canadian farmers, ranchers and producers face.

With us today for our first hour, from my home province of New Brunswick, from the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick, we have Ms. Lisa Ashworth, Director, Region 6, Board of Directors. That was formerly Mr. Harvey's region.

Also, from Issues Ink, we have Shawn Brook, President, by video conference from Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Devyn Brook, Community Manager with the Do More Agriculture Foundation.

Also, from the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc., we have Eduardo Huesca, Community Outreach and Program Coordinator, Migrant Worker Health Project, Hamilton; and also Michelle Tew, Occupational Health Nurse, Hamilton Clinic.

Welcome, everyone. We will start with six-minute opening statements.

Ms. Ashworth, would you like to begin? Thank you.

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth (Director, Region 6, Board of Directors, Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

As you just heard, my name is Lisa Ashworth, and I am pleased to speak with you today on behalf of the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick. Our organization is the voice of the farmers in our province, and mental health is actually a topic that we have been talking about a lot lately, about what we need to do and how to get there.

It's encouraging that producers are beginning to publicly acknowledge that many of us and our peers have mental health challenges, but it is also bringing to light the fact that the issues facing the agricultural sector are unique, and that there are many deficiencies and gaps in the services available if producers do ask for help.

When I received the email asking me to make this presentation a few days ago, I had to chuckle because I felt that typified the stress in a farm family. Your day is packed. You're behind schedule. You

have deadlines you're not meeting, and then you check your messages and you get asked to do just one more thing. You say, "Sure, I'd love to do it", because it's important and because someone has to get it done. Farmers and their families are people who get things done. That's our culture, but the strong work ethic often comes with a high price. We're finally, thankfully, starting to talk about the price of that.

In doing some background reading, I found it very interesting to note that no matter which scientific journal I chose an article from, there was recognition that farmers are at high risk of having or developing mental health problems due to the unique nature of what we do.

The International Journal of Social Psychiatry begins an article way back in 2005 by reporting, "Farmers experience one of the highest rates of suicide of any industry and there is evidence that those involved in farming are at higher risk of developing mental health problems."

If we cross the ocean, the Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health concluded an article by stating, "Farmers had higher odds of having high depression scores compared to both other occupational groups and their siblings who were not working as farmers".

If all the research shows that our profession predisposes us to mental health challenges, the obvious first step is to ask, "Why?", which is what we're doing. A 2013 article that caught my eye had quite a handle for a title. It read, "International Perspectives on Psychosocial Working Conditions, Mental Health, and Stress of Dairy Farm Operators". It contained some information that you've already heard from previous speakers on this panel. It said:

Dairy farm operators...are faced with many demands and stressors in their daily work...farms are highly dependent on external conditions, such as weather, fluctuating markets, and regulations from government authorities. Possible external stressors include disease outbreaks, [tax issues], and recent negative societal attitudes to farming... High work demands and expectations coupled with low control and lack of social support can lead to a poor psychosocial work environment, with increased stress levels, ill mental health, depression, and, in the worst cases, suicide.

I don't want to waste the committee's time by repeating what you have already heard from previous presenters, but it is important to note that while I was reading the proceedings, most of the things that I had jotted down as my initial things to talk about were crossed off the list because they had been brought up.

That emphasizes that we're a diverse country with businesses and geography being quite different, but the issues related to mental health are actually very similar. We have trade wars. We have trade deals. We have interest rates. We have a lot of guilt over trying to find a family-work balance. Most of us live in our workplace. The list of stressors is very long, and the next question is, "What are we going to do about it?"

Coming back to New Brunswick, we haven't done anything yet, but we're trying. We don't have a farm safety program or mental health services offered in an organized fashion. We're a very small province, so resources are always a challenge. We've decided to try to work together. Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia have some access to counselling services offered to members of their federations of agriculture. Both of those provinces also have resources designated for farm safety programming.

We've agreed to a regional approach to farm safety, sharing knowledge and programming as we can. In New Brunswick, the alliance firmly believes that mental health initiatives would naturally fall under the umbrella of farm safety.

As previous speakers have already mentioned to the committee, having a federally coordinated approach to the development and delivery of mental health resources is the desired approach. This eliminates the duplication and wasting of precious resources as well as ensuring that smaller provinces and more remote locations have what is needed to support their producers and their families.

●(0850)

In order to achieve nationwide benefits, we need more people trained in mental health first aid, and we need reliable broadband access. Telehealth and video conferencing services could be a lifeline in remote locations, if the Internet service was actually high speed and reliable.

As I close, I would like to ask a question that actually results from our family's personal experience with mental health services in recent months. That is, why isn't primary care for mental health covered by medicare in the same way that physical health is covered? Timely interventions not only save the medicare system money in the long term, but they save lives.

I want to thank you for your investment of time on this matter, and I look forward to hearing what actions result from these discussions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Ashworth.

From Issues Ink, we have Mr. Shawn Brook and Ms. Devyn Brook.

You have up to six minutes.

**Mr. Shawn Brook (President, Issues Ink):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to start off by saying that I am not a mental health professional. I'm a communicator. Communication in the ag sector is what I'm passionate about and is close to my heart.

