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**EVIDENCE**

## Thursday, November 3, 2016

## Chair

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj**

# Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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● (1530)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)):** Good afternoon. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 25, the committee will resume its study on family reunification.

This afternoon, we have with us from the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary by video conference Ms. Antonio, who is the executive director; and Ms. Bragg, the former research and policy manager.

From Dalhousie University, we have Mr. Ungar, the Canada research chair in child, family and community resilience, Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

Welcome.

I now would like to turn to the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary.

You have seven minutes combined.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio (Executive Director, Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary):** Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak about family reunification. My name is Marichu Antonio, and I am the executive director of the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary. We are a community-based organization that works to build the collective voice of ethnocultural communities in Calgary. We are also an umbrella organization for approximately 65 ethnocultural community organizations.

Our comments today stem from some of our research that we conducted in 2012: “Families Together/Families Apart”. We undertook a participatory education and research process using focus groups and workshops on immigration policy changes and their impact on ethnocultural communities. In speaking with nearly 200 people, we heard overwhelmingly that the issue of greatest concern was the closure of the sponsorship program for parents and grandparents at that time. This prompted us to undertake interviews with individuals and families who were directly impacted by the limits on family sponsorship.

While the program reopened in 2014, it did so with a cap of 5,000 applications annually. We appreciate that under the new government, this has been raised to 10,000 applications. However, we believe that the research we are presenting shows that families in our community continue to experience barriers to meaningful family reunification.

Bronwyn Bragg, our research and policy manager at that time, will present the key findings of this research in a moment. Before she does so, I want to take a few moments and reflect personally on the importance of family reunification as a core component of Canada's immigration program.

Over time, the number of family class immigrants has declined sharply from where it was a few decades ago. Family class immigrants, especially sponsored parents and grandparents, are represented as a drain on our social welfare system. As someone who came to Canada as an immigrant and who has worked directly with immigrant communities for the last two decades, I see this characterization as both inaccurate and harmful.

In my own family of six siblings and two parents, we greatly benefited from Canada's strong family reunification policy in the 1980s. My sister sponsored my parents from the Philippines in their late fifties; they in turn sponsored me and later my cousin. The average processing time then for most of us was approximately one to two years. This has resulted in a strengthened feeling of belonging and well-being in our new home country, thereby strengthening our ability to give back to Canada. We now have four generations, 42 citizens, 30 of whom are taxpayers, community leaders and volunteers, and those employed as professionals in various sectors of the economy such as oil and gas, banking, and the not-for-profit sector. I myself am now a grandmother of two adorable grandchildren, soon to be three—this weekend—and I work as the executive director of this agency. My 86-year-old mom, who is now a great-grandmother to 10, is still active and supporting us in raising our grandchildren. This wouldn't have happened under the current policy regime.

Thank you to Canada.

In my own experience and in the research we conducted, we found that sponsored relatives are not a burden. Instead, they provide critical support to immigrant families, especially to children in Canada. They help raise grandchildren. They provide psychological and emotional support to families in transition. They are sources of cultural and linguistic knowledge and wisdom. They support the successful integration and settlement of immigrant families and communities in Canada.

We therefore suggest the following five policy recommendations: One, remove the quota of 10,000 applications per year on the parent and grandparent sponsorship program. Two, devote resources to processing all family class applications, including parent and grandparent applications, in a timely manner. Three, lower the minimum necessary income for sponsoring parents and grandparents. Four, reduce the sponsorship undertaking period to 10 years instead of the current 20 years. Five, please do not treat the family super visa as a replacement for a meaningful family reunification program for parents and grandparents.

Now, Bronwyn, go ahead, please.

● (1535)

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg (Former Research and Policy Manager, Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary):** In the time that remains, I will be presenting key findings from our research in 2013.

First, we found that there are profound economic impacts to family separation. From our research participants, we heard that sponsored parents and grandparents were playing critical roles as child care providers, which allowed their children to go out and become part of the workforce in Canada. When these family members were not able to come to Canada, families were forced to cope on one income and women especially were not able to enter the workforce.

The majority of our interview participants cited child care as a major factor in wanting to sponsor a parent to come to Canada. Our research found that in the absence of family support from parents, it was immigrant women in particular who were disproportionately impacted, often having to leave paid employment or choosing not to enter the workforce at all.

Second, family separation also exacerbates the vulnerabilities already facing ethnocultural children and youth. Families we spoke with expressed deep concern about the impact of these policy changes on their children. For many of the families we interviewed, their children had close relationships with their grandparents. These family members played an important role in supporting the healthy psychological and emotional development of young people, especially ethnocultural youth adjusting to life in a new country.

First and second generation visible minority youth face a number of barriers in adjusting to and gaining a sense of belonging in Canada. Grandparents play a vital role in supporting these young people, particularly through critical transitions. They are also transmitters of cultural identity and language, both of which support ethnocultural youth in their adaptation to life in Canada.

Third, family separation inhibits meaningful integration and settlement. For families living in Canada, barriers to family reunification are also barriers to feeling fully settled and integrated into Canadian life and society. Among critics—

**The Chair:** Ms. Bragg, you have 20 seconds, please.

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** Thanks.

Among critics of the program, it has been suggested that the process of immigration involves leaving one's loved ones back home. This is problematic. We found that many of our participants chose Canada instead of other countries because of its promise of family reunification and the ability to sponsor parents.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Ungar, you have seven minutes, please.

**Dr. Michael Ungar (Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience, Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition, Dalhousie University):** Thanks very much for this opportunity.

I'm going to build on some of the comments my colleagues just made.

As a researcher, I'd like to introduce to the committee a frame of reference to make the decisions, which are obviously very complex and have long-term ramifications, as we have just heard.

In my role as a Canada research chair, I lead a national coalition of researchers and service provider organizations. We have contributions from four federal departments as well. We're trying to understand the refugee experience from the child's and the family's points of view.

Let me see if I can ground this for you. Let's think about this. Some of you on this committee have children, I take it. If there were a crisis right now, and you got that very urgent phone call, I wonder whether you would have the social capital to respond.

In a sense, when we begin to think in these terms, that family reunification is fundamentally not just avoiding problems, avoiding some of the stressors on families—that's what I study, stress and resilience and the way people cope across cultures—you also have to ask yourself what resources are being built.

I'm going to argue, and I think the evidence shows this, that you're increasing the chances and the likelihood of social integration by expanding the size of the families that come to Canada, offering ways of streamlining this opportunity for family reunification, as you just heard.

If we can break this down into some simple processes, which is what I study, we need ways of simplifying this question.

Seven things are leveraged by expediting a family reunification process for immigrants or refugees. Relationships are obvious. But it's not just the idea of an intimate attachment. You're giving people the support they need during those crisis times. As we know from the literature, people tend to stay together when the families are reunified.

What about identity? You're helping kids know who they are. We have a crisis sometimes, and we talk about this. We're worried about children losing identity. We're worried about the violence that potentially follows from that. Yet here we have a way of addressing some of these other bigger concerns that are sometimes put together, inadvertently or intentionally, when we talk about immigrants.

What about issues of control? You certainly open up opportunities for families to have more opportunities. A very simple one of course is you give parents a much greater latitude in where they're going to be able to work, the number of hours they can transit to their workplaces, by increasing the family supports, whether that's an aunt, an uncle, an older child, an older sibling, or a grandparent who is present in the home.

We're also talking about fair treatment. You are bringing in people to be advocates for each other, which is of course important.

Needless to say, all the research says that you increase material wealth or resources for the families as well. You increase the income, the potential for money inside a home, which of course translates into someone helping the children learn. More resources in technology or supports are the tipping point for educational gains for children who are in transition and under stress.

You increase a sense of belonging, cultural continuity. The family's story can be told live, in a robust way that just isn't available through Facebook and other social media communication.

Of course, there's just the continuity of culture.

If you think about what I've just laid out as seven balls juggling in the air, like a Cirque du Soleil act, through family reunification you are putting more of those balls in play so that families have at least a fighting chance of doing well.

Let me give you one last principle from my work as a resilience researcher all over the world. We have projects that are global in scope. The thing we learn is that there's a principle called differential impact. That says the protective factor, like family reunification, is exponentially greater for a family that's under greater stress. As stress increases, you're seeing the more vulnerable families will benefit the most from a policy that promotes family reunification.

If you think about this, let's be really practical. We have two profiles of families coming in. I'm going more on the refugee side of this. Let's think about the refugees. We have government-assisted refugees, the GARs, and of course we have privately sponsored refugees. If you think about it, if we really had a sensible policy, we would be focusing on the government-assisted refugees and expediting their family reunification even faster than that of the privately sponsored refugees.

