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

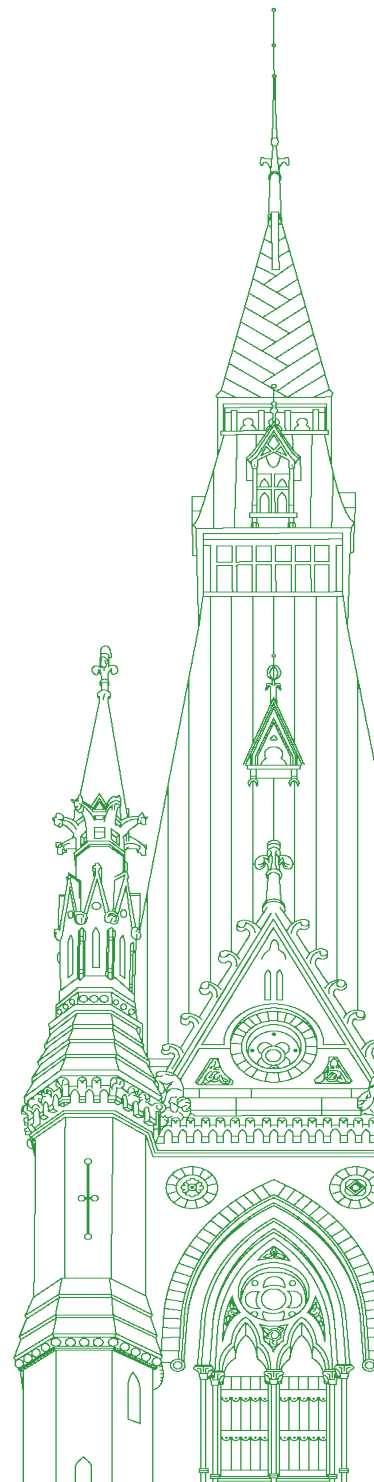
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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey





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

Friday, June 19, 2020

• (1405)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 20 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Pursuant to orders of reference of April 11 and May 26, 2020, the committee is resuming its study of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference, and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I would like to remind everyone, especially the witnesses, to please use the language channel of the language you are speaking. If you intend to switch between French and English, please be sure to switch the channel before you switch the language you are speaking.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. We have Doug Pawson, executive director for End Homelessness St. John's, the city of my birth; and Jacques Beaudoin, general secretary for Réseau québécois des OSBL d'habitation.

Mr. Pawson, please proceed with your opening remarks.

**Mr. Doug Pawson (Executive Director, End Homelessness St. John's):** Good afternoon, everybody.

I'd like to start by thanking the committee, and you, Mr. Chair, for inviting me to appear today.

I appreciate your time and commitment to better understanding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our most vulnerable neighbours, specifically those who are experiencing homelessness.

At End Homelessness St. John's, we understand the dynamic interplay between the forces that create homelessness and housing instability for our most vulnerable neighbours. We recognize and accept that homelessness itself is not the issue; it's the culmination of social system breakdowns. These breakdowns, whether they be related to health, the economy, intergenerational poverty, colonization, exploitation, gender-based violence, trauma or something else, all serve as pathways into homelessness.

We also recognize that the opposite of homelessness is not just having a roof over one's head. It's having housing stability and hav-

ing the resources, the skills and the confidence to maintain one's housing. More importantly, we believe that by working together and collaboratively across all levels of government, it is possible to end homelessness here in St. John's and across the country.

While many people across our community and indeed across the country continue to suffer as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, one thing we've borne witness to is the incredible ways in which governments across all levels have come together to support our most vulnerable neighbours. Watching institutions become more agile and collaborative gives me great hope that the pathway to housing and housing stability for those experiencing homelessness can happen.

The Government of Canada's emergency response, specifically the work within Employment and Social Development Canada, and Reaching Home, under the leadership of Minister Ahmed Hussen, Parliamentary Secretary Adam Vaughan and their teams should be applauded. The emergency funding that's been allocated under Reaching Home has allowed communities like ours in St. John's to not only respond to the pandemic but also begin thinking about how we can leverage investments to enact critical systems change that will lead to more communities across Canada reducing homelessness.

During the pandemic it has become clear that the investments required to end homelessness in our community, as in many others around Canada, are needed now more than ever. The pandemic has highlighted the significant gaps that exist for our vulnerable neighbours who live on the margins. In St. John's we've seen an increase in demand for emergency shelter, an increase in demand for mental health services and an increase in demand from women experiencing violence, among a host of other social ills. What has become painfully obvious for those we hear from who work in the homeless-serving sector here is that the gaps to securing safe and affordable housing continue to widen.

Ending homelessness isn't going to be done solely by building houses. For many people who experience homelessness, ending homelessness will require that additional supports be part of any and all housing and homelessness strategies and investments.

The research undertaken across several Canadian communities over the past 10 years has demonstrated to us that those experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of morbidity and mortality; acute illness, including traumatic brain injury and vascular disease; chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, cancer and respiratory illnesses; severe mental illness and substance abuse issues; and infectious diseases, including hepatitis C, HIV and tuberculosis.

Taken together, what the research and the voices of those working on the front lines every day across Canada show is that people experiencing homelessness often have disabilities and medical conditions that place them at greater risk of COVID-19. What we have learned during the pandemic is the importance of finding ways to work across government departments that by their very design and nature operate in isolation. Finding new solutions to long-standing social and health inequities will require a commitment from all levels of government to innovation and collaboration within and between all levels of government.