I grew up on a small farm in southern Manitoba. I got to see farmers have hard times, help each other and figure things out on their own, because that's what we were taught to do. We were taught to figure it out on our own, and if we couldn't figure it out on our

own, go back and figure it out on our own. That was the culture that was instilled and that's the culture that made us strong.

It's also the culture that sets us in a difficult spot when mental illness comes into the conversation. I think that is the crux of why the communications component of what we're talking about with mental health and sharing is so critical to the program.

**Ms. Devyn Brook (Community Manager, Do More Agriculture Foundation, Issues Ink):** In the name of sharing stories, I've been a part of progressing the conversation around mental health for the past six years in different capacities.

Three years ago it became less about sharing other people's stories and more about actually sharing mine.

Three years ago almost to the date, my mother took her own life. Mental health didn't just become the mission of my job; it became the heart and soul of everything that I do.

Our stories are really the glue that holds us together. They allow us to have conversations across differences and to build relationships and trust. Our stories are what shine so that another struggling soul can know that they too are not alone.

My whole life I have been drawn to wherever support is most needed. Right now mental health in agriculture is where support is most needed. This is an industry that needs to be reminded that they too are not alone.

**Mr. Shawn Brook:** Rather than sharing stats with you, my goal was to share a story. I facilitated a panel discussion with two incredible young women, Kim Keller and Lesley Kelly, from the Do More Agriculture Foundation earlier this year at a farm tech meeting in Edmonton.

We had no idea how many producers would be interested in this conversation. We had no idea what the turnout was going to be, but the organizer wanted that conversation to happen.

We were put in a large conference room and we watched it fill up with faces, some that we knew and many that we didn't know. All were there to have this conversation.

I planned to start with three questions, each one was an ever-larger net to get the audience to see the impact of mental illness.

My first question was, who knows someone who has died from suicide? Virtually the entire room stood up. It still makes the hair on my neck stand up. I was floored, devastated and broken-hearted, but I was standing in front of a room of hundreds of people and we had to keep on going. Thankfully I was with two of the strongest, most impressive women I have ever met. Together we talked and shared about mental health in agriculture.

After the session was done and we had collected ourselves a bit, I was headed to my next session and saw an old-timer who was making a beeline towards me. I thought, oh boy, what's this gent going to say to me?

As he got to me he extended his hand and said, "Thank you. Thank you for your session and thank you for saving my life." I bumbled off some sort of "pardon me?" type of comment, and he proceeded with what seemed like had been a well-thought-out explanation. He said, "After hearing that presentation, I'm going to find a professional to talk to. I'm having a hard time and didn't want to admit it out loud. Thank you."

That ensured that I will be doing everything I can to help people understand what it means to suffer from mental illness, to support people who are suffering and to work as hard as I can to get the resources in place to make a difference.

●(0855)

**Ms. Devyn Brook:** Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton from the University of Guelph recently conducted a national survey on farmers' mental health. The survey ran from September 2015 to January 2016 and included farmers from all across Canada. She found that 35% of respondents meet the definition for depression, 45% of respondents meet the classification for having high stress, and 58% of respondents meet the definition for anxiety. The number of most concern out of all of them though was that 40% of farmers felt uneasy about seeking professional help for fear of what people might think. This points to the fact that this is not just an individual issue, but a cultural conversation that surrounds the industry right now that we get to be a part of.

The demand for something more gave rise to the Do More Agriculture Foundation, which is a Canada-wide, not-for-profit organization, championing the mental well-being of all Canadian producers. We are striving to create a culture in agriculture where all Canadian producers are empowered, supported and care for their mental well-being. The Do More Agriculture Foundation has three main focuses: creating awareness, building community and supporting research.

What does this look like in action? One of our most exciting initiatives ended up being a partnership with Farm Credit Canada called the community fund, which seeks to get mental health first aid into the hands of communities all across Canada. We weren't sure whether people were going to apply for the community fund, and we were floored by the fact that we had over 100 participants, or over 100 communities, apply for the community fund to bring mental health first aid to their communities from coast to coast, all through Canada.

We're super excited that things like this are happening and that we get to build capacity in our industry so we're not just depending on the crisis response team. We're depending on the individual communities to show up for their neighbours, their friends and their families in new and better ways that have them be cared for, but also have them fully equipped to manage and support somebody who is struggling with mental health.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. and Ms. Brook.

Now we'll move to the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers. Mr. Huesca and Ms. Tew, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Eduardo Huesca (Community Outreach and Program Coordinator, Migrant Farm Worker Program, Hamilton, Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc.):** Good morning

and thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this very important discussion.

My name is Eduardo Huesca and I work for the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, or OHCOW, a network of clinics funded through the Ontario Ministry of Labour as a free-of-charge resource to Ontario workers and their employers.

Specifically, I'm the program coordinator of OHCOW's migrant farm worker program, which has been running since 2006. With me I have my colleague Michelle Tew, who is an occupational health nurse who has been working with our program since its beginnings.

