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Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

This is meeting number five of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are here for the study of the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B), 2019-20, votes 1b and 10b under Department of Citizenship and Immigration. Also, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are here to study of the mandate of the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

Good morning, everyone.

I would like to welcome the Honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship here before the standing committee.

Good morning, Minister. It is your first appearance before this committee.

I also welcome the departmental officials, Catrina Tapley, deputy minister, Harpreet Kochhar, assistant deputy minister, operations, Marian Campbell Jarvis, assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy, and Daniel Mills, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer.

Thank you all for coming here today.

Minister, I understand you will be leaving after the first hour and the officials will stay here for the second hour. The floor is yours. You have 10 minutes for your opening remarks.

[Translation]

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

Thank you to all of the members of this committee for allowing me my first opportunity to come and address you.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we gather today on the traditional territory of the Algonquin nation.

I'm pleased to make my first appearance before this committee as the Minister for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

As a result of Canada's history of immigration, today more than one in five Canadians were born outside of Canada. This is a strength for our country and a source of great pride. Canada's com-

mitment to diversity and inclusion is essential to making our nation and this world a better place.

[Translation]

That is why the Government of Canada is focused on building an inclusive society with a sense of belonging, trust, and shared values throughout our country.

[English]

We know that immigrants make important contributions to Canada, both economically and through cultural diversity. Our government will continue to defend immigration in this country. Our aim is to further improve Canada's immigration system for the benefit of all Canadians and newcomers. This is no small task.

The Prime Minister has given me a very important mandate, one that is vital to our future economic prosperity and one that is absolutely essential to who we are. I have already begun this work in earnest.

As you know, in recent years our government has moved to a multi-year levels plan. This approach allows us to work more effectively with our partners all across the country as we make responsible increases to immigration. My department will soon table its annual report to Parliament on immigration, which will include Canada's multi-year levels plan for the years 2020 to 2022.

Immigration builds vibrant and dynamic communities. It gives Canadian businesses the skills they need to thrive in global markets and to create good-paying middle-class jobs. Our government is working with our counterparts to ensure that these benefits are distributed right across the country, particularly in this period where several regions have been affected by labour shortages.

• (0850)

[Translation]

We live in an increasingly competitive world and we must seize the opportunity to work together to ensure that Canada remains a world leader.

[English]

I've travelled to Geneva and to Germany where Canada has been recognized as a world leader and a shining example for the rest of the world on immigration. In fact, recently Germany invited us to share the lessons we have learned together over many years. These lessons have strengthened our system, which has been hailed by the OECD as the "benchmark for other countries" when it comes to integration.

To seize the opportunity and to stay in that position as a world leader, we are working on various initiatives to enhance economic immigration everywhere in Canada. Let's take the Atlantic immigration pilot for example, which has been a tremendous success. We are building on it to attract even more skilled immigrants to live and work in Atlantic Canada and we are taking the next steps to making this pilot a permanent part of our framework.

In addition, our rural and northern immigration pilot is rolling out in partnership with 11 communities from northern Ontario to British Columbia.

We're also looking at developing a new municipal nominee program to allow local communities, chambers of commerce and labour councils the opportunity to directly sponsor the workers they need.

Similarly, the express entry program is the fast lane for immigrants who have the skills and experience to hit the ground running. It's getting results. Under this stream, 95% of the participants have a job, with 83% of them in their main occupation, and 20% earn more than the principal applicants who are coming in under streams other than the express entry.

We're also maintaining our commitment to family reunification. We will continue to play a leadership role in refugee resettlement by introducing a dedicated refugee stream for journalists and humanitarian workers at risk, with a target of helping to resettle as many as 250 people per year.

To help all newcomers and their families integrate, our government will continue to deliver innovative settlement programming and to further invest in research, support and employment projects for visible minority newcomer women. Newcomers, whether refugees or from family reunification, give back to their host country by participating in the economic development of their communities. I know you will be as familiar with their successes as I am.

[Translation]

Supporting positive outcomes—not only for the newcomers who come to Canada, but for our communities across the country—is critical, and my cabinet colleagues and I are working diligently with partners and stakeholders across the country to achieve this.

[English]

A timely and efficient immigration system is of critical importance in attracting the world's most talented individuals. Canadians continue to view immigration as key to filling labour gaps and as a tool for addressing the challenges of an aging working population. But, while Canadians continue to express strong support for immigration, we cannot be complacent. We know that Canadians' continued support for immigration goes hand in hand with our ability to manage the system in an orderly and principled way and one that is beneficial to our country.

[Translation]

While Canada is open and generous towards the world's most vulnerable, we must also remain vigilant in the enforcement of our borders, while ensuring our asylum system remains open for those who truly need it.

• (0855)

[English]

To that end, I am working with my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, and I will continue to advance reforms and investments in the capacity of the asylum system to ensure it is efficient, while meeting Canada's international legal obligations.

We're also improving our immigration system for all of our clients. This means we must also endeavour to protect them from fraud and from falling prey to immigration and citizenship consultants who are unscrupulous and take advantage of vulnerable people. To that end, my department will implement the new professional governance regime for immigration and citizenship consultants under the College of Immigration and Citizenship Consultants Act, which will bring strengthened government oversight and a new and stronger compliance and enforcement regime.

[Translation]

The protection of our official languages is very important and that is why we want to put in place measures to strengthen the capacity of francophone communities across the country.

We want to increase francophone immigration between now and 2023 and support the integration and retention of French-speaking newcomers outside Quebec.

Canadian citizenship is the hallmark of a newcomer's full integration into Canada. I have attended a few citizenship ceremonies since I took office and I can tell you, there is no greater pride than the pride that can be seen on the faces of newcomers on this significant day.

[English]

There is nothing like seeing a smile on the face of somebody who has just been welcomed to the family of Canadians.

Becoming a citizen is a key of an immigrant's journey, and 86% of newcomers go on to become Canadians. This is one of the highest naturalization rates in the world and something we should celebrate. In fact, more than 200,000 took the oath of citizenship and became citizens in 2018-19.

Through our shared citizenship, we are building a stronger Canada and promoting equality and diversity. To encourage even more newcomers to take the full path to citizenship, our government will bring forward a plan to eliminate fees for citizenship for those who have fulfilled the requirements to obtain it, and I look forward to advancing that work.

I will also say that I'm pleased to have recently tabled Bill C-6, which will amend the oath of citizenship to reflect reconciliation and to reflect our essential relationship with indigenous peoples in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to action.

Madam Chair, in conclusion I believe that Canadians should have the utmost respect for the people who want to rebuild their lives in Canada and make contributions to our country. I know that everyone around this table shares the same goals of seeing how we can depend and rely on immigration not only to improve our country, but to make the world a better place.

For example, I want to commend this committee's study of labour shortages. I look forward to collaborating with you on that important work. Together, I know that we can generate and shape the ideas that will drive Canada's long-term prosperity, and I look forward to that work with you as well.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks and for letting us know all the important work you are doing.

We will now move to our first round of questioning.

Mr. Kent, you have six minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and thanks to your departmental officials for attending today.

I am as new to this file as you are, and you have inherited a truly challenging set of files. The official opposition is committed to assist you in addressing those challenges.

We know from departmental figures that among the 341,000 permanent residents admitted in 2019 to Canada, 4,710 were admitted for humanitarian, compassionate and other reasons. Among the many appeals currently in play for admittance on those grounds, as well as applications for ministerial exemption, is a particularly compelling case, that of an effectively stateless orphan, Widlene Alexis, in hiding in the Dominican Republic in the care of a Canadian family for the past 10 years, a family that sought a temporary resident permit in Canada that would enable her adoption here.

Last month, a Federal Court of Appeal judge set aside an immigration officer's decision to refuse a TRP for Widlene, saying that the decision was "incoherent or profoundly inconsistent with the presented evidence". Mr. Justice Barnes said the time has come "to take a holistic and full-fledged humanitarian and compassionate review focussed on Widlene's circumstances and needs."

The judge ordered redetermination by another decision-maker.

Minister, you could send the case back to Canada's office in Mexico where it could languish on an officer's desk for years, or you could, under the powers you hold under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, subsection 25.1(1), grant a "foreign national permanent resident status or an exemption from" the act, if you, the minister, are of the opinion "that it is justified by humanitarian

and compassionate considerations relating to... [a] foreign national, taking into account the best interests of a child directly affected."