● (1540)

I am not sure we want to get into a model where we're saying one is better than the other, but if you begin to actually think about the process here of what family reunification does and those seven things I've just talked about—cultural continuity, relationships, increasing the household income, all these factors—you begin to say that the more vulnerable the child, the more likely you are going to have an impact by actually proceeding with this kind of program.

In the last minute I have, I'm going to suggest as a researcher that we need to study a bit more the cost and benefits of refugees. We have some studies out there that have happened. Perhaps—and this is really one of the goals of CYRRC, this refugee coalition we have going—we need to introduce into those studies a range of outcomes, maybe not just the economic one. Right now, that's not really the problem with teenagers, is it? That's not what's making the front pages of our newspapers, the economic well-being of kids. That won't solve all these issues. We need better social integration and we need conduits for cultural continuity.

I'm also going to suggest that we need to have a little more sophistication. We need to be thinking about if the benefit is just in the first generation or the second generation. Do we have a long-term plan here or is it just short-term?

I'm going to also suggest we need a better understanding of the optimal timing for reunification. What is the impact of delays? When you're talking about the way an individual arrives, what is optimal? Is there a difference if it's a young person who has arrived first and they're trying to get the rest of the family in? There's a lot more complexity in these models.

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds, Mr. Ungar.

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** Thank you.

At the end of the day, we have to understand the cultural meanings of what family reunification and indeed what family means. As we know, even within the mosaic of our own country of people who are already here, what a family is and who is important to completing one's family depends very greatly on who you are and what kind of meaning you bring to that word.

Thank you.

● (1545)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Dzerowicz, for seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say a huge thank you, Ms. Bragg, Ms. Antonio, and Mr. Ungar, for your excellent presentations.

Very interesting information came out today. One of the things I've heard about for years and years is it used to take families five years to get settled in Canada and now we're hearing that it's taking 10 years. I wonder to what extent this whole process contributes to it.

I personally don't believe that bringing in family members is a burden on our system. What would be the best kind of supports that we could provide to help integrate parents, grandparents, children, spouses when they come into this country? Is it making sure that our settlement services have sufficient and excellent ESL classes?

I'd like both Ms. Antonio and Mr. Ungar to respond to that.

We'll start with you, Ms. Antonio.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** There are statistics that point to the fact that more than 50% of newcomers that come to Canada don't access formal settlement services. The question there is, where do they go? Who do they resort to?

In our work with around 65 ethnocultural organizations, our experience is that they are the go-to people especially during the first six months and the first year of their stay in Canada, in looking for a home, looking for transportation support, mobility support, medical support. They play a big role. Usually they are relatives or friends or people who speak the same language and understand the culture. Then we encourage them to access formal services.

These kinds of supports are embedded in the communities. The only thing that we need to do is to train them, give them the right information, which is what we're doing in our organization. We call them cultural brokers. They are the connectors, the bridge. Once you give them the right information, they will give the right advice and they will give the right supports to these communities. The other professional services can be linked to them later.

We usually do a settlement action plan for families. For example, my mother sponsored my cousin, or other people sponsor their relatives. They're asked to do a community action plan—a settlement action plan is what we call it—identifying and foreseeing all the possible needs of these immigrants.

If we're dealing with grandparents' needs, there are already specialized services for newcomer elders. In our case, for example, we have 15 trained elder workers who speak different languages and understand the culture and look out for the most isolated members of the community. Even if they are isolated, they still can give back to the community once given the right connections and opportunities. There's a combination of formal services and informal support networks that work on an equal basis.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Thank you.

Do you have anything to add, Mr. Ungar?

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** I would just add, coming from Nova Scotia, that the same themes appear there, and I'll just echo the same thing about this idea of cultural brokers and family navigators to link people. This myth that they stay with the settlement organizations long term is actually not true. The settlement organizations could use, it seems, a bit more resources for sure, but they're more transitory. They do tend to quickly integrate into regular formal services that are available. The sum total of that needs a bit more study including some sort of cost-benefit analysis, but if we actually looked at the social return on investment here and broadened the definitions, I believe we would probably see a pretty healthy return on that investment, which we know anecdotally from individual stories.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Thank you.

Ms. Antonio, you've recommended that we eliminate the 10,000 quota, as you call it. What would be the right number, or is there a number?

● (1550)

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** There wasn't a quota before, right?

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** There could have been one that was hidden. Do you know what I mean? It might have been more departmental as opposed to more public.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** One of the things we were talking about is maybe to have a sense of the demand for grandparents and parents in every province, because it depends on the immigration trends. If there is a possibility to identify.... For example, in Alberta, I questioned some of the immigration consultants here in our communities, and you don't base the demand on the applications received; you base the demand on the intention of the families and the needs of the families. One of the indicators we're looking at is the child care wait list and child care affordability in Alberta.

Included in our study, and maybe Bronwyn can elaborate on that, we looked at what the demands are, how long the wait list is, and therefore what the newcomer families are resorting to in terms of bringing in their grandparents, including affordability.

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** Just related to the cap, we see that certainly the system before the quota was put in place was inadequate, and many organizations across the country were referring to the long wait times. I know that the wait times and the processing times for parents and grandparents were stated as a concern and a reason for bringing in a quota. Whether it is explicit or not, it is still part of the problem, and there needs to be a holistic approach to understanding what the needs are. Capping it at 10,000 creates basically a lottery system in which we see families sprinting to try to get applications in on the first, and then the program is closed weeks or a short month later and people are not able to bring their family members here, so the barriers remain in place.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

**Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC):** Thank you to Ms. Antonio, Ms. Bragg, and Mr. Ungar.

If you look at the table, most of us may be the exception here. We are all on your side. We understand it. I came to the country back in the 1970s. I sponsored my parents back in 1977, if I'm not mistaken. They came in 1978. It was a different Canada in those days. Today it is a totally different Canada in which immigrants may represent 32% or 33% of the population.

For people who were sponsoring parents or grandparents, there were limited applications. If I am not mistaken, we have 80,000 or more applications in the queue. It's all about how we can balance it. The system can allow up to 300,000 total immigrants into the country. This is the reality. According to the numbers, we are looking at 80,000 in the family class of immigrants coming, about 20,000 of whom are parents and grandparents. It's all about balancing where we can bring economic immigrants, parents and grandparents in every single category.

What are the reasonable numbers? What do all of you think is a reasonable number that we can work with? The mandate of this committee is to look for the solution. The solution is to find the reasonable number that both sides can live with.

Can we start with Calgary?

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** Thank you for that question.

I also take a researcher's perspective. I think we need a bit more information to understand specifically. Working at the community level we can only see what we see, and that's a high need for people to be reunited with their families, but if we were to take a more analytical approach and understand what the needs are for such things as child care, or in terms of the numbers....

The bigger issue that we hope the committee will consider is the way in which the division between economic immigrants and family class immigrants has become increasingly distinguished in the last, let's say, 10 years, such that economic immigrants are treated as having the priority. I think we saw this particularly under the last government. A fast and flexible immigration program that brings skilled immigrants to Canada was the priority, at the expense of other kinds of immigrants including the family class.

What we see in our work and through this research—and I'm sure, as you've said, you understand this issue personally—is that family class immigrants in fact contribute to the broader economic well-being of our immigration program.

What I heard in our interviews was that the majority of the people we spoke to were skilled immigrants. They were working. They were professionals. They wanted to bring a grandparent to Canada because they had chosen to come to Canada because of the ability to have family reunification. Instead of seeing these two as separate spheres—as I know we do, and that's unfortunate—we need to understand that as part of our ability to attract the labour market ready, English speaking, highly educated, skilled immigrants whom Canada allegedly wants to include in our community, we need to be keeping our family reunification programs robust in order to continue to attract those migrants.

● (1555)

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Michael, do you want to add something?

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** Yes. I'd be curious to know, when you came to Canada, how old were your parents when they came over?

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** When my parents came to the country, they were 62.

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** They were 62, so they were actually—

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** My father was 62, my mother 59.

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** So they were older. My sense is that many immigrants are arriving with their parents, whom they want to bring in, actually. If the process were quicker, they would be coming in during much more productive years, when retirement is not imminent, but it's the delay of the process....

Also, by the way, this focus on grandparents isn't totally accurate, as we know, because most of the family reunification is not just a case of elderly parents coming in. It's about aunts and uncles and brothers and siblings and spouses. It's actually a lot more than just about the grandparents, which I think sometimes is the picture here.