This is why for us in St. John's and across Newfoundland and Labrador, we see an opportunity to lead, with our province, interdepartmental conversations and collaborations among our income assistance programs, justice department, health and regional health authorities and our provincial housing corporation. This is all with the intention to redesign our housing and homeless-serving systems to bring about real change for our most vulnerable neighbours.

The same approach can certainly be taken with the leadership and commitment from the federal government. Investing in the federal housing advocate and the national housing council is one way to demonstrate this commitment, as is investing in better understanding the unique needs associated with urban and rural indigenous housing and homelessness across the country.

Even with those much-needed investments that have come through as part of the Government of Canada's emergency response, there's still a lot of work in front of us if we're going to plan for a second surge in the fall and beyond. We know that the system costs of homelessness cut across multiple departments, as do the cost savings when investments are aligned.

With the support and leadership of the federal government, we see an opportunity for a concerted effort to ensure that community entities, like ours at End Homelessness St. John's, are working very collaboratively with our provincial governments and the federal government to maximize the investments and align the funding across and between the national housing strategy and Reaching Home.

● (1410)

I'd like to see all the departments within the federal government that have a housing, homelessness and health mandate, in fact, all departments with a social policy mandate, work collaboratively to ensure investments are aligned and contribute to housing stability and ending homelessness.

Of course, any continued investments into housing and homelessness prevention should be part of a post-pandemic relief package. The reasons for this are many, but three important ones would be that any investments in housing will accelerate an economic recovery through much-needed job creation; aligning investments

will save money as we find ways to [Technical difficulty—Editor] homelessness and into housing; and more importantly, will save lives at the community level.

I'd like to thank you again for inviting me to appear today. I look forward to our discussion.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Pawson.

[Translation]

Mr. Beaudoin, you have the floor.

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin (General Secretary, Réseau québécois des OSBL d'habitation):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all the members of the committee for having invited us today.

The events of the past few months, you will agree, have certainly been a tremendous challenge for all Canadians. This was particularly the case for the sector we represent, the non-profit housing sector organizations, or NPOs, in Quebec. There are 1,250 organizations in Quebec that own and administer 2,600 housing projects, or nearly 55,000 affordable housing units, all of which are intended for a variety of vulnerable clientele.

Of these households, nearly half are composed of seniors, who are known to be among those most at risk in the current pandemic. The others are families, including one or two-parent families, women and children victims of violence, troubled youth, people at risk of homelessness, and others living with physical or mental health problems.

The variety of clientele found in our housing NPOs represents just about the entire spectrum of the most vulnerable people in Quebec society, as is also the case in non-profit housing in other provinces. COVID-19 has added an additional layer of hardship for these people.

Having said that, we are pleased, if I may use that term, that less than 5% of non-profit housing projects in Quebec have had confirmed cases of COVID-19 in recent weeks. Among those, there have been no significant outbreaks. I would like to believe that having access to affordable, safe and well-maintained housing, where there is community support and where people take care of each other, has contributed to the overall positive results in terms of protecting individuals.

Almost a year ago to the day, on June 20, the Parliament of Canada took a historic step by recognizing housing as a fundamental human right. The importance of everyone having a roof over their heads and a place to live in safety has never been more evident than in the context of the current pandemic. The commitment enshrined in the National Housing Strategy Act to advance the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing must inform the government's response to the pandemic and the recovery plan in the coming weeks or months.

The organizations we represent, their managers and the thousands of volunteers who work for them have spared no effort over the past three months to put in place the protective measures recommended by the various public health authorities, despite the limited means at their disposal. I might mention the control of comings and goings in the buildings, the intensification of sanitation measures, the provision of personal protective equipment, as well as the preparation and delivery of meals to seniors in seniors' residences, directly to their rental units. All of this has had a major impact on the operating expenses of our member organizations.

A survey we conducted among them in the last few days allowed us to estimate the additional costs caused by the pandemic in all housing NPOs in Quebec over the last three months at approximately \$30 million. These are mainly costs associated with the additional human and material resources that had to be mobilized. This is in addition to the loss of certain revenues. Although this loss was less significant than could have been expected, it still adds pressure on the budgetary balance of our organizations. There was a loss of rental income, mainly because of the difficulty in renting units that became vacant that we could not show potential tenants. These revenue losses totalled about \$10 million.

It should be noted that the vast majority of our organizations do not receive any financial support for their operations. Any increase in expenses must necessarily be offset by an increase in their own-source revenues. Since these revenues come from rents, this poses a challenge for maintaining the affordability of our housing units. The assistance programs that have been put in place, such as the emergency wage subsidy, have been designed primarily to help businesses that have suffered significant revenue losses, not necessarily those that, rather than suffering a significant loss of revenue, have experienced a significant increase in expenses. As a result, our members have not been able to benefit from this particular program. A number of them did, however, benefit from the Canadian emergency business account. They have taken advantage of it and we are very pleased about that. It's been very helpful to them.

We hope that in the coming days, the \$350-million emergency community support fund announced for community organizations will support our non-profit housing organizations, which greatly need that support.

• (1415)

In my presentation, I argued that the right to housing should inform the government's response to the pandemic. In our view, this should translate into a revitalization and acceleration of the National Housing Strategy. We need a more ambitious and stronger strategy. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has set the goal of ensuring that by 2030, all Canadians will have affordable hous-

ing. To achieve this goal, the National Housing Strategy needs to provide better delivery and even greater program flexibility.