Your officials have said that you are considering this case, but I would like to ask you today, will you take a compassionate and humanitarian decision on this case now and then consider the risk that this child is facing now in hiding in very difficult circumstances in the Dominican Republic?

● (0900)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'd like to congratulate my honourable colleague on assuming the portfolio as my critic. I look forward to working with you, sir, both today at this committee and in the future.

I am indeed very proud of the work of my department and of this government when it comes to our humanitarian efforts. I am aware of this case and will say that I had the opportunity recently to speak with Mr. Earle. I want to underline that I understand and respect his frustration and know that these cases are difficult because they have a profound impact on people's lives.

I have seen the decision; I have been briefed on it, and as you rightly pointed out, the court does remit the matter back to an official.

It is my position, the position of our government, that we should let due process unfold. We look forward to providing an update to you and to the members of this committee, and to the public more generally, when we have that decision.

Hon. Peter Kent: Could you assure the potential adoptive family, as well as the child, of a particular time frame for a timely decision?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Mr. Kent, we do have the decision. I have followed up with our department to ensure the review is being undertaken in a timely fashion.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

Among the specific assignments you received in your mandate letter are those to support the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness in the continued work with the United States on the significant problems with the Canada-U.S. safe third country agreement, which brings me to the point of asylum backlog claims. Canada has recently set a record in the last few months with the asylum backlog claims exceeding 80,000 cases. This represents the largest number of unprocessed claims on record and the first time it has ever been this high.

Recognizing that the process time determines how large this backlog gets, and we see that the increased illegal irregular arrivals are still exceeding the number of processed claims, have your officials briefed you on the legislation passed by our previous government in 2012, which dealt with obviously probably unworthy asylum claimants to be processed within 45 days and allowed only one appeal before being removed from the country? That was effected, significantly reduced the cost to Canadian taxpayers and discouraged the number of unworthy claimants at that time.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I will try to condense my answer to say that this is a world-class asylum system that is recognized around the world as setting high-water marks for due process and efficiency. We invested \$1 billion as part of a border enforcement strategy. We have seen irregular migration come down. I think we should take a moment to celebrate that progress, and I see that my time has lapsed.

The Chair: Mr. Kent, your time is up.

We will now move to Mr. Tabbara. You have six minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for your first visit to this committee. We welcome you and we look forward to engaging with you on various topics.

I want to start by talking about my region and expanding across Canada. I know that a previous immigration minister John McCallum early on in our last Parliament came to our Waterloo region and met with staff at an incubator called Communitech and they talked about the shortage of labour and the high skills in high tech particularly. That was in a round table. If can give you a few stats, in 2017 Communitech had around 200 start-ups. It generates around \$250 million in start-ups, and employs hundreds of people. When the previous minister went there, he heard about the shortage in talent, the calls for getting talent from many different regions around the world—top talent because we needed the best and brightest in our region to expand, innovate, scale up companies.

As I mentioned, those stats were one of the reasons it was imperative for Communitech to scale up and have that talent. When we introduced the global skills strategy through the global talent stream, we were able to bring in talent within two weeks rather than two months. Many other countries like Australia were grabbing these individuals, bringing them to their countries. How has that impacted communities in the Waterloo region and across Canada?

● (0905)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I take this as an opportunity to answer the question as well as an invitation to come and visit with Communitech and other leaders in your community who are showing leadership when it comes to driving economic prosperity by leveraging Canada's immigration system to attract the best and the brightest.

My colleague demonstrates with his experience how we can leverage our tech and innovation leaders here to really attract people who present the high skills and experience to come and hit the ground running. I would point to two concrete examples where our levels plan is achieving that success.

One is the express entry program, where, like the individuals who are working at Communitech, individuals are able to very quickly integrate into a job and into their communities.

The other is the start-up visa program. We have seen a number of incubators like Communitech, capital funds and angel investors that are really doing their part to ensure that we are attracting the best and the brightest from around the world.

The types of initiatives that I've just pointed out together are driving and attracting economic investment and growth.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: To continue with that, we bring in those who are in the high-tech field and those who have proven to have great skills. There's another organization that was run by Mike Lazaridis who is one of the founders of BlackBerry. Although BlackBerry isn't in our region anymore, he has started Quantum Valley Investments. It is bringing in a lot of researchers from around the world to develop a quantum computer that will revolutionize our technology. Through certain streams, it has been able to get that top talent as well.

We always want to bring in high-tech workers, but researchers are a key and pivotal role for us to advance in the next phase of our technology. Once we develop that technology here in Canada, we can export it around the world.

Can you elaborate a little bit more on having that top talent and how that can benefit our economy?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: In addition to the two examples I've already provided, I would also highlight the work under the global skills strategy.

The global skills strategy has seen 60,000 people come to Canada who are highly skilled, particularly in the category of research, tech and innovation. By leveraging this program, we are ensuring that our companies that operate here in Canada remain on the competitive edge. That is precisely the kind of innovation that we've shown within our own policy framework approach so that we can be sure that companies like Communitech and others in your region, in Kitchener-Waterloo, are able to attract the best and the brightest.

● (0910)

The Chair: You have 25 seconds.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'll pass on that time. I don't think I can get to my third question.

Thank you very much, Minister, for that update.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

We will move on to Ms. Normandin for six minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much.

Thank you for being here, Minister.

The first question I want to ask you has to do with francophone immigration. I know that this is one of the issues that you are addressing, as indicated on page 17 of your departmental plan.

I'll start my question by referring to an article in *La Presse* from March 2. This article mentions that between 70% and 90% of the applications of French-speaking international students from Cameroon, Guinea, Algeria and Senegal are refused, which means that half of the international students end up in Ontario, which corresponds to almost twice the weight of its population in Canada, and only 12% end up in Quebec, which is half the weight of its population in Canada.

Does the minister have an explanation for this situation? Why are there so many refusals and why are 51% of foreigners who want to study in Quebec denied their permits, compared to 38% in the rest of Canada?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First of all, I want to thank my colleague for her question.

I'll start by saying that there is a lot of cooperation between the Government of Canada and the Government of Quebec. We respect Quebec's jurisdiction when it comes to setting the level of immigration. Even when it comes to foreign students, there is a great deal of cooperation between our two governments. We know that the International Student Program is important to growing the economy.

[English]

With regard to your question, we have indeed seen a high degree of approvals for individuals who are coming from that part of the world to participate in the international student program here in Canada, including in Quebec. On September 9, 2019, the student direct stream was expanded to include Senegal and Morocco, facilitating the process of genuine study permit applications from these two African countries.

I believe we are seeing progress in this part of the world for aspiring international students coming to Canada.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'll continue in the same vein.

We note that many educational institutions admit students from, among others, French-speaking countries, mainly from Africa, and that these places are not filled because, even if Quebec accepts students, the federal government refuses them.

Can you explain to me why this is happening?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'll revisit a few points.

In 2019, the volume of applications for temporary resident visas and study permits from Africa increased significantly. As a result, there are more applications. In addition, applications from Cameroon, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire increased by more than 25%. In 2019, the number of study permits issued to students from Algeria, Senegal and Morocco doubled.

So there are many more applications, and my department will continue to work with the Government of Quebec to ensure the success of this program.

Ms. Christine Normandin: My next questions are about the Municipal Nominee Program, another flagship project mentioned in your mandate letter.

Given the existence of the Canada-Quebec Accord and the possibility for Quebec to select its own candidates for economic immigration, does the minister agree that the application of this program in Quebec would be an intrusion into its jurisdiction, which would create a duplication of procedures and entry points for economic immigration?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for your question.

The goal of this new program is to continue to work with municipalities to understand the needs of local communities and their priorities regarding labour shortages. They can share their experiences with the federal government. When I launch this pilot project, I will continue discussions with my counterpart in Quebec City. I had an initial discussion with Mr. Jolin-Barrette, which was constructive. We will continue to work together.

• (0915)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Fine.

I'll clarify my question, Minister. Do you intend to implement the Municipal Nominee Program in Quebec?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: When we launch this pilot project, I will discuss it with my counterpart in Quebec City and any municipalities that want to participate. We will continue to work with them.