I will also say this. The numbers are arbitrary, but the needs are not. It would be interesting to introduce some sort of family assessment from which we'd have more information, so that we can say, it's funny that employers get to justify, when they bring in temporary workers, and yet a family which has a definite need because of a long commute and who could bring in someone who could actually assist, we don't assess. We don't have any mechanism, it seems, to get into adding another element of proper assessment to this process.

Maybe it's my analytical mind, but as a researcher, I would want to ask more questions, so that we get in a sense to open this up. Maybe the number's not the right thing, but some sort of case management system is.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** What sort of delays...? We've heard this over and over in the last number of weeks, that delays are too long. I agree with all of you. Fifty-one months, 48 months.... What would be an acceptable number, in your opinion?

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** Do you want it from the field?

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Sure, go ahead.

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** Do you mean us?

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Yes.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** This is the reason I mentioned our experience in the 1980s.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** That part I know. My parents came within one year. That was a different time. There were limited applications processed.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** That's right.

Actually, two years is an acceptable process, because if a woman has a child and she sponsors her parents.... Based on the people we have contacted, processing time took them seven years. By the time the grandparent is here, the child is already eight years old.

The other question there was—

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** In sponsoring the parents, the basis for the income requirement is the last three years. That also needs to be reviewed: what a reasonable time is for the minimum income.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** May I have 10 seconds?

**The Chair:** Thank you. We're done.

Madam Sansoucy.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first questions are for the representatives from the Ethno-cultural Council of Calgary

I am the member for Saint-Hyacinthe-Bagot, Quebec. Since very early in January, we also have had to tell people who come to ask us to help them with their applications that it is no longer possible to submit applications. From the end of January, in February and throughout the year, we have been telling people to come back to see us in November and then we can help them file an application for next January.

Even those who submit an application on time have it processed one year later. They are told a year later that they are actually missing a particular document and that their application is not complete.

This brings me to the question: do you think this system should be in fact abolished?

● (1600)

[*English*]

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** Do you mean to clarify the quota system, the cap?

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** The cap.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** Yes.

[*English*]

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** In fact, our first recommendation is to remove the cap. That's why we couldn't answer the question about what is a reasonable cap. We're starting from the premise that it be based on the needs. Remove the cap, and determine the applications based on the needs.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** Absolutely. This is what we are seeing this year. We will soon reach the ceiling of 20,000 people.

Do you have anything to add, Mr. Ungar?

[*English*]

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** I'm not hearing anyone raise that this is a security issue, yet it's a bureaucratic processing issue. It just strikes me as profoundly odd that for some reason, this has become so.... You had the example of that one missing piece of paper. I've heard stories like this. I think all of us have heard such stories. This is not often raised as a security discourse. It begs the question, isn't this more about case management? We want to expedite this.

I agree with my colleagues. If someone has a young child, we would triage that to perhaps the top of the pile. If we're talking about an older family, maybe that's a lesser priority. I think we have to introduce some reasonableness into our assessment of the prioritization and expedite this. For a young family, I would say six months to a year is a reasonable time frame. For an older family, two years might function okay.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** I'll continue with you, Mr. Ungar.

You talked about acceptable processing times. You said family reunification is an important protection factor, and you talked about seven areas that need to be considered. You took the opportunity to tell us that the bureaucracy is very cumbersome and that we have to simplify things.

If you had to change the family reunification system, what would you propose?

[*English*]

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** I guess I was inspired, if I could, by what Canada just did with the refugees. Now, I understand that it was a huge financial investment. I'm not naive about that, but what struck me was that there was a moment in time when Canada processed.... It was not only in late 2015 and early 2016. This is something we have done before.

We have a backlog, as you pointed out, of 80,000 families or more. Is there a potential to perhaps clear this up as a one-time effort and simply assess families to see if they can justify the need to expedite this, with the same resources we just showed internationally? That is not to mention the goodwill this just brought Canada internationally in terms of what we did with the Syrian refugees.

My simple answer back is that I think there could be a net gain if we simply got rid of the wait-list to within a reasonable limit of 10,000 or something and then started again to see what we got. That would be my wish.

I wonder what the net gain of such an exercise would be if someone actually crunched the numbers. I have not, but I have colleagues who could. Would this rush to bring in family reunification, in a sense, create enough of a momentum?

I'm from Nova Scotia. You guys are out in Alberta. In Nova Scotia, the one thing we keep saying to Minister McCallum is, “Please, give us more”. Nova Scotia and P.E.I. have done a shining job of this. We are looking for more people. I'm going hat in hand here a little bit.

● (1605)

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** For the Ethno-cultural Council of Calgary, what would your suggestions be for improving the system in financial terms? I am talking about the financial burden of paying for an application, additional medical examinations, income requirements, and so on.

If that aspect of the system had to be improved, what would you propose?

[*English*]

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** Thank you for the question.

I think I'll just reiterate some of what we were recommending.

Obviously, we feel very strongly that the parent and grandparent program, which is the area that we just happen to know particularly well because of our research, is very important. We feel that all family class applicants make strong contributions to our society. We do see the burden that has been placed on families. In 2014 when the 5,000 cap came in, it came in with other requirements. An increase of 30% to the minimum necessary income doubled the sponsorship undertaking agreement to 20 years. It put in place this super visa as a suggestion that this was a viable alternative to the family reunification program.

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds, please.

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** I'll just highlight our recommendations. We want to remove the quota. We want to lower the minimum necessary income. We want to reduce the sponsorship undertaking period to 10 years. We want the super visa to be treated not as a family reunification program but as a visa, which it is.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes, please.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.):** Thank you to all of you for being here today as we further conduct our study on family reunification.

My first question is for Mr. Ungar. You mentioned in your testimony that vulnerable families benefit the most. Could you elaborate on that, please?

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** Sure.

What's interesting as the conversation roles out here is we hear numbers, but I think both of us, without having prepared our remarks in advance, are really saying something more along the lines of some analysis of the vulnerability of families or the benefits that they would receive.

If I tell you what I know as a researcher on this topic, I'm going to say that I think in terms of levels of vulnerability. I study resilience. I study what makes people well protected and most likely to succeed. That's what I specialize in. What I can tell you is that something like family reunification will have the biggest bang for the buck, the largest amount of change, what we in statistics terms talk about, the amount that will account for the most variance in life trajectories based on the vulnerability of the particular family. Now, I'm not saying that we should ignore families that are less vulnerable. Please don't misinterpret what I'm saying. But if you really thinking a little more in depth about this, the families who are really the most vulnerable, say, the refugees that came in as government assisted, would absolutely be for me, priority number one. Frankly, if you could get them any other supports, then you're going to have an exponential bump that is disproportionate to, say, bringing in a grandparent to another family that is already better resourced or better integrated into the family.

For me, I look at an equation as an algorithm of impact—the more vulnerability, the family reunification will probably produce a bigger impact—just as a concept.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** I want to give a small example. In my riding I have one brother that has been here for a couple of years. His brother was doing his application to come to Canada. He came to Canada as well. The one brother didn't have much experience in the English language quite yet—his English language skills weren't up to par—but the other brother did. What they did is they joined together and opened up a construction business. The one brother had a lot of on-the-job field experience. He can do estimates. The other brother, the one that is good in English, does all the paperwork, sends emails and bids on jobs, etc. That's just one example of where one family member is weak in certain skills and one has greater skills, and they come together and really build on their family unit and work together.

You mentioned an increase in social, financial, and cultural capital. Perhaps you could elaborate on that, too, please.

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** I think the reports and, if I could defer again, the stories we're hearing from the direct field.... I'm conscious of my role as a researcher, but if I defer to my colleagues who are in the service-providing organizations, we know there's this bump in all kinds of different capital. By capital we mean, of course, financial potential and that's in the reports that are coming out, but I think we also need to think about things like cultural continuity.

One of my side interests is in the area of countering violent extremism and immigrant youth. I know it's a discourse that doesn't always play out, but it has been on the agenda of this committee as well. It's not something we often want to talk about, but for me the broader issue isn't necessarily violence; it's about whether the next generation is going to have a sense of cultural continuity, a sense of fair treatment and social justice, and for better or for worse, family reunification and the terms of that fit into that discourse.

I see it in more global terms if we provide an opportunity to be, in a sense, mentored by an older sibling, an uncle, or a grandparent or whomever, you're creating a critical mass of cultural capital. Again, I'm not trying to equate necessarily.... Unfortunately, the discourse puts some violence issues along with immigration, especially when you add in adolescents or young people. What our work is trying to do is to change that conversation and talk about the resilience of those populations, but resilience requires protective factors and one of the things they need is cultural continuity and engagement with people who are going to mentor them and create a community that can support young people as they transition into adulthood.