Given the situation we are experiencing now and will experience in the coming weeks due to the health crisis, we invite the government to consider the possibility of creating an emergency fund to support the acquisition by non-profit organizations, and eventually, by municipalities, of affordable housing that may become available on the private market. A slowdown, or even a collapse, in the real estate market is expected, announced or projected. In this context, some owners will want to dispose of their assets.

There is currently affordable housing in the private market that we wish to retain. We do not want the situation to become like the one we experienced in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, a kind of "financialization" of the housing market. This led to a massive loss of affordable housing. Between 2011 and 2016, Canada lost 322,000 affordable housing units for households earning less than \$30,000 a year. The current programs of the National Housing Strategy, as valid as they are, do not provide the flexibility needed to encourage such acquisitions. Such acquisitions would preserve the affordable housing stock and ensure its sustainability by removing it from the speculative market.

In conclusion, I would like to convey a message from all representatives of the Quebec social and community housing sector. They fervently hope that the agreement between Ottawa and the province on the transfer of funds provided for in the National Housing Strategy will finally be concluded, and quickly. Quebec is the only province that does not have access to these funds. In our view, these funds are absolutely necessary so that we can continue to meet the needs of the hundreds of thousands of Quebec households whose housing needs are imperative.

The pandemic has shown us that when they have the will to do so and the situation requires it, governments are capable of acting quickly and decisively in crisis situations. What we have managed to do collectively, in the context of the health crisis, we should also be able to do in the context of the housing crisis.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1420)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Beaudoin.

We will now proceed to question period for members, starting with Conservative members.

[English]

Leading off is Mrs. Vecchio for six minutes.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC):** Thank you very much, Monsieur Beaudoin and Mr. Pawson, for joining us today. It's wonderful.

I'm going to begin with Mr. Pawson.

I was out in St. John's doing a tour in Newfoundland back in 2018, and I happened to meet with members of your organization. Specifically, looking at the makeup of the way the houses are even built in Newfoundland they are a bit different from what we see in other parts of the country. I know there are multiple units in homes.

With social distancing and different measures that are being asked for in Newfoundland, did you find any new effects in some of the housing issues?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** Broadly speaking, yes. There was this concern regarding having an aging infrastructure. Certainly, we experience 800-plus individuals in emergency shelters annually, which may seem small, but in a city the size of St. John's, it's pretty significant.

More importantly, moving from an emergency shelter to an affordable housing unit is really complicated, because we do have aging infrastructure, and folks are often residing in what we call bedsits, rooming houses that are overcrowded and have very little in ways of supports or management.

A lot of individuals have expressed concern about living in conditions where they have very little control over the activities of the folks who also reside in those homes. We've worked a bit with the province to identify ways in which those individuals might be supported, including, as part of our pandemic response, to ensure that anybody requiring testing, who can't avail of safe and secure refuge, can find space at a designated hotel in the community here.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Awesome.

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** We recognize that for folks who may not be in an emergency shelter there's certainly a gap between getting from a shelter and into a deeply affordable and maybe non-market rental type of unit. We know the national housing strategy's funding will allow the province to expand and repair its housing stock. We do wonder if that's going to be enough.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Okay. I want to move on to some other things.

I think in 2019 there was supposed to be a five-year strategy that had been completed by your organization, but you mentioned that the gaps continue to widen when it comes to housing and homelessness.

What did you find over the scope of the five-year study, the survey and structure that you did in your strategic plan? What results did you get from that? Add that to where we are with this pandemic. What are some of the trials and things that you're seeing? How did this actually widen?

We know there has been a lot of money put into this, but how has this widened, and why has the gap continued to get larger?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** I think quite honestly it's the issue of affordability. For individuals who are moving from homelessness, or moving from a bedsit, or a rooming house into a private market housing unit, the cost of maintaining that unit can be quite challenging on provincial income support systems.

This is why any housing and homelessness strategy has to include income support systems as part of it, because the challenge of maintaining housing stability on limited income can be very daunting,

and that's in St. John's where we have quite a vacancy rate which is quite higher than the national average.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** We see affordability is the issue with a lot of things.

When it comes to supply, is that being increased? What are you finding with that right now?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** We know that under the NHS there is a commitment by the province to expand its housing stock and repair that stock. We don't have specific timelines for when that will be developed, but we do see a vacancy rate, and we're working with private landlords as part of our organization to try to incentivize them to take on individuals.

We're seeing take-up on that, but that needs to be widespread and have far more investments than what we would typically see under Reaching Home.

• (1425)

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Thank you very much.

Monsieur Beaudoin, looking specifically at the seniors, you mentioned there were many seniors in many of your facilities and taking up many of your spaces.

What were some of the challenges you saw that the seniors were facing, specifically through this pandemic?

[Translation]

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** The main difficulty we had was complying with health regulations. In the seniors' residences, we had to impose confinement for public health reasons. This confinement is just beginning to be lifted these days. From a mental health perspective, the requirement for these people to be confined to rental units—small one-bedroom units at best—has been very difficult for their morale.

These people are used to going out, socializing, and taking part in recreational activities in the common room. These are habits that are essential to maintaining their independence and abilities. However, we had to close the dining rooms and deliver meals to the rental units. This was the most difficult part, because these seniors would have liked to have had even this opportunity to meet at least once a day to eat together, exchange ideas, make sure everyone was well, and so on.

Our organizations have obviously had to deal with the costs associated with providing meals in rental units or hiring security guards to monitor the comings and goings in the buildings. This represents a significant financial pressure for these organizations and we hope to be able to offset this in the coming months.