Ms. Christine Normandin: If the municipalities in Quebec tell you that they want the program and Minister Jolin-Barrette tells you that he doesn't want it, do you already have an idea of what your position will be?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That is why it is so important to continue to work in a spirit of collaboration.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Fine.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Normandin.

We will now move on to Ms. Kwan.

You have six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair; and thank you to the minister and his officials.

My first question deals with the estimates component. In the overall spending from the minister, according to the government's website, the planned expenditure is \$67.7 million. The actual spending is \$48.3 million. That's a shortfall of close to \$20 million.

On the FTE side, the planned FTE was 613, but the actual was 460, a shortfall of 153.

Now we go to the programs. On settlement targets, as shown on the website, it achieved one out of three of the desired results. Targets were not met on the percentage of clients who received language training services, yet funding cuts have taken place for NGOs in delivering of services in support of resettlement.

In my own riding, Mount Pleasant Family Centre Society's circles of care and connection program received a funding cut of close to \$140,000. That funding shortfall would mean it cannot sustain the program. The number of outreach workers to the refugee community has been slashed significantly.

I'm very troubled by that. The NGOs had a discussion with officials prior to their funding allocation. In the webinar, officials told NGOs that the funding model from IRCC would be improved and resources would be redirected to support the small and local non-profits. This association that I mentioned is a very effective small, local organization, yet it received a significant funding cut.

Why is that, especially when your ministry actually underspent?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First of all, I want to commend my colleague for her advocacy.

I recently had an opportunity to travel to her part of the country where I met with settlement service providers, and I want to take a moment to thank them for the incredible work they do.

With regard to the specific numbers, I will defer to my officials who will elaborate on that. Let me just say that, year over year, more than 800 projects were selected for funding through the 2019 national call for proposals process.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Minister. I don't want to get into all those details. I have six minutes and I asked a specific question, so I want it answered specifically.

In the spirit of working together, back on February 4 I wrote you a letter on this. I have yet to receive a reply.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes. I was in the process of trying to be directly responsive to what I thought was a legitimate concern around what we're doing to fund front-line service providers. I was giving you some precise numbers to show the progress that our department has made: 800 projects have been selected for funding and 79 service providers. We have a very robust settlement service provider system, and I've seen the benefits of that system first-hand in my travels in my early months—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, with all due respect, I appreciate those lines, but the reality on the ground is that people are experiencing funding cuts. Some of those organizations that you visited actually received funding cuts. There are programs that have been eliminated.

In spite of all this grand talk, the reality on the ground is different. This is what I'm telling you right now, with these specific case examples, and I have more to come.

Therefore, I want to raise this issue and I would ask you to go back and look at those numbers and talk with your officials to see how it is that those organizations received a funding cut when your department underperformed on the resettlement services, and particularly on the language training component. This is a real issue for many people on the ground. If we want people to be settled suc-

cessfully, they need to be supported. The funding cut is not helping that.

Your ministry actually had resources. There were resources within your ministry and you underspent by \$20 million. I'm going to park that with you, and we can have a further discussion about that.

I want to raise another issue with respect to this. Your ministry mandate letter specifically outlines, "continued work with the United States to modernize the Safe Third Country Agreement".

I want to get clarity. When the government said "modernize", a word that has been used previously, does that mean to say that the government is looking for ways to extend and expand the safe third country agreement?

• (0920)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, let me just say a few last words on your previous question briefly.

This country sets the high-water mark for our resettlement work. We've been recognized by the UNHCR and other organizations, and we should always be proud.

Is there more that we can do? Absolutely, and I look forward to working with you on that—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You have \$20 million there.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: With regard to your question on the STCA, Canada and the United States enjoy the most secure border in the world. The STCA is an important instrument to ensure not only the safety of Canadians but also the due process that should be afforded to refugee claimants.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes. Minister. I just want to understand the mandate letter. When it says "modernize the Safe Third Country Agreement", does that mean to say that the government is planning to expand the application of the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: What I would say in response to that is that my specific mandate is to support Minister Blair, who has been asked to move forward with the modernization of the STCA. We are in contact with our counterparts in the United States, and those discussions will continue.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What does "modernize" mean? Does that mean that it's going to expand the usage of the safe third country agreement?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It means to—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but your time is up.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I can provide a very short answer.

It means to continually reassess this agreement.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move on to our second round of questioning.

Mr. Seeback, you have five minutes.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you.

Minister, I'm going to try to be very quick and direct in my questions, so I'm hoping that you can give me very succinct answers.

Two weeks ago at this committee, we learned that visitor visas are no longer being processed in Chandigarh. On what date was that decision made?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I will defer to my officials for the exact date, but I will say that we are moving to a more integrated, modernized and centralized working environment in India. We are moving applications around the global network.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: That's great. That's not my question. I want to know what the date is. If the officials don't know, can you let me know what the date is after today?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Madam Chair, let me just mention that we gradually moved some of the decision-making out of Chandigarh because of capacity. It has not been completely moved out of Chandigarh. There is still processing happening in Chandigarh.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Okay. That's not what you said two weeks ago. You said that only complex cases are being processed in Chandigarh. Is this a different answer now?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: The complex cases still mean that there is processing happening over there.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Are there any cases other than complex cases being processed?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Yes, there are other cases that are being processed.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Are they visitor visa cases?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Yes, visitor visa cases.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Okay.

Who made the decision?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: It is an operational component. We depend on where the capacity is in the network. We are optimizing our network so as to make sure that all the processing happens in the time standard in which we are supposed to do it.

There is a lot of intake because of two visa application centres in the vicinity of Chandigarh—Chandigarh and Jalandhar. We have capacity in Delhi. That's how, operationally, we move the applications around.

However, let me assure you of one thing. The people who make those decisions are well-trained visa officer officials, and they have been trained to work under the premise of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Would the number of employees in Chandigarh be the same now as before this decision was made?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: The number of employees always varies, depending on where the need is for that. We do have a continuous presence in Chandigarh. We have locally engaged staff. We have Canada-based staff.

● (0925)

Mr. Kyle Seeback: How many employees are currently in the Chandigarh office?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: I'll get you that number very quickly.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Great. Can you also get me the number of how many employees were there when the decision was made to start moving files out of Chandigarh?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: I will get you that number.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Great.

Why was no one told that this decision was being made?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: As I mentioned earlier, this is an operational optimization of our network capacity. This kind of movement within the network happens all the time. This is a way that we can actually—again, I might be repeating myself—make sure that we stay within the processing time standard, which is set so that the clients get optimal client service. We continue to move our files around where the capacity exists and depending on what the intake is of the applications.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Are you suggesting that the processing time for visitor visas through the Chandigarh office is now faster than it was before this decision was made?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: We have really come to a point where our visa application processing in the Indian network—and, again, I will emphasize the Indian network, which includes Chandigarh, Bengaluru and Delhi—is below nine days. The client standard is 14 days. We've been there since December 2018.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Okay.

Minister, you proceeded with recommendation 94 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was to add words to the oath of citizenship. It took you five years to come up with 17 words.

Recommendation 93 is a more significant recommendation. It requires changes to the actual citizenship course.

Can we anticipate that if you make 34 word changes in that, it will take 10 years?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: No, I don't think that is a fair way to put the question. Given the urgency and the tone with which it was put to me, I would certainly hope that you will encourage your colleagues to support Bill C-6, because it is a call to action and it represents a significant step forward in reconciliation.

I would just say that the process of coming up with that amendment required consultation with—

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Are you working on recommendation 93?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Could I just be permitted to finish the answer?

The Chair: Your time is up, but—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Just to complete the answer, it required consultation with national indigenous leaders right across the country, and we did that. We arrived at a good proposal, and I look forward to studying the bill here, in conjunction with this committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Before I move forward, I want to let all the committee members know, if you pose a question, that you should let the witness have the time to answer the question. Don't speak over. Just out of respect, I think we need to make sure that we provide the opportunity to our witnesses to answer the question.

Thank you.

We will now move to Mr. Regan for five minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, good morning. Thank you for being here. It's good to have you here.

Thank you for mentioning the Atlantic immigration pilot. As you know, this program is an employer-focused model and one that has been well received throughout the region. Certainly I hear from businesses in my riding that they have appreciated it.

One issue that you know you've had traditionally in the region is retention. Certainly in the Halifax area and in Nova Scotia we have seen recently increases in population. Part of this is due to this program and other immigration. That's encouraging.