It's not a bad strategy, in terms of thinking more holistically about some of the other problems which are sort of percolating that we don't necessarily want to talk about.

● (1610)

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** You mentioned also better short-term and long-term integration. If we had better social integration programs, what would they look like? We generally see with immigrants who come here as a family that maybe the parents at times integrate into the society, but we see the children integrating a lot faster and a lot quicker. What kind of programs would you think would be available to have better social integration, for example, for the parents who first come?

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** If we're talking about the parents, I might defer more to my colleagues in Calgary.

My focus is much more on when the kids get up to about age 24, and of course their families, and specifically on that. I can speak well to them in terms of, for instance, the continuity in language training which unfortunately a lot of kids lose if they drop out of school. Due to the challenges of school, we see a gap in services between the ages of 16 and 18 years old, but these are things nuanced for the kids themselves.

Integration is very good, but also one of the advantages of being a Canadian is that we don't emphasize acculturation. We're much more pluralistic in our mosaic. In fact, from a mental health point of view, what the researchers are saying is that it's actually a better approach here, that people are mentally healthier if we don't just think about blanket acculturation, but actually more about finding that middle ground, the third cultural space.

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

Mr. Tilson, you have five minutes please.

**Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC):** Ms. Antonio, you have made a recommendation to the committee that the cap be removed, and you're not the only one who's said that. In other words, that's a popular recommendation.

The committee has several issues that it's dealing with. One is what in the world are we going to do with this backlog? How are we going to recommend to the government that we get rid of this backlog? Another is, how are we going to cut down on the wait times which are extremely long? All of that ties in with your recommendation of getting rid of the cap.

One witness said that you can't deal with the wait times until you get rid of the backlog and it's just impossible to do that.

There are obviously different alternatives. The government can put more money into the system. I suppose it would be the same thing, but the government could hire more staff to process these things, or the government could develop new processes.

My question is for all of you. I'd like all three of you to comment on this, but we'll start with Ms. Bragg. One of you has said that we could streamline the process and that's an interesting one. How would you recommend to the committee that the processes be streamlined?

● (1615)

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** Thank you for the question.

When you were talking about putting more money into the system, I think that's a good idea. Putting more resources into the system, I think, is a good idea. Streamlining, I think, is a good idea. Of course, we're community advocates, so we don't work within the bureaucracy or the government necessarily, and we can't speak to the challenges of what you're suggesting, but I think—

**Mr. David Tilson:** I'm sorry to interrupt you, but that's a very important issue. It's great to say to get rid of the cap, but that's going to cost money, and we have to be responsible to the taxpayer.

**Ms. Bronwyn Bragg:** I understand that. I think when we talk about this issue, we're very cautious to just emphasize, and I know we've made this point, that while there may be a short-term cost to processing family class applications, it will be a long-term investment. There is a return on investment, so the taxpayer actually benefits by having families reunited and healthy and socially integrated in our communities.

There was another point. In terms of streamlining the process, one of the things that I heard quite a bit in talking to families was about the issue of documents that are required but then expire. For example, medical documents are valid for only one year. A family will submit an application, which takes time and money. It goes into the queue, and then it's not looked at, and then the documents become invalid. That's just one example of a small processing thing that would make things perhaps run more smoothly and take less time.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Ms. Antonio, with regard to streamlining the process, one witness said that we could get more technology into the system. Have you philosophized about that? Is there a way to cut back on the paperwork or the bureaucracy?

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** That's one of the greatest kinds of feedback, in support of Ms. Bragg here. The requirements are so onerous, so maybe review how it was before and how it is now, and which ones are really necessary. In our experience, when we were talking to the community members, some applications are able to be processed within a year for parents and grandparents. Look at those cases and see what makes them efficient and what makes the others inefficient. The question is, does it take one year to process 10,000 applications, or 5,000 applications, for grandparents?

That's all I would like to say, but there are cases that are being processed within one year, and grandparents are able to come. Some are settled.

**Mr. David Tilson:** You work with the system. There must be some bureaucracy that you find absolutely silly, or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's not slow.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** Yes. One of the things we're getting feedback about is why there is a requirement for a minimum of three years' income. For example, if there's a life-changing situation within the last year, we will have to alter the whole document. It goes back to them. It becomes a backlog. But the basic situation of the family, the need, for example—

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** —for grandparents is there, so why will the documents serve as a barrier to justifying the situation of the family? What is the best way to capture that? The minimum income requirement is also onerous.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Zahid, go ahead for five minutes, please.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.):** I'll take this opportunity to thank the panellists for coming today and providing their valuable input to the study we are undertaking.

My first question is for Mr. Ungar.

One of your topics of study has been families across cultures, immigration, and refugees. We have heard a lot about family during our study, the definition of a family. Our immigration system is based on the western definition of a nuclear family: two parents and their dependent children. But that isn't in line with the definition of a family in many other countries and cultures, including many of the countries Canada draws the maximum number of immigrants from. Their parents and grandparents, older children, and even sometimes aunts and uncles, often live under the same roof as a family.

Could you discuss the varying definitions of family and whether you believe the definition of family in our immigration regulations is still appropriate?

● (1620)

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** Thank you for that question.

That is such a hot-button issue here. Indeed, we have a kind of bias toward this nuclear family, which might represent my cultural space, but it doesn't necessarily represent many of the spaces of the people I work with, globally.

In fact, when you start thinking about who would be most effective for child care, it might be an aunt or an uncle. Our bias tends to be to define those key players as the grandparent or the parent, when in many other cultures that just wouldn't be the case. It would not be uncommon for a child to be actually raised by multiple parental figures in a home. We sort of shortchange that, creating more stress for families, when we have this bias toward one particular individual.

In fact, I would almost go out on a limb and say that in most cultures that I'm familiar with—if we really look at the global situation—it's quite unusual to have a nuclear family. It's an oddity, globally. Certainly, burdening grandparents, who are elderly, with care of young children is even a bit odder, globally. It doesn't tend to be like that. It tends to be more extended family, and you need a critical mass of people to create that.

There are sociologists, for instance—just a very small quip—who say that we pathologize single parents, but we don't have to. We just ask if a parent is single, married, or in a common-law relationship, and we sort of tick the box in our census, and everything else. But the real question that should be asked is, "If there was a crisis at midnight tonight, how many metres away would you need to go until you could find someone to actually help you with your children?" That is the benchmark of a cohesive community, and that's the way we need to be thinking about this—creating that critical mass of supports for people, which, I think, is what people naturally do when they do a secondary migration once they are inside the country.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** As a leading authority on resilience in children and young people, would you be able to comment on the value that having grandparents involved with parents in the raising of a child has on the resilience, emotional well-being, and long-term success of that child?

**Dr. Michael Ungar:** Absolutely. The case studies you'll hear from our colleagues in the field would say that.

Now, I just said, of course, that you want a larger matrix of individuals in the child's family, in the child's home. What grandparents do, perhaps uniquely, is in terms of culture. They convey to a child a sense of belonging. They are the ones who carry the story and the identity. If we want people not to disconnect.... Now, it's interesting that families.... I'm sure you're seeing this in your clientele. People are using Facebook and social media as a way of maintaining continuity of their identity in the absence of live flesh-and-blood people in their families. People are adapting and using technology in somewhat positive ways, but it's not as strong, especially for some vulnerable ages, and I'm going to say adolescents especially, not necessarily the younger children. Adolescents really need that sense of a grandparent present in their lives who can sometimes be there when there is a crisis happening. They are much more likely to listen to their grandparent than their parent at certain phases in their development.

I am seeing people smile at that, by the way.

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds, please.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** My next question is for Ms. Antonio.

A lot of people say that the sponsorship of parents and grandparents is a drain on the economy. I am an immigrant who came here 17 years ago. For the first four years, I did not work, because I had small kids, and I didn't have family support. Do you think that they are an economic drain?

**The Chair:** A very brief response, please.

**Ms. Marichu Antonio:** No, definitely not. They will enable parents to become more economically successful.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'd like to thank our panellists for appearing before the committee today, and for their insights.

We will now suspend for two minutes, to allow the next panel to assemble.

● (1620)

(Pause)

● (1625)

**The Chair:** Our committee will resume.

We have as witnesses before us this afternoon, Mr. Bissett, former ambassador and former executive director, Canadian Immigration Service.

As an individual, we have Mr. Puneet Uppal.

We were also to have Ms. De Gante from the Multicultural Association of Fredericton Inc. Welcome, Ms. De Gante.