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

[English]

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Thank you.

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

Next, we're going to Mr. Turnbull, please, for six minutes.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Thanks, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the panellists for being here.

I wanted to start off by saying that I think our government has demonstrated a real commitment to addressing the affordable housing crisis and putting an end to homelessness with historic investments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it's certain to me that we've invested \$15 million for big cities, \$157.5 million through Reaching Home, \$50 million for women's shelters, and another \$350 million through the emergency community support fund, which is going to many of the agencies that deliver a lot of the wraparound supports.

Would you not agree that the current government has demonstrated a real commitment to addressing affordable housing and ending homelessness?

I would like a short answer from Mr. Pawson, if you don't mind.

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** Obviously, these investments are absolutely critical if we're going to continue down the path to end homelessness. I think the challenge remaining is the relationship building that needs to exist between the community entities, the NHS partners at the provincial level, as well as the federal government. These investments need to be stronger and more aligned, but they are critical and allow us to set forth, at least for us, a strategy to transform our shelter system here in St. John's.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** That's great, thank you.

Mr. Beaudoin, maybe you could answer that question as well, but quickly, please, as I have more questions.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** I'd be happy to.

In fact, since the announcement of the National Housing Strategy in 2017, we have applauded this commitment and the will that has guided the development of this strategy. However, in practice, there is still a lot of work to be done to make this a concrete reality on the ground, to tie together the different interventions and programs.

In Quebec, the situation is relatively unique. Indeed, over the past 20 years, especially following the withdrawal of social housing investments by previous federal governments, Quebec has developed infrastructure, an ecosystem and programs that have made it possible to put in place social and community housing.

There has to be an alignment and follow-through so that the will expressed by the federal government is conveyed to the people on the ground and development continues.

• (1430)

[English]

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you for that answer.

I want to ask a looking-forward question now. I think both of you would probably agree that we need to make sure that housing is a part or at the centre of our economic recovery. Nod your head if you agree.

What's the best thing to do to make sure we're continuing to move the needle on ending homelessness and addressing the affordable housing crisis in the economic recovery post-COVID?

Mr. Pawson, I'll go to you first.

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** Absolutely, housing is essential to an economic recovery; there's no question. These are big infrastructure projects that can be built across the country to alleviate a very important housing crisis.

The issue around folks exiting homelessness will inevitably require provincial income support systems to be involved in housing corporations in those communities and across the provinces, and of course interventions around the financialization of the housing market in general.

I think we want to make sure that as we're adding affordable new housing stock to communities, and maybe even deeply affordable in non-market-based rentals, we're also not further contributing to the unaffordability of housing in the private market because of the financialization of the housing market across the country.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** That's very insightful.

Mr. Beaudoin, I want to give you a chance to answer, and then my time will probably be up.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** I would add that social recovery must be included in economic recovery. We will not be able to dissociate the issues of economic recovery and social recovery. The latter will make it possible, for example, to develop affordable housing that meets high standards in terms of energy efficiency and ecological concerns. We have to see this as a whole and adopt a much broader perspective, if only in anticipation of a second wave. We will not make predictions, but we know that we will experience other difficult situations like the one we have experienced and are experiencing right now. So we have to be increasingly prepared to deal with those situations, and affordable housing is part of the solution.

[English]

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you.

Chair, do I have more time?

**The Chair:** You have 23 seconds.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** How does the social economy factor into ending homelessness, Mr. Pawson?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** That's a great question. Our history allows me to speak to this a bit: Social procurement and looking at the ways in which the non-profit social housing sector can be embedded into procurement.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thanks, Mr. Pawson.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Trudel, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank Mr. Pawson and Mr. Beaudoin.

First, I would just like to respond to my government colleague who was wondering if the government has done the right thing in the last two or three years with respect to housing.

I'm going to mention a few facts about the housing situation in Quebec at the moment. Housing needs are compelling: 500,000 households spend more than 30% of their income on housing; 300,000 households spend more than 50% of their income on housing; and 82,000 households spend 80% of their income on housing. These are concrete facts, and they are happening in Quebec right now. The situation is not rosy, especially since some of the money spent on social housing, in particular, is sleeping in Ottawa—this money has not been paid to the provinces.

Mr. Beaudoin, I want to set the record straight. When it comes to housing, language is important, especially when governments around the world are telling people to stay at home.

Could you explain the difference between affordable and social housing?

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** In fact, it's social and community housing. By this expression, we mean housing that is, obviously, affordable and whose ownership is not based on the pursuit of profit, therefore not for profit.

These are collectively owned in the case of private organizations, such as non-profit organizations or housing co-operatives. However, there must be a desire for sustainability and a mode of community organization that allows for the mobilization of communities and tenants and their participation in management.

In our view, all of this helps to ensure that the projects we design remain affordable and serve the people who need them in the long term. The notion of affordability is important, but it is only one factor in housing rights.

• (1435)

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** Thank you for your response, Mr. Beaudoin.

Since I've been a member of Parliament in Ottawa, I've often heard about Quebec's approach to housing, an approach that is said to be more comprehensive and more community-based.

Could you tell us about what characterizes Quebec's approach to housing?

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** I'd be happy to talk about it, Mr. Trudel.

I'm not saying that Quebec is better than the other provinces, because each province has its own policies, constraints, directions and ways of doing things.

By necessity, we have developed a model over the last 20 years or so that is largely based on community initiative. The projects that are designed and receive support from authorities and government funding come from the communities. This is what has allowed us to set up dozens and dozens of seniors' residences in rural areas, in small communities.