Your mandate letter says you're to "take the steps required to make the Atlantic Immigration Pilot permanent". How do you intend to proceed to do this, and what are the lessons that have been learned from this pilot?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I want to say that I had the opportunity recently to visit the member's riding and a local business called Mabata, which is a great restaurant and a success story involving an immigrant entrepreneur, a self-starter who is not only a great business leader but a great chef. I look forward to going back soon.

It's another example showing that the Atlantic immigration pilot, which is an innovation to ensure that we understand the needs of Atlantic Canada—the labour shortages, what the community's needs are—and bake them into our policy architecture so that we can tap into that knowledge and align it with the skills and experience of those who wish to come from around the world to settle in Atlantic Canada, is indeed part of my mandate.

What we hope to do now is take the successes of that pilot and make them permanent. Over the course of my mandate, and as I said in my remarks, we hope, in very short order, to be tabling our levels plans and take the necessary steps beyond that to enshrine the Atlantic immigration perspective as part of our year-over-year approach.

This is about working with local businesses, working with local chambers, working with local leaders in Atlantic Canada to encourage immigration to that part of the country, because we know that the demographic challenges there are very real—an aging workforce, retirement rates that are accelerating and the labour shortages we have seen and studied very closely. This pilot will allow us to continue to build on the successes of it, going forward.

• (0930)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Minister, as you know from personal experience, people come to our offices because they have a problem with a government department in some fashion. People who aren't hav-

ing problems don't come to see us; it's people who have some frustration or delay or whatever. We tend to hear about the applications that experience a delay and for which processing time is longer than the average. I certainly know that when business people have in mind a particular timeline that they expect, and it is exceeded and they take actions, and that causes a concern for them....

How does your department deal with that situation? What is happening with timelines, and what is the picture nationally?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I recognized as a member of Parliament before I assumed this portfolio that doing immigration work on the front lines is an essential part of the job. I want to thank you and all the members of the committee and indeed all of my colleagues in the Chamber for being, in many ways, that first point of contact.

I work with members on all sides of the House. I am frequently approached to try to find ways to collaborate to meet the needs of all of your constituents. I want to commend the work of my department in making tremendous progress on our service standards. Questions were put earlier about how we're doing in turning around these applications and inquiries. I would say we've made great progress. Since I have become minister, we are now meeting our service standards at 80% across all business lines. I think that is a reflection of the priority we are placing on this department. We will continue to make advancements in that area.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thanks, Minister.

Can you give me an update in relation to spending in the estimates? Under the helping travellers visit Canada program, there is \$2.46 million in the estimates. What impact will the coronavirus issue have on those numbers and that program and on immigration and refugee policy?

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I see the line in the estimates.

Let me just say that we place the health and safety of Canadians as our top priority. We have a response that will put the necessary resources into the health care system, but it extends equally to our immigration system, in which, in addition to the special measures, we also have rigorous screening for every single person who comes into this country, whether as a visitor or for permanent residency.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hallan, you have five minutes.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): I've had many constituents approach my office whose family members have applied for visas. When they are rejected, the letter is usually very brief and doesn't really explain much. It's a very generic answer that they get, usually along the lines that immigration officials don't feel that they're going to return to their country. Sometimes it's because they're single; basically, it implies that they might do a marriage of convenience at the time.

I'd like to know what objective criteria visa officers are using when arriving at those decisions, because I'm concerned that there may be potential for arbitrary and inconsistent judgements happening.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I want to thank the member for his advocacy. It has been a pleasure to get to know him in the early days of his time as a member of Parliament. I look forward to continuing that collaboration.

On the question of how visa officers are taking their decisions, we have put into place a very transparent set of procedural and operational guidelines that are intended to inform the decision-makers about how to take those decisions. The purpose of those guidelines is to ensure a number of things: that the decisions are taken fairly, that they're taken in a manner that is consistent and that they're taken in a timely manner.

Obviously, we take those decisions very seriously. They're made in a very professional way, and when there are questions about how decisions have been taken, my office remains open to try to answer them.

• (0935)

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you.

In the 2017 mandate letter to then-minister Hussen, there was a commitment to conduct "a review of the visa policy framework, including its application to the transit of passengers through Canada, in a way that promotes economic growth while ensuring program integrity."

On May 31, 2018, in a meeting of this committee, my colleague the Honourable Michelle Rempel questioned the assistant deputy minister of strategic and program policy at the time. She said, "The department promised to deliver its review of the visa policy framework within this year. When will that be done?" The assistant deputy minister responded that it would come within a few months. Obviously it's 2020 now. It has been over a year; we're in a new parliamentary session.

Was this review ever completed? Can you explain the review's findings with respect to my concerns regarding the reasons for visa refusal, which I highlighted previously?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As this predates my tenure, I'm going to defer to my colleague, the deputy minister.

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Minister.

It predates my arrival back at the department as well. I will commit to getting back on this question.

One thing we have worked hard on is the transit without visa program, because it's so important to the airports in Vancouver and Toronto. It has been an important model. We've worked closely with those airports. We have put improvements of the program in place.

I'm happy to get back with the formalities of this, but we have continued to make those improvements.

Madam Chair, we'll get back to the committee with the study itself.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Just as a follow-up, could we find out why the review was late and also why that review doesn't appear in the new mandate letter? Is it still a priority? That's what we would like to know.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As the deputy said, we'll be happy to come back to you and to the members of this committee with the answer.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Okay, thank you.

That's all I have. Can I pass my time on to my colleague?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for coming to talk to us.

The cost of eliminating citizenship fees for new applicants is estimated to be about \$75 million in forgone revenues just in fiscal year 2020-21. In the meanwhile, the department has suffered a reduction of funding of approximately \$50 million. On one side you have a reduction of income, and on the other side you have a reduced amount of money coming from the government.

Is there any plan to help recoup immigration costs?

The Chair: I'm sorry, your time is up.

If you want to add, Minister, a quick....

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Would you like me to give a very brief answer?

I have this as part of my mandate, to be woven into our overall government's belief that we need to address affordability challenges and to continue the success of naturalization, the statistics for which I referred to in my opening remarks.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll move on to Ms. Martinez Ferrada, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Minister.

My question will focus on francophone immigration.

As you said, governments and communities have set a goal of 4.3% francophone immigration by 2023. This is an ambitious challenge. I think the percentage is currently about 2.3% or 2.4% of the objective.

Can you talk more about the government's policies for the integration of immigrants into minority language communities? What measures can we take to increase the number of immigrants entering the country? Not only do we need to work on integration in the communities, but above all we need to increase the number and the pool because the demographic weight of francophone communities is decreasing.

• (0940)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I thank my colleague for her question. I want to congratulate her on her work, particularly as parliamentary secretary.

It's very important that we continue to make progress in attracting French-speaking immigrants outside of Quebec. Our government is a champion of Canada's official languages, and we recognize the importance of immigration to francophone minority communities in Canada.

My department takes its responsibilities seriously. We aim to increase francophone immigration, with the goal of reaching a target of 4.4% of francophone immigrants outside Quebec by 2023, and we are studying measures to determine how best to achieve this target.

[English]

I would just say that very recently I travelled to Alberta, where we're seeing real concrete progress, in partnership with a number of settlement services organizations that want to help us.

[Translation]

They want to help us continue to make progress in this important phase.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you.

I have a second question. I'd like to hear from you on the issue of labour shortages. As you know, the committee will be studying this issue and how immigration can respond to it.

How can the different skill levels of immigrants be better integrated to achieve this? What are your department's linkages, particularly with the Department of Employment and Social Development, to ensure that immigration is one of the solutions to the labour shortage, and addresses all skill levels needed in the country?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The issue of labour shortages is a priority that I share with my colleague Minister Qualtrough. This issue is extremely important to the success of the economy.

If we understand the needs of communities across Canada, we will continue to address this issue. So it's extremely important that we work together, including with the provinces. In fact, my provincial counterparts and I have begun the important work.

[English]

If we can continue to understand the needs of the regions and localities experiencing labour shortages, then we can align those gaps with the skills and experiences that exist from around the world.

We are seeing this kind of success through the express entry program. As I mentioned, almost every single person who comes

through the express entry has a job—95% of them. This means they are hitting the ground running. More than 80% of those individuals are getting a job in the primary occupation of their choice, which tells us that this particular facet of our plan is working and working well.