We'll begin with Mr. Bissett, for seven minutes, please.

**Mr. James Bissett (Former Ambassador, Former Executive Director, Canadian Immigration Service, As an Individual):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm happy to have the opportunity to speak to the committee. I'm going to be as brief as I can, and get right to the point.

I think the real problem with family class is not, of course, with spouses and dependent children. It's with parents and grandparents. It's always been a very difficult and complex job to try to balance the economic with the family class and with humanitarian programs and it can also be troubling. It's more acute today because of the very large increase in immigration since the 1990s. As the immigration levels increase quite enormously, so do the number of parents who want to come and join their loved ones here.

The problem is essentially one of money. This is at the heart of the problem, and the high costs of admitting large numbers of elderly migrants. Studies have estimated that the social welfare costs, that is, OAS and the government supplementary program and other transfers, and the health costs during the lifetime of an elderly immigrant who comes here at the age of 65 and survives until 85 years old—which is the vital statistics figure—in that period of time, for each one of those elderly migrants, the cost is $300,000. That's a lot of money. That's at the heart of the problem.

The way it's been calculated is up to other people to decide, but more than one study has indicated that. That's the heart of the problem. It's a lot of money to bring in those people.

As an example, the Department of Immigration some time ago, in 2011, estimated there were about 275,000 sponsored parents and grandparents living in Canada over the age of 65, and assuming that they lived to the age of 85, their health care costs alone would total $27 billion. This did not estimate that many parents come here under the age of 65.

Another study by a private sector economist using data from the C.D. Howe Institute estimated that senior parents and grandparents receive on average $152,880 in old age security and guaranteed income supplement and other transfers if they live for that period from 65 to 85 years. That is the real problem.

Maybe another problem is the fact that now parents of any age can be sponsored. Part of the problem there is many of the parents are quite young and among the ones who arrive with them are three, four, or perhaps five siblings, who in turn can sponsor husbands and fiancées. That creates what all immigration officials don't like very much, chain migration, because the ones who are coming in do not have to meet any kind of skill, education, or other requirements.

It was for this reason that previous governments in the past, both Liberal and Conservative, put an age limit on parents and grandparents. It used to be that you couldn't bring your parents into Canada unless they had reached the age of 60 or a grandparent before the age of 65. In my view, the age limit would not have much impact today because of the great numbers.

The other issue, of course, is the 150,000 or so backlog that existed back in 2011 was the beginning of concern on the part of all governments about costs, because they found out that there were 150,000 sponsored parents and grandparents waiting to get in here who were qualified to come, and it was just a question of whether they could be processed in time. Governments since then have been finding ways and means to either slow the flow down or try to get rid of the backlog, which is not easily done.

The previous Conservative government did make a preliminary effort to try to get control of that situation by putting on a cap of 500 applications, and then trying to increase the numbers coming in from the backlog. I'm not sure it worked, but they did make an attempt at it.

● (1630)

The other thing the Conservatives did, which I think was very good and should certainly exist, was to introduce the idea of the super visa, so that parents and grandparents could come to visit their relatives an unlimited number of times for a period of two years and not have to get the visa renewed every time they wanted to come. That enabled a certain balance to occur, whereby people in the backlog could at least come to visit their loved ones here. It was a very good idea. Australia has already implemented it.

I don't have any solutions to this, although I have some ideas about it. One other way by which other countries such as Australia tackle this issue is to have what they call the balance of family. If you apply for your father and your mother and they are living in a country in which three or four of their sons and daughters are living, you will not be able to sponsor them to Australia. But if you are here and are trying to sponsor your parents who are on their own and are not looking after other dependants, then they're welcome to come. That has slowed down the flow of parents and grandparents to Australia, but it seems to be working.

In addition to that—I'm not sure how they do this—the Australians basically ask people to put up a bond of about 40,000 Australian dollars, if they're going to bring their parents or their grandparents.

We're not the only country dealing with this, but we are the only country bringing in such large numbers of people, and that's what has accelerated the problem and aggravated it.

Thank you.

● (1635)

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

**Mr. James Bissett:** Can I add a postscript to that?

The figures I gave you are pretty solid figures—they come from the department and they come from private economists—but probably the best study I could recommend for the committee is one that has been done by a colleague of mine, Martin Collacott. He has done an excellent study called "The Canadian Family Class Immigration". I would recommend that every member of the committee have a look at it. It's really good. I have a copy here, if you want me to table it.

**The Chair:** If you table it, we'll make sure it's distributed.

Thank you.

Mr. Uppal, you have seven minutes, please.

**Mr. Puneet Uppal (Electrical and Control Systems Engineer, As an Individual):** Hello. Thanks for considering me as a witness.

I'm personally affected by the processing times for spouses and parents. I applied for my parents seven years ago. My parents are alone in India because my brother and I both came to Canada as students. We both immigrated under the provincial nomination program. We are both engineers.

I got my citizenship last year. I applied for my wife's PR seven months ago, and what I was told is that it can take up to 18 months to get the PR processed. What I also learned is that my wife cannot apply for a visitor visa to visit me because her PR is under processing.

I can't visit my wife because I have already exhausted my vacation time. I took about three months earlier this year to visit India to get married, and now I can't take any more vacation. I can't even imagine having to be apart from my wife for a year and a half. I'm pretty sure I'll have to quit my job and move back to India temporarily.

I have listed a few recommendations in my written brief about helping us deal with these processing times. My first recommendation is to reduce this processing time to six to eight months. This is being implemented in the U.S., the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia. One thing is, if you can't bring the processing time down, to at least issue some sort of super visa to the spouse so that the couple can be united.

For me it's personally a lot of strain. I'm living far apart from my parents and from my wife. My parents are aging, and they're literally alone, because my younger brother is here with me in Canada.

My last recommendation is to reduce the processing time for parents to two years. As I said, I've been waiting seven years for them to get PR, and there is literally no end limit. It could take 15 years. I have no idea when they will get the PR.

That's it. Thank you.

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

Ms. De Gante, you have seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante (Executive Director, Multicultural Association of Fredericton Inc.):** Good afternoon. My name is Lisa Bamford De Gante. I'm the executive director of the Multicultural Association of Fredericton Incorporated.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the pressing issue of family reunification. I have witnessed and experienced the impact of family reunification, and the delay of it or the denial of it, on clients, colleagues, and my own family in my work with immigrant-serving organizations for almost 30 years.

Since 1974, the Multicultural Association of Fredericton has played a vital role in our small centre in our community by establishing communication and fostering understanding between the community, settled immigrants, and newcomers. MCAF accomplishes this by encouraging and promoting the concept of diversity and inclusion by providing newcomers to Canada with settlement services, language instruction, employment services, and community networking. It works overall on the creation of an inclusive and welcoming community with many partners in the community.

Through funding from IRCC, the province, the city, and countless others as well as through extensive community partnerships, the MCAF newcomer programs deliver a range of resettlement and settlement services, including language training, employment services, children and youth programming, and community connections, to facilitate the integration and full participation of immigrants in our community.

The province of New Brunswick had the honour of receiving the largest number of Syrian refugees per capita in the past year. I want to look at that in a demographic context for our province.

In 2011, for the first time, New Brunswick experienced a larger number of deaths than births. The gap at that point was only nine. But in the first quarter of 2016, the gap increased. New Brunswick experienced in the first three months of 2016 over 1,900 deaths, the highest number of deaths on record, and the least number of births, at just over 1,500. The gap was 390. In spite of this, in that same period, New Brunswick set a 70-year immigration record overall. New Brunswick grew by over 1,133, despite the larger number of deaths and births. That was the largest single gain in six years.

In Fredericton, the city in which I work specifically, we received 418 government-assisted refugees in three short months, from late December to the end of March last year. In total, we resettled 443 GARs, government-assisted refugees, in that period, and 410 of them were from Syria. This was a 527% increase over the total number in the previous year.

In March and April, MCAF was able to participate in a pilot resettlement project with an additional 236 Syrians who were to be relocated to the original resettlement sites in the province as well as to four smaller centres. It was not to deliver new resettlement services but to deliver settlement services. This was a very interesting and unique pilot. All of those families were re-destined by the end of April.

Our organization has also worked closely with sponsorship groups, who sponsored an additional 10 families in the greater Fredericton area comprising 55 individuals.

Overall, Fredericton has welcomed a record number of 573 refugees, or 114 families, since April 2015. To give you some context, the greater Fredericton area has a total population of 124,000. The impact is great on the community. I wish to emphasize not just the number of refugees, 573, but the number of families, 114, because the notion of family is central here.