Our program works directly with Ontario migrant farm workers to better understand their work experiences, to identify key occupational health issues that affect them, and to respond with initiatives, recommendations, language and culturally appropriate educational resources useful to these workers and their employers in support of occupational health and safety on their farms.

Through our work, we have identified mental health challenges affecting Ontario migrant farm workers. We are also seeing these findings reflected in a growing body of research coming from leading universities across Canada. More recently, clinical data has also begun to emerge from an increasing number of Ontario community health centres that are running specialized primary health care clinics for migrant workers in these regions. This data is identifying mental health distress among these workers as well.

In addition, similar to the findings presented on the lack or limitations of mental health supports currently available for farmers, through our work we have identified difficulties in finding mental health resources to support migrant farm workers in the local rural regions where these workers are residing.

Our intention today is by no means to try to eclipse or overshadow the focus on understanding and responding to the mental health of Canadian farmers. Through our work, we recognize and continue to learn about the extremely difficult challenges faced by farmers. We recognize their resilience and strength, and we want to thank the farmers who have previously contributed testimony to this committee, speaking about their lived experience on these matters.

We would also like to commend those leading important initiatives that have provided key supports to them. We have worked hard to gain the trust of Ontario farmers and we see our program as a support to them. Many of the farmers we work with, who invite us onto their farms to present our information sessions to the migrant farm workers they hire, have identified relief in connecting with us after experiencing great challenges finding effective occupational health and safety resources to support the particular needs of migrant farm workers and meet their legislative responsibilities towards them as their employers.

Today, our intention is to echo the testimony of Dr. Patrick Smith, the national chief executive officer of the Canadian Mental Health Association, and his reminder for us not to forget the experience of migrant farm workers in this review.

Again, in no way do we want to suggest that farmers and migrant farm workers are somehow in competition for our concern, but rather recognize the opportunity that is in front of us to seek a more comprehensive understanding of mental health challenges facing the agricultural industry and to challenge ourselves to develop responses for this sector that do not leave anyone behind.

The mental health of farmers and that of the migrant farm workers they hire are linked. We have had fruitful conversations with Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton and her team from the University of Guelph about how in the same way the mental health challenges of a farmer have direct effects on the farm family, they also have the potential to affect the workers the farmer manages. Similarly, a worker experiencing mental health distress may affect his or her employer.

Two years ago, we received a call from a community member in Carlisle, Ontario, between Hamilton and Guelph, who was supporting a very distraught farmer after one of the migrant farm workers who she was employing was hospitalized after suffering from alcohol poisoning connected to what had been an ongoing experience of depression. The worker's depression had reached this level of crisis after the sudden death of a close family member and the realization that he might not be able to return to his family in Mexico before the season finished without potentially losing his employment on the Ontario farm. After the fact, his co-workers noted they had seen symptoms of distress in this individual, but the farmer admitted that she had not noticed them. The farmer was woken up in the night, confronted with having to call for emergency services, tasked with communicating with the Mexican consulate, and required to figure out how to support the other workers who had witnessed the situation. The experience left this farmer quite affected.

A mental health support strategy for farmers that provides, for example, education on signs and symptoms of mental health distress not only has the potential to help farmers recognize and understand feelings they may be experiencing themselves or recognize behaviour in a husband, a wife, a partner, a friend or a neighbour, but also, if it includes migrant farm workers in this picture as being potentially at risk, could help farmers prevent potential mental health crises among the workers they hire.

We are in support of the recommendations that have been presented thus far to this committee by experts in this field. However, we suggest considering the migrant farm worker experience for inclusion within these recommendations to seek a more comprehensive understanding of this picture and to develop inclusive responses and solutions.

Whether it's having the call for funding for research in this area include research that focuses on farmer mental health as well as migrant farm worker mental health or possibly innovative research that looks at the intersections between the mental health challenges of both groups, this inclusion and possible exploration of commonalities and differences may result in a greater understanding across these groups, creating space for recommendations that may be mutually supportive.

• (0900)

In the scenario of the field worker meeting with the farmer on the farm and supporting their mental health, we can envision this field

worker bringing a Spanish- or Thai-speaking translator with them, for example, who has familiarity with migrant farm workers, to then allow the field worker to also possibly visit with migrant workers who might be interested as well.

Whether the field worker visits the farmer and the migrant farm worker on the same day or on a separate occasion independently, whichever is decided to be the most effective, in such an example we would still hope that this dual focus of support would come from the same initiative to be able to leverage the working with both groups towards fostering greater empathy and potentially creating a space for farmer-farm worker relationships that are increasingly supportive of mental health.

In closing, the programs allowing for the hiring of migrant workers in Canada were themselves a federal solution to stresses experienced by Canadian farmers around labour shortages in the industry. Therefore, in a way, migrant farm workers have been part of this conversation and solution around the mental health of farmers. Considering this, we hope that we can move ahead with including these workers in our concerns around mental health in the agricultural industry and our search for increased understanding in our development of effective responses. This would result in a strategy that would seek to support a healthy agricultural sector for all those involved.