I also would say in a last few words that the pilot projects we have introduced—the Atlantic immigration pilot and the rural and northern pilot—are a bona fide effort to work very closely with regional leaders to understand the needs and to align those needs with aspiring Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have two or three minutes left.

Minister, if it's okay, can we do four minutes more?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm happy to stretch it to four minutes, sure.

The Chair: We will now move on to Ms. Normandin for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

My next question is simple; it should elicit a yes or no answer. Has the department considered using subsection 10(3) of the Safe Third Country Agreement to suspend the Safe Third Country Agreement?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I addressed this in my first answer.

• (0945)

[English]

The STCA is an important instrument that ensures the safety and security of the border between Canada and the United States. We continually assess that instrument, and it is part of my mandate to support Minister Blair to look at modernizing the agreement, because it ensures the safety of all Canadians here as well as of those who are travelling back and forth. It also ensures due process for those who are claiming refugee status.

This is an important instrument. We are in the process, as I have said, of supporting Minister Blair's work.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Unfortunately, this doesn't answer my question, which is simple: has this possibility been studied?

I'll allow myself, once again, a preamble. During the last election campaign, the Bloc expressed support for a suspension; the Conservatives expressed support for a suspension; the NDP expressed support for a suspension. There was very broad public support. My riding is a stone's throw from Roxham Road and that has been mentioned.

Is this possibility so frivolous to the government that it hasn't even been explored?

[English]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I would come back to my original points. We have a world-class asylum system that ensures the safety and security of Canadians and that ensures the orderly processing of refugee claims. We have seen progress on reducing irregular migration, as I pointed out to my colleague Mr. Kent earlier.

A part of the overall strategy is having the resources necessary to ensure the regular processing of those claims and also modernizing or looking at the potential of modernizing the STCA, which I am doing in conjunction with my colleague, Minister Blair.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: All right.

[English]

The Chair: We will now move to our last round of questioning.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: According to the government's website on service standards, while the target is to process applications 80% of the time within the standard, the reality is that in the provincial nominee program the process performance is at 5% of standard. The performance of the Quebec-selected skilled workers program sees 2% of applications done within the standard. In the skilled trades program—the express entry, of which the minister is very proud—the performance standard is 38% of applications within standard.

While setting standards is great, you're not meeting them for these critical areas.

I want to highlight this again, tying it to the fact that the ministry underspent and cut staff FTEs significantly, by close to 200. That is the kind of performance we're seeing. Is it a wonder that we have such long wait times in processing? I want to highlight this as an issue.

Another issue is that at the last committee meeting, the official said that when a form is missing in an application, or a signature or something is missing, they would contact the applicant to have it fixed, instead of sending the whole application back.

I have two active cases in which the application was sent back and as a result, the people's work permits expired. This creates great problems for them.

Social media is lit up, because somebody had put out something asking the community what their experience has been. Social media is lit up with people with lots of problems with respect to officials not processing these applications as such.

I want to flag these issues to your attention, Minister, and I hope they get fixed.

I'd like to ask a question about refugee sponsorship. In the Group of Five community sponsorships, the refugees who need sponsorship are required to provide a refugee determination certificate. This requirement was waived between 2015 and 2017 for the government to get their Syrian refugee initiative numbers up. This requirement is also not required for any other privately sponsored refugee stream.

Why, then, do we have this for the Group of Five sponsorships?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Just briefly, I look forward to working with my colleague on the issues she has flagged.

Regarding service times, I will always defend the work we have done. We reduced backlogs on spousal applications, on PSRs and on study permits. Since taking on this new role, we have seen things dramatically improve. As I said, 80% of our service standards are now being met—

An hon. member: No, they're not.

Hon. Marco Mendicino:—and this is work that I continue to do in conjunction with my officials.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: With this, we come to the end of our round of questioning.

On behalf of all the committee members, thank you, Minister, for coming and answering those important questions.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On a point of order, Madam Chair, I'd like to get clarification.

From our last meetings, I thought that the request was to have the minister appear before our committee for the full two hours. Because we have collapsed both the mandate letter and the estimates component into this one meeting, I thought that was going to be the case.

It is now clearly not the case, because the minister is preparing to leave.

• (0950)

The Chair: We requested, but he was only available for one hour, so we will have the officials for the second hour. We will always allow the opportunity for the minister to come back again.

With this, I will suspend the meeting so that the minister can leave, and we will have the officials for the remaining time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Chair, I think that information should have been shared with the committee so that committee members were aware there had been a change.

The Chair: It was posted

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I don't think so. My understanding was that the minister would come for the full two hours.

I get it that the minister will come back another time—he will have to, I suspect—for other matters, but these two critical issues, the mandate letter and the estimates, are big issues with lots of questions for the minister.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan. It was mentioned; it was in the notice of meeting also. It was, then, mentioned that the minister would be here.

I will suspend the meeting. We will allow the minister to leave and then resume the meeting.

• (0950) _____ (Pause) _____

• (0955)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

We have our officials here to go into the round of questioning. We will not have any further opening remarks.

We will start, then, with our first round of questioning. We will go first to Mr. Kent.

Mr. Kent, you have six minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair.

I would like to echo my NDP colleague's disappointment that the minister wasn't available for the two hours. From experience, I know that ministerial availability is a very flexible concept. I look forward to his return for the discussion of the main estimates.

Deputy, I'd like to come back to the minister's deflection of my question regarding the judicial order to redetermine the rejection of Widlene Alexis's application for temporary residency.

Given the judge's scathing criticism of the flawed bureaucratic reasoning of the officer who rejected the TRP, I'd like to ask you not about this case but about how many instances of ministerial exemption were given in the past year. We know there were 4,710 decisions made on compassionate and humanitarian grounds and on "other" grounds, which one would assume would be ministerial exemptions.

I'm just wondering how many ministerial exemptions were made by the minister's predecessor.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I have processing times for permanent resident applications under humanitarian and compassionate grounds in 2019.

Madam Chair, I'm happy to get back to the committee with that answer.

Hon. Peter Kent: Okay.

Moving on, another of the mandate letter assignments for the minister is "to advance reforms and investments in the capacity of the asylum system to ensure it is efficient while meeting...obligations". With regard to support for cities and provincial governments and regional governments currently on the hook for many tens of millions of dollars for asylum claimant reports, and given this record 80,000-plus backlog of claimants processing, again the minister deflected his answer.

But did your department—did you—brief the minister on our previous Conservative government's express treatment: the 45-day turnaround for obviously unworthy asylum claims and the reduction to one single appeal?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We have briefed the minister on a number of aspects of this. We continue to be concerned about the growing number of asylum claims. I think, as the honourable member has

noted, we've had 64,000 claims in the last year, which is of concern.

We continue to look at ways to protect the system and to make the system work as efficiently as possible.

Hon. Peter Kent: Given that the 2012 legislation not only discouraged unworthy asylum claims but saved the Government of Canada hundreds of millions of dollars by reducing the time that unworthy claimants were supported by federal, provincial and municipal social welfare costs, what was your advice to the minister with regard to that previous program?

• (1000)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Our advice to the minister takes a number of forms: of things we want to look at, a number of things the department has done in the past, or a number of things that we have done with money from budget 2019 and the way we want to continue to invest in the asylum system. Those discussions are still ongoing with Minister Mendicino and Minister Blair. We continue to make strides from the money that was received in budget 2019. We will have to see what comes for the next part.

Hon. Peter Kent: The City of Toronto is in the midst of budget considerations now. They have revealed what they require for support for their emergency shelter. They've doubled their shelter capacity for refugee claimants, many of whom, we're told, will ultimately be found to be unworthy and will be asked to leave the country.

The city will require \$76.9 million in 2020 to continue its program to temporarily house family refugee claimants, \$22.2 million to continue supporting the IRCC in delivering the regional response after 2020, and \$13.1 million to continue the Willowdale Welcome Centre temporary response site for refugee singles.

What plans does the department have to recommend in this budget this compensation to the City of Toronto and to cities in Manitoba and Quebec for the support of asylum claimants?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We continue to work very closely. We have provided \$88 million to the City of Toronto to date. We are in discussions with the City of Toronto now over continued assistance to the city, as we are with the Government of Quebec.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move on to Ms. Dhillon for six minutes.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Good morning.