The most pressing issue for the vast majority of these families is the well-being of the family they've left behind and the desire to reunite. This pressing concern will affect their ability to settle and integrate and participate in the economy of Canada.

Immigrants arriving under family sponsorship streams are arriving with pre-existing natural support systems, which can assist with their orientation to the community and to government services, finances, and emotional support.

● (1640)

Seeing the impact of delays in family reunification, and also the impact when family reunification happens, our organization recommends that we increase the level of family reunification, particularly in light of the smaller centres and the increase in the level of immigration, that we look at raising quotas in proportion with the increased level of immigration, and that we expedite family reunification. Many children wait over two years before being able to reunite with their parents in Canada. For family members, refugees, overseas processing may take 31 months.

We'd like to see something more like an express entry of a six- to eight-month period for family reunification. We'd also like to see a broader, more inclusive definition of family. You may consider siblings in that. We'd definitely like to see the previous age of dependants reinstated, from 18 back to 22, particularly looking at the fact that children who are in school are still dependent. We do encourage children to access post-secondary education.

We also would like to look at the minimum income requirements for sponsorship. Those requirements are set at a national level and they do not reflect the cost of living in different regions of Canada.

● (1645)

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** We do reflect the differentiation from government-assisted refugees. Rather than having one national cookie cutter, we really need to look at the cost of living in each region of Canada.

We also know that there's higher retention for newcomers in New Brunswick who are family class.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. De Gante.

We'll begin with Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette for seven minutes.

Welcome.

**Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette (Winnipeg Centre, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I very much appreciate the opportunity to come here today.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for coming.

I want to mention that I have an indigenous poppy. Someone asked me what this was, and they didn't know it was a poppy. My wife made it. It took around 10 hours of bead work. I'm very happy that I'm wearing it today. It's not some strange flower or something.

As an indigenous person, I find it very interesting to be here to participate in an immigration debate. We've had the French come, and the British in these waves, and every time we've always looked down upon these people as being somehow not worthy of coming, as being a drain. We said that about the Irish, the Ukrainians, the Italians, the Sikhs, and the Chinese, in all these successive waves that have come to our country. I've heard some interesting facts and figures and I'd love to gain a little bit more understanding of that.

My first question is related to the 2016 immigration levels plan. It shows that the government intends to admit around 80,000 family class immigrants, of which 20,000 are to be parents and grandparents. In your view, are these targets adequate? If not, why? What are the implications of these targets with respect to family reunification, and why are families important to people? Why should we allow families in? Should we be concentrated on only the economic aspect or are there additional aspects that are important when people come to this country?

The question is for all three.

**The Chair:** Perhaps we'll follow the same order of the presentations.

Mr. Bissett.

**Mr. James Bissett:** I think part of the problem is we're bringing in very large numbers. If you're bringing in large numbers, it's not going to be possible to process them quickly.

I lived in an age in the 1980s, when I was in charge of immigration. We had immigration officers abroad. They were usually equipped with a security officer who would do the security checking. All of the people coming were interviewed and counselled face to face by an immigrant visa officer. In the case of spouses and the case of family, grandparents and parents, they were seldom interviewed. They were simply processed very quickly. If they met the medical requirements and the sponsor met the requirements for sponsoring people, they were dealt with quickly. That was a different time. Now we're dealing with up to 300,000 people in a variety of countries around the world.

Processing has been cut, if you can call it that. Now very few of the immigrants coming here, even the ones in the so-called economic class are interviewed. The interview is skipped and the documents that the immigrant files are sent to Ottawa. A civil servant looks them over. If they look pretty good they stamp them and send them back to Dhaka or wherever and the immigrant gets on the next plane to Montreal or Toronto. They've never been seen by an immigration officer. The system has been sped up but it has lacked the kind of ability, I think, to deal with the numbers.

In my own view, the family class, parents and grandparents, should be given a priority. Bear in mind what I said about costs: it's going to cost, and the taxpayer will deeply resent it if they see parents and grandparents being brought in from other countries when their tax load is being increased and they're going to be paying. That's what the politicians have to worry about. Fortunately, I don't have to.

● (1650)

**Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette:** As a person with a bit of ignorance on the immigration issue, although I wish I were more knowledgeable, are there currently medical exams that are conducted?

**Mr. James Bissett:** Yes.

**Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette:** Generally, people should be of health.

**Mr. James Bissett:** Absolutely. All immigrants have to be examined for health purposes.

**Mr. Robert-Falcon Ouellette:** Then it will continue on with the —

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Uppal.

**Mr. Puneet Uppal:** Regarding the spouses, the waiting period is about 18 months. I disagree with that because my spouse is healthy and she is an engineer. We are just waiting to be united. Right now, there is no way for us to see each other. As I said, I can't take any more vacation. She cannot visit me.

In terms of taxes, I'm a citizen here and I pay taxes. I've been paying taxes for the past 12 years. Since I arrived here, I've been in the workforce.

To me, uniting spouses should be a priority. If immigration cannot bring down the processing time, at least issue super visas to spouses. When it comes to grandparents, my parents are completely healthy. It's just that as I am aging, they are aging too. For me, I've been waiting seven years now. They visit me on a super visa, but again, I'd just like to be together as a complete family here.

That's all I have to say. Focus on the spouses first. The super visa program is excellent for parents, but for spouses, there needs to be something to tackle that processing time.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. De Gante.

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** The point made by the previous speaker about the denial of temporary visas when people are in process for sponsorship is a further hardship upon the relationship and upon the family. We've seen cases where relationships haven't survived when later sponsorship did happen. It's very challenging. We've seen cases where people have decided that maybe they can't stay in Canada and they need to go back.

I think also the point that was made earlier in terms of health care, yes, denials are made if there are any flags on the health exam and people have to go through it perhaps repeatedly.

Also in terms of processing times, I know in our own family's sponsorship, it ended up being three different levels of sponsorship because of the lag and the time delay in the processing. During that time, we were forced to pay for our son, my stepson, to go to high school here—

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** That's just an example, but I think we need to look at those timelines. If we can do express entry for economic immigrants, we can do express entry for family class.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have seven minutes, please.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Mr. Bissett, I'm always pleased to see you and hear you. You always give good counsel to the committee. I'd like to ask you some questions with respect to backlogs and wait times, which is one of the principal issues that the committee is concerned with.

The committee has heard considerable testimony on wait times and backlogs, particularly for family members. We're hearing some now. These testimonies vary depending on the source country and the type of family member, of course. In addition, we heard testimony on Tuesday which suggested that you cannot increase the numbers until you clear the backlogs, and that you can only clear the backlogs with the following: one, increase the funding to the different processes; two, increase the number of staff, which I suppose is the same thing as increasing the funding; and three, limit the intake. There was the suggestion of technological improvements. You might have some concepts about what technological improvements could be made to the system to expedite processing.

Mr. Bissett, given your experience as the former head of the immigration service, can you tell me what your take is on this? Can you advise us how the government should tackle backlogs and wait times, while being responsible stewards of the taxpayers' dollars?

● (1655)

**Mr. James Bissett:** Whoever gave you their advice about how to clear up the backlog I think was close to the mark.

If you want to clear up the backlog...let me go way back. In the 1950s, if you were an immigrant here, you could bring your brother, your sister, your aunt, your uncle, your nephew, your niece, your parents, and also your spouse, if you desired to do it. Immediately, in parts of Europe, particularly in Italy, there was a massive backlog of thousands of uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters.

In order to get rid of the backlog, the minister at the time had to make a tough decision and decided that she would cut out the ability to sponsor uncles, aunts, nieces, and even brothers and sisters. They could no longer be sponsored. Then we sent extra officers to Rome to try to process and get rid of the backlog, which we eventually did. The minister paid the price for this in the next election. She was defeated in a constituency that had a large Italian population.

But that's the problem. If you wanted to clear up the backlog, you would not allow new applicants; you'd cut it off. Then you would send a task force around to the various offices to process the relatives and get them in quickly.

That would cost money, and it would cost a minimum amount of money compared with what it would cost once they got here, because then they would become eligible for free health care. They would become eligible after a certain period of time for the age supplement and the old age security and other benefits, which they wouldn't have paid for, nor would the sponsors have paid for those. You would run the risk of doing that.

In addition to that, if you were going to concentrate on the family class, it would mean that the highly skilled, educated, and experienced people whom we're looking for in the economic class would have to be cut back.

It could be done and it could be done fairly quickly, but it would be very risky to do it politically, I'd say.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Have you any thoughts on technological improvements, in other words changing the whole process by which we do things?