Thank you.

• (0905)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Huesca.

Now we will start our question round, for six minutes, with Monsieur Berthold.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In a few moments, I'll give the floor to my colleague Mr. Shipley, but before that, Mr. Chair, I would like to ask my colleagues again if they want us to invite the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food to appear as part of this study. As you know, the debate on this motion has been adjourned twice on this subject.

I would very much like us to resume this debate, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**The Chair:** Is there any interest in debating this motion?

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** I would like to point out that I have met with the Minister, and he seemed very surprised not to have been invited to this meeting. I think he has a lot to say on this issue. Are the members of the committee interested in debating this motion?

[English]

**The Chair:** Is there any interest in opening this debate?

Monsieur Poissant.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (La Prairie, Lib.):** The minister will come and meet with us. He always comes to talk to us about the budget, and when he does, that is the time to ask him your questions.

**The Chair:** The question is whether the members of the committee want to debate this motion.

A recorded vote was requested.

(Motion agreed to: yeas, 5; nays, 4)

[English]

**The Chair:** We will resume questioning.

Monsieur Berthold.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Thank you. I will give the floor to my colleague Mr. Shipley.

[English]

**Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC):** Thank you very much to all of you for taking the time to be part of this discussion.

Ms. Ashworth, in terms of the funding, you talked about the scenario of how it would be put together with the federal responsibility, to the province or the region, and then down to the local level.

From my perspective and I think from the perspective of many, one of the concerns in any of our recommendations is that we don't want it bureaucracy-laden. How do we fine-tune it so that those resources actually come down?

I may have missed it. Could you just help me out and talk about that pyramid, where it would come down to the lower level, where the action is?

We've had some great testimony in regard to Ms. Brook and her mom. There are lots of opportunities. How do we fine-tune that?

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** I don't have that answer.

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** We're looking for recommendations and thoughts, so—

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** That's the thing. It's an important question, because to say that any program starts at the federal level, when you know that you need the resources in very rural areas, there are a lot of layers in between to make that happen.

In the funding, FCC has stepped up, but in terms of the mental health first aid, the feed sales people and the machinery dealers, those people, need to be able to recognize the signs of distress on the farm, because they're the people who are there on a regular basis and may see a perfect example with the migrant workers. The person who interacts every day has so many things on their mind that they may miss those signs, so it's the people on the ground who interact who need training.

As I said, I don't have an easy answer for that, but it's making sure that we don't announce some gigantic programming and spend all the money promoting the program. We need the resources to be in the communities.

● (0910)

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** I want to talk about that just a little bit because I think one thing we've learned is that there are a number of impacts. I'm never really sure how we understand the difference. You can talk

to some of us around this table who have walked through some of this. I really think that there's an opportunity, first, for individuals who are out there at the local levels and who have walked through it and need to be tapped into. It's nothing against the academic side of it, but they have to come alongside with those who have had some experience.

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** Having read through the previous proceedings of the people who've already presented, I think it's something that we recognize. When someone reaches out for help and they're told by a professional that they need to just step away and take a break, you've lost that connection. You need to have people who understand that your house is in the middle of your farmyard and you're not going anywhere. That's an important aspect to consider.

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** Devyn, I see you have your hand up. Would you just carry on, please?

**Ms. Devyn Brook:** Yes. The preliminary phase seems to be mental health first aid. What mental health first aid does is it gives people the confidence to ask those questions, so it gives the confidence to ask, "Are you okay?", and to manage the response as well. There's a lot of fear about overstepping by asking if somebody's okay: Am I invasive at that point? Mental health first aid gives that confidence.

Next, there's peer-to-peer support, which is exactly what you're speaking about. I think that's the next phase moving forward. How can we create systems of peer-to-peer support, so that a dairy farmer can speak to another dairy farmer, when it's not even really a question of "Can I stay in today?", but rather, "This is harvest time and this is an imperative time that I show up on my farm". It's not even really a question of taking a sick day. How can we create systems, so there's somebody you can call up and say, "Hey, this is what I'm dealing with right now", and then have somebody on the other line who can say, "Yes, I get that and this is what's worked for me"?

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** I just had a thought about how the regionality across this country is so diverse. I would always be concerned, if we had a cash cropper talking to a fisherman. That's the peer-to-peer I hope you're talking about, Devyn.

When we're in the agriculture and farming business, anxiety and stress are actually part of our day. However, at some point, is it that the peer reviewer or the peer, who could come alongside, would be helpful to us, by just knowing they're there when that trip to the abnormal from the normal stress and anxiety is over? Is there anything that has been done that would help us? In terms of some of the studies, you go back to 2013, but we're now in 2018. Is there anything more current that would help us?

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** I wonder how many times you've heard the name Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton so far. That's my science background, where I go back to the old and come to the new. I find it interesting that there are these studies saying that we have a problem. We have a problem, so let's do something. I think that maintaining the University of Guelph as a centre and encouraging that work, where we're actually talking to people in 2018 and into 2019—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Ashworth.

Thank you, Mr. Shipley.