In a hundred or so municipalities in Quebec, without these housing NPOs to provide housing with services for seniors, the latter would have to leave their communities and move to large centres when they retire or at the end of their lives, because there would be no housing with services for seniors.

In each of these communities, people of good will came together, and government support, private sector funding and shared initiatives ensured that these projects were successfully developed.

As you mentioned, this doesn't mean that everything is fine and everything is settled. There are still huge problems related to housing accessibility, access to a roof over one's head. There is still a lot to be done. We need to have funding available under the National Housing Strategy. An agreement must be signed as soon as possible.

However, the foundation has been laid. There are programs and a way of doing things that will allow us to use this money for further development.

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** Thank you, Mr. Beaudoin.

With respect to the agreement between Quebec and Ottawa on the National Housing Strategy, we heard that \$1.4 billion had not been spent and that this money for social and affordable housing should go to Quebec. The Government of Quebec wants control over that money, even though housing is a federal jurisdiction.

Why do you think it's important for Quebec to take the lead on housing?

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** I would say that there are already programs and an approach that have been proven to work. The AccèsLogis Québec program, which has been in existence for some 20 years, has enabled the construction of 42,000 social and community housing units.

We managed to improve our indicators. For example, between the 2011 and 2016 censuses, the number of people in core housing need in Quebec decreased thanks to the investments made in AccèsLogis. This program has proven its ability to build and provide new housing for our clientele, which is very diversified, as I mentioned at the beginning of my statement.

If we get additional funding, we will be able to accelerate the construction of these new units to meet the needs. It will also be done quickly because both the program and the ecosystem of organizations with the capacity and professional knowledge to mount projects already exist. That is what we really need it for, and that is what the funds will be used for once the agreement is finalized.

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** Thank you, Mr. Beaudoin.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

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

**Mr. Denis Trudel:** I have one last question on the real need for housing. How many people could be housed immediately if the agreement were signed tomorrow morning?

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** In fact...

**The Chair:** Please answer briefly.

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** Quebec needs 5,000 new community units per year. With the help of this agreement, we could probably catch up with the backlog.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Trudel and Mr. Beaudoin.

[English]

Next we have Ms. Kwan, please, for six minutes.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for their thoughtful presentations.

I'm going to start with you, Mr. Pawson. I'm wondering if you can comment on the recovery for all initiatives that have been proposed by the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. They were here at HUMA to present their six-point plan. I wonder whether you have any thoughts about that and whether or not you support their six-point plan.

• (1440)

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** A very short response to that question is yes, we support it.

Across our community, we work really closely with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, and we do support its recovery for all plan. We've continued to work with them to advocate to the federal government under their six-point plan.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you.

One of the comments that was posted on social media from End Homelessness St. John's says:

[W]e cannot go back to normal—[to] a normal where over 235,000 different Canadians every year are homeless; where 1.7 million households live in sub-standard or unaffordable housing; where people are at life threatening risk for no other reason than they are poor and don't have a place to call home.

Is this comment that was posted accurate?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** Yes. Across the country, that's what the data is showing.

Emergency shelter usage includes over 235,000 Canadians on an annual basis. Several more, obviously, are living in substandard and dilapidated housing conditions and are under-housed and overcrowded and just don't necessarily meet the traditional view of what people might think of homelessness. They're living in unsafe conditions. Of course, what the pandemic has shown is that you need safe conditions to isolate in. That is often missing for our most vulnerable neighbours across the country.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** As part of the six-point plan, one of the components is to call for a major housing stimulus package in the recovery for the federal government to invest in. It's calling for maintaining the \$157 million per year of additional funding, an expansion of the rural and remote stream to \$50 million per year, and developing a new funding stream of \$75 million to prevent homelessness for women, children and youth. That's as a baseline.

From that perspective, that would be one component of the six-point plan. Another component is a national guaranteed minimum income, which is an essential piece, because poverty is tied into it. I wonder if you can comment on these two specific recommendations.

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** Yes, absolutely. In my earlier comments, I mentioned the need for government across all levels, including the federal and provincial governments, to work closely with income support systems when addressing housing and homelessness strategies.

We've seen a lot of individuals who are unable to maintain housing in the private market because their income levels allocated for

rent are simply not enough. That's the case here in St. John's, where we have a healthy vacancy rate. It's further exacerbated in larger urban areas. In rural areas, for example, in parts of Labrador, we see that housing is incredibly difficult to acquire and the affordability concerns there resemble something that you might see in Toronto or Vancouver.

We absolutely support the notion around the idea of implementation of these basic needs, basic income types of programs, that will ensure people have the affordability component of housing secure.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** In Vancouver, we have a major housing crisis. Just a couple of days ago in another homeless encampment, some 40 people were arrested. All that really means is that we're pushing people from one encampment to another, with no place they can call home.

Now, part of the recommendation from the six-point plan is 300,000 new, permanent, affordable housing units. Compare this to what is proposed under the national housing strategy. Is the national housing strategy sufficient to reach 300,000 new, permanent, affordable housing units to meet the need?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** That's a good question. Just to address the first part of your comment, around the encampment and folks being arrested, what we see is that the costs across the system are just shifted. That's why interdepartmental coordination around housing and homelessness strategies and investments needs to involve every department that has a social policy objective and mandate.