**Mr. James Bissett:** I don't have any ideas. I'm very suspicious of the digital age.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Me too; I can't figure it out.

**Mr. James Bissett:** Part of the problem is that too much of it is being done electronically and not enough with common sense.

I went on a flight to Moscow last year, and I got to the airport and they found I wasn't on the flight. Why? It was because the Russians had switched my name from Bissett to James, and the surname was James. I got that straightened around and said, “Fine, then I can get on the flight.” They said, “No, you can't get on the flight. Your name is now James in the digital circuit electronically, and you can't get on the flight.”

I'm not much help technologically, but I don't think technology is the problem. I think the problem is simply too many immigrants, not enough staff, not enough resources, and the consequence on the family class is extremely high costs. Any finance minister, when he finds out what the costs are for bringing in more parents and grandparents, shudders.

**Mr. David Tilson:** I don't know whether you've had an opportunity to review the 2017 levels plan that the minister announced on Monday, which indicates that there's really no overall increase from the 2016 levels. There are some changes, but it's basically the same. There's a sizable decrease in refugees, given the end of the Syrian refugee initiative. This is somewhat offset by an increase in economic migrants and a small increase in the spousal and children category.

Do you have any thoughts on the 2017 levels plan?

● (1700)

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Mr. James Bissett:** I think they're too high in the first place. Second, the so-called emphasis on the economic class is somewhat misleading, because in the economic class you also have the spouses and dependants who the selected skilled immigrants bring with them. They're never counted into the family class, and they should be.

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

**A voice:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Madam Sansoucy, you have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to all the witnesses for their presentations.

My first question is for Ms. Bamford De Gante.

You concluded your presentation with a recommendation. You said that current income requirements for family sponsorship should reflect regional differences.

Do you have any other recommendations?

[*English*]

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** May I expand on that one, just a bit?

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** Of course.

[*English*]

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** I've seen cases where people were eligible to do a family sponsorship, and when the income level changed, they were no longer eligible, so although they had been in the queue, they were then out of the queue.

At the same time, in one particular sponsorship case, the people they were sponsoring had a pension from Germany that was going to be coming with them, and there was no way to document that in the income process. In this case, they were parents whose only two children were here with their families. Their only two daughters were living in our city. It was really a great hardship for the two daughters, who were both working here and raising their families, to have their two parents alone back in Germany.

I would raise that, as well—to be able to look at transferable income. People being sponsored are not always dependants.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** Okay.

Based on your experience with families filing sponsorship applications, do you feel the financial burden associated with those applications is too high? I am thinking in particular of the fees for an application.

[*English*]

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** It's not so much the application fees. I'm not referring to the application fees as much as to the minimum income level cut-off because obviously, the cost of supporting three family members in Vancouver or in Toronto is very different from the cost of supporting three family members in New Brunswick, where the cost of an average house is under $200,000.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** You told us about welcoming Syrian refugees in your community.

In your opinion, should the family reunification system work in the same way as other types of reception?

[*English*]

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** Obviously, when people are coming in as refugees, their concerns about family reunification are very pressing, and they are concerned about the well-being of their families. Every day I have three or four different people coming to my office asking what can happen with their family. They are still in limbo, between countries. Obviously, that's pressing.

I think the same applies to the new Atlantic Canada immigration pilot. As we look at increased levels, we need to look at the fact that we are not individuals; we are parts of families and we function as families in our economy and in our society. We need to define those families and, if they are eligible to be sponsored, expedite that process for them.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** Thank you.

Mr. Uppal, you told us about the tension and stress you are experiencing from being separated from your spouse and your parents.

What are all the effects of a separation that has lasted for such a long time?

[*English*]

**Mr. Puneet Uppal:** Recently, for my parents, it wasn't too bad, because they visited me in the summertime, using the super visa program, but for my spouse, it's really stressful, because she has no idea. Every time we look at the processing time of a year and a half, we literally scare ourselves off. I'm working, and it has been affecting my work. We have those phone conversations, “Hey, when am I going to see you?” We have no idea, because every time we call the immigration department, they just tell us it takes about a year and a half.

Recently, I found out that my file has been sitting in Delhi for seven months untouched. I had to do an MP inquiry to get them to take a look at my file, and my file was just opened two weeks ago in New Delhi. In the past seven months, the file was untouched, and my wife.... We couldn't really apply for a visitor visa, because the immigration department won't give a visa to spouses who are still under process.

My only recommendation about spouses is if they can't control the processing time, at least give them the visitor visa. As I said, she is an engineer, like me, and if she gets here—

● (1705)

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** Let me ask you the question the other way around.

What will the benefits be once you are all together in Canada?

[*English*]

**Mr. Puneet Uppal:** The first the thing is that I want to see my wife. That's the basic thing, to see my wife, and to make an economic contribution. I live in Vancouver. It's quite expensive to live here. She'll be coming here and contributing to the economy, right? She'll be a taxpayer like me.

When it comes to my parents, my dad works in India, so he'll have a pension when he comes here. He is getting close to retirement in India, so when he comes here, he'll have a pension from India. It would be good to be here as a family.

I only get three weeks of vacation. I went to the extra effort of taking three months off, and that was time off without pay. You can imagine making mortgage payments in Vancouver. It's really hard. That's why I suggest, especially for my wife, getting that time down, please.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds left.

**Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy:** You said you have to visit your country of origin often. Do you also need to support your family there, or are your family members financially self-sufficient?

[*English*]

**Mr. Puneet Uppal:** No, my parents are independent, and my wife is independent too. She works in India. I send her some money, but she is financially independent.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Sahota, for seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.):** Thank you. It's nice to be visiting this committee today. There are a lot of interesting conversations about things that I deal with a lot in my riding.

From the last panel, we heard quite a lot about how having family with you supports the mental and economic stability of the overall family, and I can attest to that myself, especially the cultural continuity and cohesion we heard of. Confidence is something I can definitely attest to. When my grandmother immigrated to Canada to support my parents, my confidence level definitely shot up. It helps to have someone around to care for you when your parents are working multiple jobs and can't spend that extra time with you. It helps to have a loved one there who will teach you language and culture and things that keep you grounded. Perhaps a lot of kids without that family support would drift and maybe get into trouble without having adult supervision around. It's vital.

As an adult now, for my son.... I was born here, but my in-laws and my parents both immigrated in the 1970s and without them, I wouldn't be able to do this job because I need that family support structure at home. My being a member of Parliament, I wouldn't have been able to do it if I did not have my extended family around me to support my son.

It is really important in order to further the economy. Being an MP from Brampton and having grown up there, I can definitely attest to the fact that immigrants support the economy there. They are some of the highest homebuyers and without them, I don't think we would have some of the bustling suburbs around the Toronto area that we currently have today.

We heard from the witness from Fredericton that the Atlantic provinces are desperate for immigration. They have an aging population. They need economic immigrants.

Mr. Uppal is an economic immigrant and he made a statement a little earlier saying that he may need to leave and go back to be with his spouse. Is that what we really want to do? At one moment, we say that we want to bring in economic immigrants and the next moment we say, as I heard from Mr. Bissett, that well, with economic immigrants, along comes a spouse, along come parents, but what's wrong with that? Mr. Uppal says his wife is also an engineer. She'll be bringing benefits to our country as well. She is one of those highly skilled people that we desperately need. Along the way, they may have children and they may need the support of their grandparents and their parents around.

I can't imagine how we solve this by cutting off immigration, how we solve the problem that Canada faces, which is an aging population and the need for immigration in order to thrive. We need to continue immigration and it's just about how we do it in the right way and how we support the immigrants who come here, so they can be successful and not end up being a burden on many other services, as long as they have those supports in place.

Mr. Bissett, what do you think that right balance is? You are saying it's an economic burden, but somewhere along the line you said there was a time when we couldn't sponsor parents until they were over 65. That seems counterintuitive to me. We heard from the previous panel that if they're able to sponsor their parents quicker, at an age when they are perhaps in their forties or fifties, they can still contribute to the economy in the sense of working. I would still say that even after 65, there is a big contribution to the social fabric of Canada.

Where do you think we need to make the cuts and why?

● (1710)

**Mr. James Bissett:** I wasn't suggesting cuts in any one category. I was just saying that we are bringing in 260,000 or 280,000 immigrants every year, and probably almost the same number of temporary workers. They all have to be processed and that has put a tremendous burden on the bureaucracy. That's part of the problem.

I'm not saying we shouldn't have immigration. Going back to what you asked about the balance.... Right up until the nineties, the balance was roughly 60% selected immigrants, because they had the skills training, the professions, and the jobs that we needed here for the labour force, and roughly 40% humanitarian cases, refugees or family. I don't know what the balance is now, but I think the economic class, too, is....