The first question I have is in regard to sponsorships and spousal work permits. A lot of constituents feel that they have been discriminated against because officers are not always fit to understand the nature of their relationships. As we know, in many cultures, people do not live together prior to marriage, and in some cases marriages are even arranged. Does that automatically disqualify somebody from sponsoring their spouse, even though in their view the relationship is bona fide and they plan on spending a lifetime together with their partner?

What kinds of measures are being taken to make sure that officers are receiving cultural sensitivity training and help in understanding the many cultural nuances that exist in many countries across the world?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: It's an important question. We continue to invest in and update two types of training for our officers. One is on cultural sensitivity training, because I think that's a really important point that you've raised, but the other is on bias training as well, to make sure that our decisions are as fair and as open as possible.

If I may—and I apologize, Madam Chair—we do have the answer to a question that was asked previously by Mr. Kent. In terms of the number of times the minister exercised his authority in the past year, Dr. Kochhar has found the answer. It was 27 applications by the minister out of 4,302.

I'll come back to your question. We continue to invest in those two types of training, which we find very important to understand, and to continue to assess those applications in a fair manner. If there are specific applications, we're always happy to look at those.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Okay. Can you talk to us a bit about the bias training?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: As the deputy pointed out, we have two types of training. One is based on the actual local knowledge or the cultural aspect. I'll take an example from our major source country, India. We have what we call in our own lingo an “India academy”. When the decision-makers or the temporary duty officers go there for their first posting, they are given a complete two-week training package on the sensitivities of the different regions in India where our visa application centres are and what is the cultural norm and how you would assess those applications.

That training is based on complete local knowledge and the availability of complex cases that are provided to them. This prepares them and, based on that, we also do a buddy system: the new people who are arriving there as the decision-makers are buddied up with the people who are more experienced. That's how we gradually bring them in.

The bias training specifically is based on the fact that when the applications come in, they are handled by different parts of the continuum. For example, eligibility is done by one set of officers and admissibility by a different set of officers. That takes away the bias, if there is any existing. We are very much focused on this, which is that the merit of the application determines the result.

• (1005)

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Perfect.

Madam Chair, I'd like to point out that maybe witnesses could be instructed to answer the question they're asked, because time was taken out of something that I had to inquire about.

The Chair: I can give you an extra 30 seconds as that was the case.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Perfect. I have a very brief question.

When a constituent applies for a temporary resident visa for the first time, they're also required to submit and pay for biometrics. If the application is refused and they decide to reapply, the first biometrics submitted are still valid and they don't have to pay for those again. However, a lot of constituents don't know this, because the refusal letter they receive doesn't say that they're still valid. Only when they call our office do they realize this.

We had a case just last week where a constituent's father submitted a third temporary resident visa application and was asked to submit biometrics. When the constituent was told by the office that he did not have to pay again, he had already paid. Is there any way that you can make it clear, when the officials send out refusal letters, that these biometrics remain valid?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Madam Chair, there is a provision where, when you're submitting your biometrics, we categorically mention there that your biometrics, once taken, are valid for 10 years. If you are applying multiple times, or even if you're converting your visa from a temporary resident to that of a student or a permanent resident, those validity periods exist for 10 years.

We've tried to correct this. We've noticed a few of them where folks do pay at that time and we do the reimbursement, which is a bit cumbersome. We have also started to mention to our visa application centre, where they do the intake of the applications and the biometrics, that they should be very precise in explaining this to them.

The Chair: Ms. Dhillon, your time is up.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Normandin, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

My question is specifically for Mr. Kochhar. It relates to my colleague's question and follows up on a question I asked last time. This is the preamble to my question.

Mr. Kochhar, at the last meeting, you explained to us that, before sending their files back to the clients, IRCC officers contact them if documents are missing from the file. I was a little surprised by your answer. I myself have worked as an immigration lawyer, and in that context, on several occasions files have been returned to me because documents were missing. I would send the files back. Then they were sent back to me. Sometimes there were up to three or four trips back and forth. I thought maybe the directive had changed since I was elected and no longer work as an immigration lawyer.

However, as my colleague mentioned, your response on social media has also provoked reactions. Several lawyers mentioned that this was still the case and that files were systematically returned to them when documents were missing.

My question is this. At present, what is the directive with regard to missing documents in a file?

• (1010)

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Thank you for your question.

[English]

There is not a specific directive that we have sent in regard to specifically calling everyone if there is a missing document.

We are using this approach: What is the piece that is missing? If it is simply our document or something that is very trivial, we actually do try to call if possible, based on availability of the agent and availability of the person. However, this is not across the board in terms of all lines of business. We are still trying to get ourselves aligned with that, but if there is a signature missing, if there is something that somebody physically has to do, then we will probably need to send back the application package.

Let me correct myself if I left the impression that we are contacting everyone who has a missing document. We have started to kind of make sure that for the minor deficiencies we don't actually send the package back but do have an ability to correct it as such.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Am I to understand, though, that this is at the discretion of the officers, since there is no formal directive?

[English]

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: This is actually what we are right now making sure of, which is that this is an officer's judgment in terms of what the missing document is and what the value is of just making a phone call and getting that information piece, or if we actually need to have the application piece sent back.

We will be more clear as we move towards more precision in terms of how we communicate that kind of directive or that guidance to our front-line officer staff so that there is a harmonized approach throughout.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: All right.

Does the departmental representative agree with me that it can be easy for an officer to simply return an application if the file is thick

and complicated or if there is a missing document? Does he agree that this unduly lengthens delays, adds to the workload and prevents the proper processing of files, since they can be reviewed two, three or four times before they are finally opened?

[English]

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: For the officers who are taking in the applications, their training is to make sure that they are providing the best client service to the applicant. We strive to minimize client pain points or client challenges on that.

I'm very cognizant of the fact that there would be instances where there are complex files that may need substantial revision and might have been sent back, but that is also an officer's judgment. We believe that officers take a lot of effort into consideration in terms of looking at those files and accordingly requesting a document through personal contact or returning the application to get it back.

The Chair: You have one minute.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Relying on the good judgment of officers has clearly not worked in the past, as processing times are very long and files are returned.

Is the department open to the idea of issuing a clear directive as to the handling of files where there are missing documents?

[English]

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: As we morph operationally, depending on the volumes and the capacity and the resources available in this line of business, we strive to operate in such a way that, as I mentioned earlier, we provide the best client service. If this is the way we reduce the client pain points, we would continue to refine our processes and bring the guidance to our front-line staff to assist the clients.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes.

• (1015)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Just to follow up on that question, I'll tell you that one case I have before me is that of a missing signature, and the entire application was sent back. In another case, one wrong certificate was sent in, and the entire application was sent back. As a result of that, both of those individuals had their work permits expire and they are now in quite a conundrum with respect to this. Had the application been sent back, they would have been able to quickly fix it and get the correct certificate sent into IRCC. No one contacted them.

This was studied by this committee in the last Parliament, and it was indicated that this would be fixed. Here we are, in the second Parliament after the study, and the same thing is happening again.

I can't emphasize enough how frustrating this is, not for me as a parliamentarian per se, but for the applicants and in the workload that is created for the IRCC themselves to have to reinitiate and reprocess another application. I'm spending way too much of my six minutes on this.

I want to ask this question. On the funding shortfall that has existed in the ministry, and given that the ministry has underspent by close to \$20 million, could you provide to the committee where the programs are that were underspent and by how much in this last fiscal year?

For example, if you get into resettlement services, on the grant applications and for each of the areas, what's the differential in terms of actual spending versus allocated dollars? If I could just get an acknowledgement—I suspect you don't have those numbers here today—that this would be passed on to the chair for the committee, I would appreciate it.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I can do a first pass, Madam Chair.

Our lapse when it came to settlement services and the money we spend on this was less than 1%. That's really tight for us, and actually we're quite proud of that because it means more money is in the hands of settlement—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I don't want to interrupt, but I really want the actual figures for the programs in terms of the underspending. Could I receive that for the committee, please?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I assume this is on the settlement side, our grants and contributions side.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, for the entire ministry, with \$20 million underspending, where did the difference come from? Where are the programs with that differential?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We'll get back with exact figures.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I'd like to ask some questions about the caregivers piece. Several committee meetings ago, I asked about that. Could you provide the committee with the figures on how many caregivers since 2014 have received their PR and how many of those applications are in process? If I can get confirmation that we can get that figure, that would be appreciated.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I have the most recent year figures, but I don't have them since 2014. So, again, we are happy to come back with that figure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, thank you.