[Translation]

I now give the floor to Mr. Poissant, who has six minutes.

**Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant:** Okay.

I would like to thank the witnesses. It's always interesting to hear about the experience behind the distress of farmers.

My first question is for Mr. Brook, but it can also be for everyone.

Do farmers in psychological distress react differently depending on their age? Does a young farmer react more easily than an older person?

[English]

**Mr. Shawn Brook:** I really can't claim to be the mental health expert, but my experience is that it is right across the board. From the people we talk to, the distinction that I hear talked about more is whether we're talking about acute or whether we're talking about preventative discussions. I think that division is more of the conversation than about any kind of age group. That preventative discussion is where I think the peer dialogue fits in. Then the acute situation is where we need investment on the professional side of the mental health discussion.

Sorry. I know that doesn't really answer your question, but it's the best I have for you.

• (0915)

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** I think there are significant differences between ages, but it's different stressors. Older farmers are stressed about transition. Should I keep farming until my kids decide whether they want to do this or not? Young farmer groups.... Because we're having this conversation, people coming into agriculture are hopefully going to be better equipped to deal with the stress. Young farmers have forums. They're much more up front about the stress of coming into agriculture, but our senior farmers have been internalizing multiple stressors for decades, in some cases. They're also the people who were taught to suck it up. There are very different stressors, I think.

I'm not sure if that answers your question. We're all stressed, but we have different types of stress.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant:** Ms. Ashworth, you said earlier that the time for research has passed and that action must now be taken. I was glad to hear you say that, and you aren't the first one to make that comment. Research shows that there are needs and that we must act.

You may not know this, but at Quebec's agricultural schools, conferences are given to young students studying in this field. There are often testimonies from people who have experienced difficulties, but there are also people who come to tell these young people what they can expect in their lives.

Is this something that could be implemented in all agricultural schools?

[English]

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** I've never actually been involved in New Brunswick Young Farmers, but I think there is a lot more with

succession planning. We've recognized that's a step you have to take—to talk about business risk management and things like that. We seem to have an encouraging wave of younger people wanting to be involved in the industry who do not come from farm families.

A person who has grown up on a farm and is going into agriculture has lived through this at their dinner table, so they know those stressors. For the people coming into agriculture who aren't from a rural background and a farming background, it's imperative to me that there should be a course—the same as occupational health and safety, first aid and those sorts of things. These are the things they're going to face. I don't think that's standard.

I would applaud Quebec for having something like that.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant:** I will give the rest of my time to Mr. Harvey.

[English]

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** Sharing is caring.

**Mr. T.J. Harvey (Tobique—Mactaquac, Lib.):** I know your farm quite well because you're in my riding. Your farm would be one of the larger dairy farms in the province. It is very remote and isolated, and I know that you and Derek have struggled with human resources. That's been a major issue for a long time.

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** He's milked the last two mornings.

**Mr. T.J. Harvey:** Yes.

Can you speak to the added anxiety and stress caused by the inability to find qualified labour to manage your operation the way you would like to operate it?

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** That's a very timely question, given my co-presenters.

We've played with the idea of temporary foreign workers for years. We don't want to do that. We want to employ local people. Part of having an agricultural enterprise is supporting your local community, but we can't find people who want to come to work at four o'clock in the morning. Most people don't want to get dirty and all that sort of stuff.

It's probably the biggest stress. My husband is very good at what he does. He knows how to do the job, but when you're reliant on people who may or may not come to work, it's an incredible stress—and it's on the whole family.

When the phone rings at 3:30 in the morning, you know exactly what's happening. Whatever plans you had for the day are done. Because we are a large enough operation, my husband doesn't normally physically milk cows. He's managing at this point, but when someone doesn't show up to work, he's milking. The next in line—my son—has gone away to school. His backup plan is now away for two years at least. Starting at age 14, our son got those phone calls at 3:30 in the morning to go milk. That's what our family does.

It's a stress that never goes away. It's something you don't realize you have after a certain amount of time, which isn't healthy. We know that.

● (0920)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Ashworth. Thank you, Mr. Harvey.

Now we have Mr. MacGregor for six minutes.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP):** Thank you.

I'll start with Ms. Brook in Winnipeg.

You talked a little bit about peer-to-peer support and the services that various organizations are trying to make available to farmers. You've also talked about the culture where so many are reluctant to go and seek help.

We've heard a lot of testimony in this committee about proactive steps. I was just wondering if you could expand on some of your experiences and recommendations about how we can be proactive. What are some innovative ways of reaching farmers who are busy with harvest and also reluctant to seek the kind of help they need?

**Ms. Devyn Brook:** That's a fabulous question.

In terms of innovative ways, there is definitely a progression toward the online community. That's something we've really been working on creating. We have found and noticed a whole lot of success in developing a space that people can come to. Whether they're out in the field or anywhere, no matter what, they can connect to content, to stories from people who've been through something similar. Whether the confidence is there to reach out and pick up the phone and call somebody up and say, "Hey, I'm having a really tough time right now", there are still opportunities for people to read a story from someone who has been in a similar situation, or has gone through a certain process and shared it, so that they can find a little bit of hope in their situation as well.