You have to be very careful about that. All governments like to let everybody know that we are bringing in the people with the skills and the training that we need, but if you analyze the annual movement pretty carefully, you'll find that only about 18% to 20% of the immigrants coming here are selected because they have skills training and experience that we need. The rest of the movement consists of family, refugees, and provincially sponsored immigrants, who don't have to meet the federal criteria of the points system. If you analyze that carefully, as I have done, you get 17% or 18% who are selected because they have skills and training.

A lot of the provincial nominees are recruited by agents overseas, and they are low-skilled workers. They don't have to meet the education or even the language requirements. That's a big bulk of the immigrants we are bringing in.

I am a grandfather. I have 11 grandchildren. I have a son in Baghdad. I have a son in Luxembourg. They have children. I'm not around to look after them, but with the ones I have here, I know what the burden can be on grandfathers and grandmothers. I am even looking after their dogs when they are away, so I'm very sympathetic about that.

What I am saying, apart from any personal views I might have, is that the issue with the family class is money.

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds, please.

**Mr. James Bissett:** If you want to bring in your parents and grandparents—

**Ms. Ruby Sahota:** Do you have any numbers? I know you gave some numbers on aging seniors, but for people who come under skilled categories in the express entry system, for refugees, or for those who have come at a younger age as a spouse or whatever, do you have any numbers on those who are a drain on our society versus those who are working in factories or in different service sectors?

**Mr. James Bissett:** I wouldn't say they're necessarily a drain—

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

Perhaps, Mr. Bissett, when it comes to numbers, you could pass that on, because we're over time at this point.

● (1715)

**Mr. James Bissett:** Yes. It's all in the study I will table for you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Saroya.

**Mr. James Bissett:** I just have one comment on that.

One study shows that family members over the age of 60 or 65 in Canada are making, roughly, below $15,000 a year.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes, please.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Thank you to New Brunswick, Vancouver, and James here for their knowledge and perspectives on how we shorten the lines.

To Puneet in Vancouver, what are your thoughts, on the parent application, regarding the income requirement for the previous three years? Are you okay with that?

**Mr. Puneet Uppal:** As I said, income has never been a problem for me, because I make good money as an engineer. I forget what the requirement was, but when I applied, I was well above it. Maybe it was $35,000 or something. Income is not a problem for me, because I am in one of the higher income brackets.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** We are looking at the overall situation. In your case, you're good.

Lisa, is there anything in New Brunswick? When people apply to sponsor parents and grandparents, one of the requirements to process the application is a three-year income requirement, how much money they are making, and whether they are qualified.

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** The three-year delay obviously poses hardships on families. A lot happens in three years. The families who are here are working and participating in our economy, and that's how they are able to apply for sponsorship.

Again, I emphasize that the cost of living here is not the same as the cost of living in MTV, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Just as we don't.... When we bring in government-assisted refugees, they don't receive the same income in each province. It's based on the social assistance rates in that province, so I'm surprised that the minimum is a uniform national cut-off point.

Again, the family I was speaking of was able to do a sponsorship, but they had to wait until their income was raised to that level and then reapply. The previous speaker mentioned the cut-off rates, but they also depend obviously on the size of the family.

I do think they need to be regional. Our economies are regional. Our cost of living is regional, and our wages are regional.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** It sounds good. I guess we should look into this requirement.

Mr. Bissett, what do you think of the three years?

**Mr. James Bissett:** I would heartily agree that there should be regional differences. We know there are regional differences in income and it would only make sense.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Puneet, if I hear you correctly, you're saying it's 18 months' time for your wife to get here, but if we have some sort of a solution, such as, if she can come to the country with a visitor visa, is that acceptable?

**Mr. Puneet Uppal:** Yes, that's totally acceptable because I'm already approved as a sponsor. First, my file went to Mississauga. They took care of my income slips. I submitted all my T4s and my notice of assessment. I was approved within a week and that was in March. In March, I applied, and in April, I was approved, but my file has been sitting in New Delhi since April and the file hasn't moved yet. What I'm requesting is that during that waiting period, when I have qualified as a sponsor, my wife should be welcome to apply for a visitor visa, but right now, that's not the case. If you apply, you get rejected.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Lisa, do you have any thoughts on this one?

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** I should also mention that in the delays in the sponsorship process, reading the application guidelines, many families early on think that because the process is tentatively approved, they do their medicals. We've seen that many families have had to do double medicals because the medical expires before their case is processed. In my own family, both my husband and my son had to do two medicals and we thought our daughter would need a third as well. There's a great cost to families who have been approved in principle. I think a previous question was regarding the application process and costs.

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Mr. Bissett, do you want to add something?

● (1720)

**Mr. James Bissett:** In my day, as they say, right up until the 1990s, priority was given to spouses. If a husband came here on his own and then wanted to bring his wife, every effort was made to get her here quickly. The delay, again, is because of numbers, I'm afraid.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Zahid, you have five minutes, please.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** I want to thank the witnesses for providing their valuable input.

My first question is directed to Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante.

One of the main categories for family reunification we are looking at is the parents and grandparents category. It has been said by some, largely without research or evidence to back it up, that this category is an economic drain on Canada. However, we have also heard from several academics, and just in the last session we heard from some people also that they have produced research that shows parents and grandparents make a positive economic contribution. When looking at their impact on the family as a whole, we see that the child care they provide allows both spouses to enter the workforce and pay taxes. We also heard that the average age of this category is younger than you would expect and most have another decade in the workforce when they arrive. When the parents and grandparents are back in the country of origin, oftentimes money is being sent back to support them, money that is leaving the Canadian economy, because in some cultures the children have to look after and support their parents.

Could you discuss the economic contribution the parents and grandparents can make that you have seen in your experience with the families you deal with?

**Ms. Lisa Bamford De Gante:** I definitely see the situations you've just spoken of, in which parents and grandparents make a huge contribution to child care, but also to cooking at home and having meals ready, given the long hours that many parents are working. Our notion of lifespan now is to 100, and we're looking at increased ages in the labour market for all of us. My own father is 80, an engineer, and doesn't plan to retire until he's unable to continue. My mother-in-law as well, at 80, is very active. She would be someone who would fit into the super visa category, going back and forth. I think she has a huge contribution to make to her grandchildren, maintaining the culture, and to our family's economy when she's here visiting just by maintaining our home life while we're out in the labour market. She's also very involved in the community, sharing her culture with other seniors and she really wants to contribute here, even as a visitor.

New Brunswick is the canary in the coal mine. Our country's average age is increasing. Atlantic Canada is seeing it first, but it's coming. The year 2030 is the year “Knowledge Matters” gave as to when all new population growth in the country would come through immigration.

We need to find ways to expedite the system. I've seen it work better. We're always told that we can't be sure of the delay in the secondary country, but sometimes the processing there is actually faster.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid:** My next question is for Mr. Bissett.

You mentioned that people above a certain age usually earn less than $15,000, but do you see that with their support, the income of the family, the unit, increases because a family has parents or grandparents living with them?

My next-door neighbours have three young daughters. Both husband and wife work because they have their parents with them. I have seen the grandmother dropping the kids off in the morning at school, picking them up for lunch, cooking for them, and taking them out for a walk. She is looking after them until sunset, when the mother comes back. Although she is not earning, she is making the income of that unit increase because, naturally, the mother wouldn't be able to work if she has to look after three daughters and she doesn't have the support of the grandmother.

What would you say on that?

**Mr. James Bissett:** I completely understand that, and that's happening in many, many thousands of cases. But the facts and the reality of it is, from these studies, which are authentic and are done by StatsCanada, and so on, in the case that you gave, the grandmother may be helping the parents go out and work, both of them, but at one point, the grandmother may have to go to hospital or she may acquire dementia and she has to get health care. That's what they're looking at. They're looking at the aggregate of what happens when parents and grandparents over the age of 65 come to Canada and they live for that 20-year period and what it's going to cost the taxpayers.

● (1725)

**The Chair:** I'd like to thank the panel for their insights, and I would just like to make one request of Mr. Bissett.

You've referenced studies a number of times, in which this $300,000 figure is quantified. Could you please provide those studies to the committee as reference?

**Mr. James Bissett:** Yes. I have it here.

**The Chair:** You've referenced several studies, so, if you could provide those, that would be of tremendous help for the committee as we do our work.

I would like to thank the panellists for their insights, as I said previously.

We will now suspend for one minute and go in camera to deal with committee business.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]