To the point about the 300,000 new, permanent, affordable and supportive housing units, this is required in addition to the NHS investments, because what we often see is that, although housing stock may be built, additional supports are also required for those who are most vulnerable. We see in our community, for example, folks who may end up in a bedsit or a private market rental but, because their stability breaks down, the attachment of supports into housing is no longer there. They return to shelter. That's a common occurrence across the country.

These are not just an additional 300,000 housing units; these are affordable and supportive housing units that need to be available.

• (1445)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I absolutely agree. You need to build the housing and then you need to have the supports in place if people are to be successful. At a bare minimum, we need 300,000 units of affordable housing to be built and get the supports in place, because without the physical structure, you have nowhere to start. Is that correct?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** Yes, absolutely. The federal government has a great opportunity to lead on this by looking at the ways in which it's investing, not only in housing but in health, and the ways in which it's working with the provincial governments to align those investments between health and housing.

We know, and research has demonstrated to us, that folks who are homeless and who may be housed very unstably require additional supports, and that's often done through the provincial governments and their relationships through their health authorities.

We do need to have that leadership, and it can be done in great part with the support of the federal government.

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

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Next we're going to go to Mrs. Falk, please, for five minutes.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

I also want to thank our witnesses for their testimony.

To effectively deliver stable support and assistance to those experiencing chronic homelessness, it is necessary that we understand the needs and the impact that this health crisis, COVID-19, is having on those needs. Your insight today is very valuable and also very much appreciated.

My first question is for Doug Pawson. In reviewing the work that End Homelessness St. John's does, I noted that housing first was a guiding principle. I am sure you know that the housing first approach was implemented into the federal homelessness partnering strategy in 2014, and changes to the federal homelessness partnering strategy in 2018 removed the 65% housing first investment target, allowing funds to be diverted elsewhere.

In my view, moving beyond short-term emergency and crisis-based responses is necessary to effectively reduce chronic homelessness in Canada. I'm wondering if you can share with the committee why your organization uses housing first as a guiding principle and any insight on the successes it has had.

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** For us, housing first is a philosophy that, first and foremost, recognizes that in order to participate fully in social and economic life, you need to have a home, and it needs to be safe and secure.

In terms of your question or your comments related to the transition between HPS and Reaching Home, and the connotation for housing first to be taken out of it, I think the intention of that, which is based on consultations that I've participated in and heard from other community entities around the country, is that it gave communities greater flexibility to make investments that were more strategic for their community.

I'll give you an example. Here, in St. John's, we see a gap existing. Housing first initiatives are often centred around rapid rehousing programs and intensive case management programs. These are often the jurisdiction of provincial governments. In our case, the federal government's investment through Reaching Home into St. John's is simply not sufficient to invest those funds strategically across the community and actually make an impact on the homeless serving sector. We abide by the housing first philosophy, and we want individuals to have agency in their entry and exit out of homelessness, but we also recognize that we need to work very closely with our provincial government where these types of health inter-

ventions need to be further embedded into housing and homelessness strategies.

That's a bit of a challenge that we face, unique to us, but I don't think that's unique across the country, where provincial governments operate their housing and homelessness strategies in isolation from their community entities.

• (1450)

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** With my life experience and my experience with social work, I absolutely understand that we can't have an "Ottawa knows best" approach. That doesn't work, especially with Canada being so regional. Honestly, I would actually argue that municipalities would be best positioned because communities are so different, let alone provinces.

My next question is for Mr. Beaudoin.

As an umbrella organization for the 1,200 not-for-profits, you are very well positioned to speak on a spectrum of needs facing vulnerable Canadians. Keeping Canadians housed, we know, is fundamental to addressing chronic homelessness. I'm wondering if you could offer the committee any insight on the most pressing needs of those at risk of becoming homeless during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** In the context of the health crisis, it's really a matter of ensuring access to a roof and safe places for everyone to comply with recommended health measures.

Over the past few weeks, we have had some interesting experiences in collaboration with teams from the health and social services sector, as well as municipalities. In Montreal, for example, fantastic work has been done to ensure that as few people as possible were forced to live on the street and that people had a place where they could get follow-up and guidance. As soon as someone had symptoms of COVID-19, they were taken care of. It is therefore necessary to establish a link between community support, access to housing and workers who can ensure follow-up with people in difficulty.

Homelessness is always linked to a housing problem, but it is not just about that. It is always accompanied by a range of problems. So community support and access to resources are fundamental if people are to make a successful transition to housing in the future.

We have had some interesting experiences, in a crisis context where we had to act quickly to help people. That gives us an idea of what we could do in the future to help people who may find themselves experiencing homelessness.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Beaudoin.

[English]

Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Next we're going to go to Mr. Long, please, for five minutes.

**Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to apologize in advance. The audio and video of what's happening around me aren't really good right now, but I think if you can hear me I'm going to move forward.

I want to thank our presenters for doing a great job in their presentations. I have some questions.

As Mr. Beaudoin rightly pointed out in his opening remarks, our federal government entrenched our commitment to undertaking a human rights-based approach to housing policy in Canadian law, so the National Housing Strategy Act was introduced and passed in the last Parliament.

I'll start with you, Mr. Pawson, and then I'll go to Mr. Beaudoin. In your view, how has the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for a human rights-based federal housing strategy?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** I think the commitment made by the government to adopt housing as a human right is not just a symbolic gesture. It allows us to chart a path to ensure that folks who are experiencing homelessness or who may need to avail themselves of emergency shelter supports can be quickly moved into housing. To do that, we need more housing. Simply put, we need more housing and more supports embedded around it. This, to me, would ensure that housing as a human right can be actioned across Canada.