That is one opportunity for us to continue to explore and see how it can be more supportive. We've progressed toward creating programming for peer-to-peer support. I think it's going to start small. I think the first thing is to create conversations. Ms. Ashworth mentioned that it's the younger generation that is moving into the agriculture community, who haven't been bred into the culture of "you put your head down and you just get work done".

It's also a really exciting opportunity for agriculture. There is a new voice coming into the scene that has an innovative possibility to it, that can create conversations that may not have been there, and that can be part of the culture in which we do talk about things, we do participate in conversations around mental health and we do share our stories. It's really exciting that agriculture is becoming so inclusive. It's bringing people in. It's creating conversations with the public. It's creating conversations with each other. I think that's an exciting possibility.

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Thank you. I have to move on to another witness. My time is running out. Thanks so much.

Mr. Huesca, thank you so much for shining a light on migrant workers. In this study, for legitimate reasons, we've been concentrating on farmers, but the workers are such a huge component of making a farm work properly. They have been overshadowed in this study. Thanks for shining a light on that.

With respect to migrant workers, we have heard from a lot of producers about the problems of securing an adequate workforce. We tend to treat migrant workers as just a statistic—this many come to Canada to work every year, and farms need this many.

What do you think the federal government could be doing to start that conversation about mental health when migrant workers are going through the application process? Do you have any recommendations?

**Mr. Eduardo Huesca:** Do you mean when they're in the application process?

**Mr. Alistair MacGregor:** Yes.

**Mr. Eduardo Huesca:** Under the federal government program, there is an assessment of mental health as workers are coming through. It's twofold. Education might be good for workers to have a bit of an understanding of what they might expect: maybe some of the feelings of isolation in coming to our country, that they might not speak the language, or that they come to rural towns that might be ethnically and culturally not as diverse or not reflective of them as perhaps racialized people.

I also think that, on the side of the federal government, there should be a lot of education for the employers of migrant farm workers to help them better receive these workers. In a lot of these rural towns, you might not have the experience of working with a diverse workforce. I work in Toronto. In my times in urban centres, I see ethnic and cultural diversity. In some rural towns it's not the same. That's not to say it's a good or a bad thing. It's just a reality. It is complex when you are a farmer who has worked with a certain culture that is your own and have a group of workers come in, and then you add power dynamics or communication differences. Without a good introduction to some of the things that could happen, employers are left a bit on their own to troubleshoot a lot of things.

The education is twofold. It's to prepare migrant workers for some of the hardships they may expect—they don't have family here and a lot of them are isolated—but it's also for employers, to give them a bit of an idea.

I really like all the talks about sharing stories and humanizing. I think mental health really humanizes, and testimonies really humanize. If we had a mental health program that shared these stories, you'd want to make sure the stories are diverse. You have a male farmer talking about how masculinity affects the stigmatization of mental health. Maybe you have female—

● (0925)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Huesca.

Madam Nassif, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Eva Nassif (Vimy, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for their presentations.

As a former nurse, I would first like to address Ms. Tew, who is a nurse.

In Canada, 10 people die by suicide each day. Suicide is the ninth cause of death in the country. Of the 4,000 people who die every year, over 90% are farmers.

You're a nurse. What would you do if a farmer, whose farm is close to his house, came to ask for help in a crisis? How could we help this distressed farmer take time off when he lives near his workplace?

Ms. Tew, what do you do, on the ground, to help farmers in distress?

[English]

**Ms. Michelle Tew (Occupational Health Nurse, Hamilton Clinic, Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc.):** Thank you for the question.

Just as a bit of a personal introduction, I grew up on a family farm and worked on a family farm as well, so I understand those stresses and those demands. As well, I also lost a very close family member to suicide, related to many of the factors that have been discussed in the meeting, so I do understand where that is coming from.

In terms of the work that we do, we don't clinically treat people with mental health issues at our clinic. That's not our area of expertise. We're mainly focused on occupational health issues. Certainly, as has been discussed and presented by previous witnesses, the ability to leave your workplace and your home is not easy for a farmer. I think the challenge is where a woman goes for help, because a lot of the discussion has been around the fact that most of the farmers who have been included in the discussion have been male.

Males tend to have a higher rate of suicide than females do. Women oftentimes are the support system and the backbone of the family farm, and they oftentimes take the brunt of much of the stress. I'm not exactly sure what their support system is beyond their internal support system and the formal health care system.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Eva Nassif:** Ms. Tew, how many years have you been working in this field? I would like to know whether you have seen a change in the culture of farmers. Are there many more farmers seeking mental health assistance help or services, or is the situation the same?

[English]

**Ms. Michelle Tew:** Again, I don't specifically work in the mental health field, but I think your question is whether there is more openness around mental health issues. I cannot say that I have any statistics to support that, but I think the material that has been presented by the witnesses and by the organizations that have programs do identify that there is more discussion around mental health issues, specifically in the Quebec model. I'm very impressed by it.