For the people who have been denied in terms of the application, at the last committee I asked for a breakdown of that. Could you make sure that the number also includes the interim pathway process under that stream of people who have been denied of the application?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On the caregivers program, is proof of funds required for a caregiver to apply for permanent residence under the new pilot?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Yes, there is a proof of funds that is required under the new pilot.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. What type of proof of funds is required? Is it an actual bank deposit or proof of income or wages? What is required?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: What is required is proof that you can sustain yourself when you come to Canada. We're prepared to look at a number of different documents on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could you provide that to the committee, please?

Actually, for all of the guidelines, specifically under these two new programs, what are the specific guidelines by which the caregiver must show? So, aside from the proof of funds—which is not on your website, by the way. It would be really good for the public and members of Parliament to know what exactly are all of the requirements and the details of how one would be able to show that they have met those requirements.

● (1020)

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Madam Chair, I would say that the information the member is seeking is on the new pathways, the one we have for the home support workers as well as for the home child care.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Correct.

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: We can provide that information, but it's very much depicted in the pilot that, when somebody applies for that, they will be assessed for their ability to sustain themselves and their dependants in Canada to begin with. That's at an officer's discretion. There is no numerical value that is actually put on to that.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

What does the government do to monitor an abusive employer of caregivers?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: In terms of looking at a situation where an employer is not holding to a social contract with a caregiver, a caregiver has the opportunity to come out and seek another open visa work permit from us.

The Chair: Your time is up, Ms. Kwan.

We will now move on to Mr. Seeback, for five minutes.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I am going to pass my time to Mr. Chiu, since he didn't get a chance in the last round.

The Chair: Mr. Chiu, you have five minutes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: One of the new priorities in the new minister's mandate is to introduce a dedicated refugee stream to provide safe haven for human rights advocates, journalists and humanitarian workers at risk, with a target of helping resettle as many as 250 people a year, as he also mentioned in his report in his introduction provided to the committee earlier. Why is this target number for such an important stream so low? How was it determined in the first place? Around the world, as we have seen, there are many advocates for human rights and journalists being persecuted. The number definitely has far exceeded 250. Perhaps it's 10 times more, which Canada could actually be helping.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We're in the process of determining how best to implement this priority and the advice we give to the minister. The number 250 might sound like a very small number, but it's quite high when we look at our overall picture of how many refugees we resettle and what Canada does in that regard in terms of protected places.

We will be assessing that number. Once we get a program established and we look at the criteria around that, we'll continue to assess what the needs are.

From our point of view —although the member is certainly correct that the need is great—we think 250 is actually a significant number for what we do.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: In my humble opinion, I think that's a misplacement of resources. We have had to allocate so many resources to dealing with illegal, irregular immigrants and asylum seekers who have a very low chance of staying in the country. There are people around the world who require our help and we are not able to help them because of a lack of resources.

My second question is that as a local MP, I have frequently received requests for help where the sponsorship of visitors was denied due to financial concerns. With a few constituents, for example, some are quite established and prominent business owners in the greater Vancouver area. They have even sent their banking information to IRCC to show that they have considerable financial capacity as a guarantor.

Why are their requests still being refused for financial reasons?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I think we'll take this question in two parts.

The first is that, when the application comes through, the visa officer looks at whether people have sufficient resources for their stay in Canada and what that looks like.

The second part to this is continuing to be clear with people in refusal letters about the reasons why this happened and what documents we want to look at.

Dr. Kochhar, do you want to add to that?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Certainly.

The aspect of sponsorship, which is somebody who is putting in a sponsorship that there is enough money once they land here, is one aspect that is taken into consideration by the visa officers. The other aspects we take into consideration are what their standing is over there, their ability to come back after they visit, their travel history, their ability to provide that documentary proof so that the visa officer is convinced that the purpose for which the person is travelling is fulfilled.

There are a multitude of factors that are taken into consideration before a refusal is made.

• (1025)

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Doctor, I appreciate that explanation. However, in the cases I have provided assistance for, they are both prominent businessmen in Canada, and the visitors being sponsored are prominent business people in India. The department still turned down their requests, even though the sponsorship side provided a guarantee to the department.

It bothers me that there is a sense of being difficult to many of our applicants. If you can provide us as members of Parliament with how we could help to advocate cases like that, it would be much appreciated.

My third question that I have is—

The Chair: You have seven seconds.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: I can read very fast, but not in seven seconds.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Regan, you have five minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you, Madam Chair. Seven seconds is rather challenging, that's for sure.

I have a couple of short questions, and then I think my colleague Mr. Sorbara may have some.

I asked the minister earlier about the helping travellers visit Canada program, which has \$2.46 million in the estimates. He only had a moment to reply.

Maybe you could provide me with more information about what impact the coronavirus will have on this kind of a program, as well as on immigration and refugee policy and your practices generally. What are you having to adjust?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: COVID-19 or coronavirus is obviously having an impact on travellers coming to Canada.

We'll start with China. As you know, we use visa application centres in China to help facilitate the arrival, particularly of temporary residents. At the end of January, around Chinese New Year, the Chinese government closed a number of businesses. Those visa application centres were closed. They have just this week started to reopen 10 of the 11 visa application centres we have in China, on a very limited closed-hours basis. We anticipate that we will see a pretty great impact on temporary resident volumes, particularly out of China.

We'll continue to look closely at the rest of the regions there, but I can't imagine that this will not have a big impact.

Hon. Geoff Regan: That hasn't happened in Italy, for example.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: In Italy, we have one visa application centre. As you know, Italy has visa-free travel to Canada. What's required is an electronic travel authorization, but we do have one visa application centre that's helpful in collecting biometrics. That's in Rome. Because of the actions of the Italian government, that visa application centre is currently closed, and we'll watch carefully what happens with that.

[Translation]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Two of my colleagues addressed the issue of francophone immigration. I am talking about the situation outside Quebec. I hear about it from time to time. We need immigrants who speak both official languages to fill various types of jobs in Nova Scotia and, in my opinion, to support the francophone community and try to expand it.

How does the department encourage this immigration? I do not believe that outside Quebec, points are granted for that. Is that correct?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for your question.

Francophone immigration outside Quebec is very important to the department, as you mentioned. I would like to make three points regarding our strategy to increase the number of francophone immigrants in Canada.

First, there's recruiting.

[English]

Destination Canada is our marquee event that we use in Europe and the Maghreb. I want to continue to invest in Destination Canada.

The second is continuing to invest in appropriate francophone settlement services for people once they arrive, recognizing how important that is.

The third, I'd underline, is being able to use tools well, like express entry, to make sure we are able to take good quality francophone applicants outside of Quebec and to make sure they've got a good pathway into Canada.

Maybe a fourth—I know I said three—would be to continue to work with provinces, particularly the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, as well as Ontario, Manitoba and the Northwest Territories. Both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have really augmented their efforts to attract francophone immigrants to their province and to work closely with them.

• (1030)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): My first question is on the immigration front. Granting of visitor visas is so important, and obviously the coronavirus is impacting many events, including the Collision conference in Toronto. It was supposed to happen in June, which would have brought 30,000 people to the city of Toronto. That has been cancelled, which is quite unfortunate. I obviously hope this resolves itself.

I want to say thank you more than anything to the people who work at IRCC. Our office deals with them and the individuals coming through. For the most part it's seamless, so I thank you and all your employees for all your efforts and work.

My question relates to the interaction between the federal government and the provincial government, specifically in Ontario through the Ontario immigrant nominee program, OINP. How is that interaction? How is that level of co-operation between the two levels?

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut you off there. Maybe you can have another opportunity to get your answer, because your time is up.

Mr. Kent, you have five minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair.

Deputy, before I pose my questions, I'll give full disclosure. My wife and I are private sponsors of three Syrian refugees. My ques-

tions are informed by fairly close experience with a number of sponsorship agreement holders.