**Mr. Wayne Long:** Mr. Beaudoin.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jacques Beaudoin:** The crisis has really demonstrated the extent to which housing is a human right. It was a historic decision last year to enshrine this objective in an act of Parliament. We really saw in practice what that meant. All Canadians were asked to confine themselves, to respect emergency measures, to stay home. No one wanted this situation, and it was not desirable, but we could not have had a better demonstration of the fact that housing is a fundamental human right.

Having a home—where you can live in safety, where you're not overcrowded, where there are no families of five or six in one- or two-bedroom units, where the unit is big enough to meet your needs—allowed those who had access to that to respect containment. However, for those who did not have access to such a home, it was very difficult.

• (1455)

[English]

**Mr. Wayne Long:** Mr. Pawson, my office in Saint John, New Brunswick, does a lot of work with the two shelters here. We work with Jayme Hall at Outflow and with Mary Saulnier-Taylor at Coverdale.

I certainly remember getting home from Ottawa when the pandemic was becoming more and more serious in all ridings across the country. We were extremely concerned about the men and women at shelters. We serve breakfast there pretty much every weekend and have a great relationship with them. Our minds and hearts went out to the men in the shelters.

Obviously, I was thrilled that we came out with the Reaching Home homelessness strategy, which has provided more money to the shelters through the Human Development Council, with Randy Hatfield and his wonderful group. Given what has happened with

COVID-19, what are the most significant risks that people experiencing homelessness have faced? What was their biggest risk?

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** We work really closely with the Human Development Council folks. They're great leaders for your community and the province of New Brunswick.

**Mr. Wayne Long:** They are.

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** Most shelter systems are based on a congregate model. That is, individuals maybe have a cot on the floor and you'll see a number of beds in one room. There's very little of the bathroom space or washroom space that would be appropriate for individuals. It's often shared among the larger group. The arrangement of the shelter set-up is therefore ripe for transmission of COVID or a disease of this nature.

**Mr. Wayne Long:** Let me just jump in. Do you feel we need to move away from a congregate model? I was lucky enough to be in HUMA last session. We went across the country looking at shelters, and almost every one of them has that style.

**Mr. Doug Pawson:** We're fortunate in our community in St. John's because we have more of a private/semi-private shelter model. The reason people continue to reside in shelters is that they're often individuals who have a very limited income and are without dependants. They can't avail themselves of the existing tax credits that are designed for those who have dependants or whatnot. They're totally reliant on provincial income support assistance, and those rental allowances are simply not enough in any urban centre or area where there might be a housing shortage.

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

To the witnesses, Mr. Pawson and Mr. Beaudoin, we very much appreciate your testimony here today and the work that you do. Thank you for being with us here today to share your expertise and experience. We wish you a good weekend.

We will suspend for a couple of minutes to get ready for the next panel. I want to start this one on time because we have some very brief administrative matters to deal with before we adjourn for the day.

We are suspended.

• (1459)

(Pause)

• (1502)

• (1500)

**The Chair:** We're back in session.

I would now like to welcome Ms. Parisa Mahboubi, senior policy analyst from the C.D. Howe Institute, as well as Mr. John Milloy, director of the Centre for Public Ethics at Martin Luther University College.

Ms. Mahboubi, please proceed with your opening remarks.

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi (Senior Policy Analyst, C.D. Howe Institute):** Good afternoon, everyone.

Mr. Chairman and honourable committee members, I am very pleased to have this opportunity to speak to you today.

In response to COVID-19, the C.D. Howe Institute has put together four crisis working groups to rapidly distill expert policy advice, and it has published a high volume of articles on a daily basis to address issues related to this crisis. One of these groups is the household income and credit support group, which has dealt with the immediate labour market and income impacts of the crisis and the transition to go back to work and reopen the economy.

Today I'd like to summarize an overall evaluation of the Canada emergency response benefit program, or CERB, highlight its current issues and provide some policy options to address them, based on our work and the output of our working group.

The Canada emergency response benefit was an early and critical element in the federal government's response to the crisis. In support of a stay-at-home strategy to flatten the curve, the CERB was particularly necessary to ensure that households stay afloat while the restrictions are in place. The introduction of the program was also in part an attempt to fill coverage gaps in employment insurance, the EI program. For example, workers in precarious employment, such as part-timers, are less likely to meet the minimum required insurable hours to qualify for EI. Labour market statistics show that the crisis has affected hourly-paid low-wage workers the most, highlighting the importance of this program.

With attention increasingly turning to reopening the economy, the CERB, however, is becoming a problem. The program has been very popular. There were more than 8.4 million unique applications as of June 4, which was about 44% of the employed labour force in Canada in February 2020. Although the heavy use of the CERB could be related, to some extent, to the slow rollout of the Canada emergency wage subsidy program and lack of a strong message and clarification on CERB eligibility in the beginning to prevent program misuse, the sheer number of applicants can be indicative of problems with the CERB itself that need to be addressed.

First, its eligibility criteria are very broad, and, unlike the EI program, there is no requirement to remain available to work and be actively looking for a job. Second, the amount of the benefit is relatively generous for low-income earners, and it is not linked to pre-pandemic income. Third, the clawback rate is too harsh with this program, since the benefit goes to zero for the first dollar of income earned above \$1,000. All these factors create significant disincentives to return to work, particularly among low-income earners, slowing the recovery.

What is the best way forward?