One of the quotes from one of the people who presented from that program was that the closer we are to the farmers, the closer we are to talking to them, the more they come to us for help. I think creating that opportunity for discussion and support is really important.

● (0930)

[Translation]

**Mrs. Eva Nassif:** My next question is for Mr. Huesca.

There is a labour shortage among farmers, and you are dealing with migrant workers. Do you have any data on migrant workers in terms of mental health services? Do these workers have access to the same services as Canadians? Tell us about the barriers that migrant workers face in this regard.

[English]

**Mr. Eduardo Huesca:** Again, we collaborated with researchers who have started to really bring forward a lot of this research. I think a lot of the time they experience a lot of the same factors that employers are experiencing or that farmers are experiencing, which are the industry pressures that trickle down to them as well. If an employer has to finish harvesting and there's that pressure to get all of the harvest done, those workers will feel the same pressures. There are a lot of similarities. That's why having conversations that connect and identify those similarities would be fruitful.

I also think migrant farm workers experience other stressors as well through their immigration status and their isolation in being in a different country, which we've mentioned as well. I think there are definitely differences and similarities. I think having the opportunity to have different groups understand both the differences and similarities would be really fruitful moving forward.

If an employer really understands some of the pressures that the migrant farm workers are feeling, that relationship may have space to have a bit of empathy and vice versa. A worker who might not really know the employer has a lot of pressures falling down on them might say, "You know he owns the farm, he's well-off," because in their countries owning a farm would be a completely different experience. In them understanding a bit more about the pressures that employers face, that farmers face, I think the workers would also gain a new perspective.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Nassif.

[English]

Thank you, Mr. Huesca.

Mr. Longfield, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.):** Thank you, and thanks to the witnesses.

I'll try to be as careful with my time as I can. I was on an organic farm this summer. It was harvesting weeds at the time. The migrant workers were there. There was a crew of about 50. The weeds were taller than the people who were harvesting them. They had machetes, and they were in lines trying to get through the crop. A month later, the carrots were doing wonderfully, the weeds were gone, but in the time of stress the farmer had said, "I've never seen weeds like this before. Our farm has never experienced this before."

Thinking of the stress on the people who are manually harvesting these weeds and are in a different country, how do we reach out to them? Whether it's through the employer, whether it's through a shift boss who's from the migrant community, how do we connect in to that?

**Mr. Eduardo Huesca:** I think there are a lot of groups who are active in this picture. Obviously, we always think about the employer and the supervisor on the farm. There are a lot of initiatives that also happen in the community that have provided migrant workers with a lot of space to de-stress, to socialize and to have other aspects in their experience other than the hard work.

Oftentimes, churches are a good in, so when we first started working our program to try to connect with migrant workers, churches were a very big part of that. We would connect with them and they would give us almost an access to meet the community. The churches and community groups were really giving workers that space to relax and de-stress. There are libraries that have organized Skype calls, something so basic, so that people could talk to their families.

I do think that on the farm is so important because that's where they're spending most of their time. I think it really becomes imperative to have supervisors who are very well trained and have an understanding of mental health and stress, so they can really support the workers they're overseeing as well.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Terrific, thank you.

I'll go over to Winnipeg.

The Do More Ag Foundation has a website that's showing an amazing number of services—almost overwhelming. There are 13 nationwide services, six training programs, at least one service per province and territory for people to access. I'm picturing myself as somebody who's in a mental health crisis looking at that website going, where do I go? How do I access the right service for me?

I'm picturing something that our government's developed for small businesses, [innovation.canada.ca](http://innovation.canada.ca), where a small business can say what their issue is, what they're trying to do, how they're trying to accomplish it, and the website helps to direct the small business to either trade commission services or funding services or innovation services.

It seems like the Do More Ag Foundation has a really good basis, but I'm not sure that sending in an email at the bottom of the page is the best way to connect with people in crisis. People in crisis might not be thinking as clearly as other people, and they're vulnerable and overwhelmed. Is this something that you've been looking at? Is it something that we could have as a recommendation in our report, to develop some type of portal to help direct people more carefully to the services that they need?

• (0935)

**Ms. Devyn Brook:** Absolutely. I think that's a really important conversation to be having.

Also, I will point out that on our website we do explicitly state that we are not mental health professionals. It's imperative to know that's not our skill set. We are the connection to those resources. I would absolutely take any recommendation for making that a little more

accessible, in a way, for somebody who is in crisis and does come to that landing page. I'll most certainly go and check out that website as well to see the platform you've created there.

I think that's a really great conversation to be starting. How can we make portals that are a little more accessible to somebody who is in crisis and maybe make them feel a little less overwhelmed with the number of resources that are out there? You caught us right at the time when we're in the process of revamping our entire web design, too, so check back in two weeks and let me know what you think.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** I will indeed.

Last year we had a mental health round table in Ottawa, and we're hoping to have another one this spring. If I wasn't studying this, I wouldn't know what was out there, and I'm just trying to picture how we promote this. For the farmers, they're on, let's say, seed pages or market information pages. How do we push the information to them? That all takes money in terms of advertising budgets, and that might be something we could hear about as well, if you're going through the revamp and need resources.