One of the minister's first public appearances was a speech in Europe in which, among other things, he praised the private sponsorship programs for resettling refugees in situations across the country—as we have over the decades going back to the Vietnamese boat people—and fulfilling the reality that in 2018, Canada surpassed the United States in terms of becoming a world leader in refugee settlement.

I know that you are aware that a number of sponsorship agreement holders, SAHs were greatly disturbed and concerned a year ago when you changed the obligations of sponsors, which at least one of the SAHs characterizes as going from humanitarian support and resettlement of refugees to a spreadsheet obligation. I know that this spreadsheet obligation was explained to the SAHs in terms of trying to establish equivalency in the way your department processes government-sponsored refugees and allocates the costs assigned to them. I just want you to know, and I hope that you've informed the minister, that this new program has imposed spreadsheet obligations when many very compassionate private-sponsor groups simply don't have the capacity to abide by your new rules. I know that the department on its website talks about sponsorship agreement holders as religious, ethnic community or humanitarian organizations. Many are considering dropping future private sponsorships because they simply cannot cope.

I wonder if you can respond to that continuing concern and criticism, and whether the minister has been advised to reconsider and get back to some of the in-kind support that very often makes a difference. Going back to the Vietnamese boat people example, people were taken into homes and provided not necessarily with the cash—they were committed to giving an equivalent, but they also were not required to actually meet those cash obligations or the accounting procedures to confirm that support.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: A personal thank you for your support of resettled refugees in the Syria movement.

You're right. We have had a number of conversations with the minister about sponsorship agreement holders, and we want to make sure that we maintain that appropriate balance. We've continued to work closely with sponsorship agreement holders. I am dismayed to hear your take that some would back away from sponsoring refugees in the future.

• (1035)

Hon. Peter Kent: So I am told.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: What we want to do is to continue to work. We've redoubled our efforts on this. I think we can probably invest in some capacity building here as well, to make sure that sponsorship agreement holders are in really good stead.

The second part is to really focus on the needs of the resettled refugees themselves, to make sure we have the right balance with in-kind support, but also to make sure that the refugees themselves have the funds necessary to be able to get established and to feel independent in the community so that when that support ends after the first year, they're able to establish themselves well.

That's a balance we want to look at really carefully. Where we've moved a little in one direction, we want to be able to correct that. We want to be able to continue to uphold that proud humanitarian tradition.

Hon. Peter Kent: Do you recognize, and have you informed the minister, that there's a very real difference between government-sponsored refugees and the support that they may not get in the same way that they do from private sponsors, ethnic communities, religious organizations and so forth, and that very often the in-kind support continues for years beyond that original, formal, one-year obligation?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I can absolutely assure the honourable member that those are discussions we have had with the minister.

The Chair: Your time is up. Thank you.

We will now move on to Mr. Tabbara for five minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll split my time with Mr. Sorbara and let him go first.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I'd like a follow-up on the collaboration of the federal and provincial governments on that program, OINP, and so forth.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I was going to give you a one-word response, which is "excellent". We have good co-operation with Ontario on the provincial nominee program, and we work very closely with them.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: On the November 2016 changes to the express entry program, specifically the changes in terms of the awarding of points as to whether you have a job offer or don't have a job offer, before November 2016, I think a majority of applicants under express entry had a pre-existing job offer to come to Canada.

Under the changes afterwards, it's the reverse situation. Can you talk about some of the skill set changes or skill set impacts that have happened due to those November 2016 changes, please, or about anything that you've seen and that you've come to a conclusion on?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We continue to examine it. We look really closely at what happens under express entry as to who is coming through, what the point score is and what we offer points for.

The changes you talk about really focused, I think, on some specific occupations. If I cast my mind back far enough, what we worried about at the time with the really enhanced points for job offers is that we were seeing a number of people come through express entry who were food service counter supervisors or who were in a number of different occupations. We worried that they were crowding out different occupational categories such as IT workers, where there was a great deal of need. We think the adjustment has really helped to just sort of put a better balance between those two things.

There are still points for a job offer. It just wasn't as high as what it was.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: It's on the IRCC website, with the reports, but we are seeing from that a different configuration of source country immigration, because of different skill sets. You are seeing a bump up in certain areas and a bump down—significantly—in other areas in terms of skill sets.

My comment on this is that a lot of employers are demanding certain skill sets and the supply potentially is not there to meet those skill sets because of the reverse onus. Before now, you could have a job offer to meet your demand and now it's based on your number of points, which is a slightly different system.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I think it's important to look at things in conjunction with one another. In the global skills strategy, which enables employers to bring in workers in high-demand occupations quickly to Canada—within two weeks—the pathway between temporary and permanent on that side we think is pretty good, where people coming through are having a great deal of success under express entry.

● (1040)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: The global skills strategy is something fantastic that we've put in.

Marwan.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I want to continue on with that and specifically turn to the trades. We are always saying that in trades we have a shortage of skilled labour, etc. Can we not find a way to expedite the global skills strategy, almost, to fill in these gaps, particularly in the trades and construction?

I know that sometimes certain members might not meet certain requirements, but can we maybe alter the point system specifically in this field so that we can fill that gap?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, there is a specific category under express entry that focuses on skilled trades to make sure that we have a good pathway for skilled trades workers to come into Canada on this. The global skills strategy attracts a variety of talent, but it's not the only pathway for skilled tradespersons to immigrate to Canada.

Most came through other programs. Provincial nominee programs have been an important source for skilled trades as well. There are other high skills programs that people come through, so it's not just the federal skilled trades program where we're seeing individuals come through. We're happy to continue to examine that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

We have four minutes left, so we will have two minutes for Ms. Normandin and two for Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Normandin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Am I correct in saying that, in addition to health and security reasons, the main reason for refusing student visa applications is the fact that a student does not have sufficient financial guarantees that he or she will return to his or her country of origin at the end of his or her studies?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for your question.

First of all, it depends on the country.

[*English*]

Funds are one key reason. I think one of the biggest source countries we have for student movement where that was an issue is Nigeria. In Nigeria, we have gone to great lengths to put in a new program where we can better examine, with the co-operation of the Nigerian government and the Central Bank of Nigeria, a real source of funds around that, in trying to reduce some of those integrity concerns so that we have a smoother pathway for students coming in.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: One of the wishes of the Government of Quebec is to ensure that students, on the contrary, stay in Quebec when they finish their studies.

In your opinion, isn't there a contradiction between the Canadian government's desire to ensure that they leave at the end of their studies and the Government of Quebec's desire to ensure that they stay when they finish their studies?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you.

That's a good question.

[*English*]

The reality is that we admit over 300,000 students a year. It would be really nice for all of them to stay, but we don't have level space around 300,000. We want to continue to ensure that we have a decent pathway for students to do well under express entry and to do well under our additional programs.

I'm going to say that, in 2019, over one-quarter of those who were successful in the economic category came in as international students. We're pretty proud of that.

The Chair: Your time is up.

Ms. Kwan, you have two minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

This is just to clarify. In my last round, I asked for the information with respect to program shortfall in terms of the budget. Could we also get those numbers in terms of FTEs per program?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Let's go back to the caregiver program. If an applicant has an occupation-specific work permit issued under the new pilot, can the applicant work for two employers, provided that it's the same occupation?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Dr. Kochhar, would you have an answer for that?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: If I understand the question correctly, if they already have a visa for our caregiver program under occupation-specific, they could work in the same occupation with two employers.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: For employers to hire migrant caregivers under the new pilot program, do they need to meet a certain household income to be eligible?

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Again, I would say that to get into the caregiver program you will need to demonstrate a certain level of financial stability.

• (1045)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This is for the employer.

Dr. Harpreet Kochhar: Yes, there is a commitment from employers that they can actually support the caregivers they're bringing in.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you provide to the committee what that financial requirement is, please?

If a work permit is given to a spouse under the new program, are there restrictions on what kind of work he or she does? Is it an open work permit? Again, can the spouse work for multiple employers? When will the work permit expire?

Likewise, if the spouse wants to go to school, does he or she need a study permit as well?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Open work permits are absolutely open work permits. Yes, they could work for multiple employers. Study permits are also provided to immediate family to help families when they come to Canada.

As for the expiry...Harpreet?

The Chair: Your time is up. We've come to the end of the meeting.

I want to thank all the witnesses for appearing before the committee. Thank you for all the work that you do.

The meeting is adjourned.

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