We're studying this as a committee. Maybe you could make some recommendations to us on that.

**Ms. Devyn Brook:** Absolutely.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Thank you.

We've talked about women in mental health, and thanks for that. I always think of New Brunswick as the broadband capital of Canada, after Frank McKenna did a lot of work on broadband. You talked about how important that is to connect Canada. Is that a local or a national thing that you were thinking about?

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** I'll give you a very local example. We're remote, and we have a very small high school. Therefore, we don't have subjects offered. Our kids are expected to do online education. I thought our Internet was bad until a mom told me that her child had dial-up.

**Mr. Lloyd Longfield:** Wow.

**The Chair:** Sorry, Ms. Ashworth, I'm going to have to cut you off. Perhaps you'll have another—

**Ms. Lisa Ashworth:** That's okay.

It's bad.

**The Chair:** We have Mr. Dreeshen for six minutes.

**Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer—Mountain View, CPC):** Thank you very much.

With regard to the broadband study, I know that Mr. Longfield and I spent a long time discussing that, so we're well aware of the concerns for rural and remote Canadians.

We are nearing the end of this study. I'd just like to thank the amazing women who have helped promote mental wellness in agriculture, those who have opened that door just a little bit so that the rest of us can get a glimpse of what a healthy state of mind could actually be.

I also want to thank my fellow committee members for agreeing to this study. I introduced this back on Bell Let's Talk Day, and I'm humbled to see where it has gone and how we've been able to bring this discussion into the open.

Last weekend I attended the Ag for Life Harvest Gala in Calgary. My wife was supposed to go with me, but I was at the gala and she was finishing the harvest. There is a lot of stress, but one thing that was brought up at the Ag for Life event was that the last project that they had done was on farm safety. This year the theme is going to be on farm education. Like the rest of us, I think that educating Canadians about how food is produced, about the amazing research and innovation that's being developed to ensure that we have the safest and the most secure food supply on earth, is important to ag producers. Of course, this is what matters to farmers. It's a narrative that I believe should be presented to our fellow Canadians. Groups like Ag for Life and Do More Ag need to be championed, and governments must ensure that they champion a "do no harm" strategy to help us so that we can prevent the demonization of our agricultural industry.

In that, we've talked about and had different groups of people who have come to talk about trade, non-tariff trade barriers, and issues that are brought up to protect other people's interests in other countries. We have the similar type of thing that occurs even with products within our own country as we demonize one group, as we set one group against another in order for them to promote what it is that they do.

As for the other things that governments do—on the taxation side of things, the carbon tax, which is tens of thousands of dollars that are going to be put towards agriculture—there is no extra margin to deal with these types of things. We compete internationally. That's what we sell our products into. Other things, from front-of-package labelling changes to the food guide, all come from thoughts that seem like a good idea from the outside, but they don't show understanding of exactly what is happening on the field.

I would hope that organizations—the ones that have appeared here and also other organizations—would be encouraged to present more information to us so that, as we deal with this study, we can get some of the views and solutions for that.

I'd like to address my question to Devyn. I followed you for a long time. I respect the work that you and other organizations have done as you've spearheaded this, and so many other groups have come to deal with this. What can we do, as far as an educational promotion of agriculture, so that the generations of separation between urban and rural Canadians can be addressed, and so that we can, as Canadians,

work together on a solution for this amazing natural resource that we have?

● (0940)

**Ms. Devyn Brook:** My history has been in working with kids, actually, so I've been designing programming for how to bring mental health into the conversation in the classroom, too. When we think about the future of agriculture, I think that a lot of it is actually about preparing the next generation that's moving into it with a whole new skill set to be equipped, excited and participatory in a whole new conversation.

Any social movement that has happened in the past has not been about fighting against the old. I think that we really need to move away from that in the conversation of mental health and really move into this conversation of creating a whole new possibility that we invite people into. I believe really strongly that this gets to be created through the younger generations that are moving forward.

**Mr. Earl Dreeshen:** I appreciate that, because, as I've told many people, I spent 34 years as a math and science teacher to support my farming habit. That was a critical part. The thing I'm seeing now is that we have to educate the teachers, because they, again, are getting further and further away. They'll hear something coming from an anti-farm group or this social media presentation and think, "That's great. I want to tell my kids about this."

These groups are very well-organized, as they will have classroom projects and everything else that they're supposed to look at, but the other side doesn't have that. Hopefully, we can build on that, so that we have something that can go to teachers' conventions, so that there are plug and play types of programs that they can have. However, when you do that, you're going to find that the others are going to up their game. The critical part is for us to try to find ways of getting into the universities and dealing with teacher education.

● (0945)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Dreeshen.

Unfortunately, this is all the time we have. I want to really thank the panel for being here today with your passionate testimonies. It's all going to be part of our report.

Mr. Dreeshen.

**Mr. Earl Dreeshen:** My only comment is that we invite more people to come up with recommendations.

**The Chair:** We will deal with that. We're going to go into our business session.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*







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