With reopening strategies differing across the country's industries, the government needs to shift away from a national one-size-fits-all income support plan and create better-tailored income supports.

In general, two options are available for providing continued income support to CERB recipients who, after exhausting their maxi-

mum eligibility period, may remain unemployed without access to EI benefits.

The first option is to extend the CERB but introduce new phase-out modifications based on some features of the EI program that can help tackle work incentive issues and support transition to work. The EI features to consider for modifying the CERB are the following: the requirement to remain available to work and be actively looking for a job; the working-while-on-claim provision of the EI program through setting appropriate income-tested clawbacks, learned from international experiences; the linkage between the amount of benefit and pre-pandemic income; and the EI parental sharing benefit, to allow parents to share child care responsibilities when no child care option is available.

● (1505)

To provide income support, there is a second option, other than reforming the CERB. It's to expand the EI program by reforming eligibility criteria to take on the role of the CERB.

The decision on which program to reform largely rests on the length of the crisis and recovery period, and the number of CERB recipients in need of post-CERB financial support. Therefore, more and better data is needed to make informed decisions about an income support transition model.

When planning out the next phase in the short term, the government should aim to preserve fairness among those who would continue to receive the CERB and others who would continue to work without receiving the benefit. One proposal for balancing concerns of work incentives and fairness would be to combine a modified CERB with a temporary working bonus program that offers an earned income tax credit for low-wage workers.

To address the coverage gap for those who are not able to return to work, the working bonus and the modified CERB can be complemented by targeted supplemental measures, such as a refundable child care tax credit for parents returning to work, and a boost to the Canada child benefit.

Longer-term policy options to support Canadians during the pandemic crisis and recovery should also include investments in re-training, re-skilling, and upskilling to address long-term displacements and structural unemployment, because the labour market is changing.

The above-mentioned policies can provide policy-makers with options to support Canadians during the crisis while easing the transition to go back to work. These were my main points to highlight. Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Mahboubi.

Next is Mr. Milloy. You have seven and a half minutes for your opening remarks.

• (1510)

[Translation]

**Mr. John Milloy (Director, Centre for Public Ethics, Martin Luther University College):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I would like to thank you for inviting me to join committee members to discuss the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[English]

I come to this question from a variety of perspectives. I spent eight years on Parliament Hill as a political staffer, including five in the office of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. I spent 11 years at Queen's Park as an MPP, seven in cabinet, including four years as Ontario's Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities.

I retired from politics to academia. I am currently the director of the Centre for Public Ethics at Martin Luther University College, the founding institution of Wilfrid Laurier University. I also serve as the practitioner-in-residence in Laurier's political science department, and I teach in the University of Waterloo's master of public service program.

From all these different perspectives, let me briefly make four observations related to the question before you.

The first involves jobs. As Canada begins to emerge from COVID-19, there is little question that we will face a jobs crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Many jobs lost during the pandemic are simply going to disappear. Youth have been particularly hard hit. The most recent job numbers out of Statistics Canada have been bleak for both non-student and student youth. [Technical difficulty—Editor] parents' basements on a temporary basis to ride out the pandemic are now asking themselves whether this is a permanent situation. So what do we do? Creating the right economic environment is crucial, but we also need to make sure that job seekers have the necessary skills.

During the 2008 recession, I was the minister who brought in Ontario's second career program, which still exists. It was fairly successful in supporting certain categories of laid-off workers in upgrading their skills. We're going to have to go much further than second career and adopt an "all hands on deck" approach, where all of our post-secondary institutions work much more closely with potential employers to ensure their programs correspond to the needs of a changing economy. Continuous intake, micro-credentialing,

year-round learning and mandatory experiential learning should all be part of the post-pandemic dialogue.

We can do it. COVID-19 has taught us that, if pushed, our somewhat sluggish post-secondary and training sector can become nimble and creative in altering the way we do business. Just ask all those who had to quickly transform their in-class courses into distance learning due to COVID-19. This doesn't mean the end of literature and theology programs, but there's plenty of room to teach subjects like these in a way that builds needed competencies and gives students practical hands-on experience.

Although the Government of Canada has a key role to play in this transformation, it needs to recognize the leadership of the provinces and territories in this area, which is my second point: Respect jurisdictions. Many Canadians, particularly those in Ontario, often look to Ottawa for leadership in a time of crisis, even in areas that fall under provincial or territorial jurisdiction, and there's a temptation within the federal government to respond by encroaching upon that jurisdiction.

As a former provincial minister, my plea is for the federal government to recognize the leadership of our provinces and territories in areas like post-secondary education and training. Support them, but don't try to create capacity and programming federally that is duplicative. Provinces and territories know their needs. They know their educational institutions and training providers. Yes, by all means, act as a convenor and reshape EI programming, federal support for students and federal tax policies, but do it in direct partnership with our provinces and territories. There is remarkable energy out there, and governments at all levels need to harness it, which leads to my third point.

As the director of a centre at a faith-based institution concerned with public ethics, my advice is not to forget Canada's faith communities as you develop and implement policies and look for partners. Religious voices have something to offer our current public debate. Collectively and individually, they are anxious to see our world transformed into one that focuses on those on the margins and challenges the consumerism and indifference of our society. Canada's faith communities have a long history of involvement in progressive issues and have been active during the current crisis in supporting the lonely, the poor and the vulnerable. They have also turned their attention to what happens next.

• (1515)

I think of the work of Joe Gunn, the executive director of “Centre Oblat – A Voice For Justice” at Ottawa's Saint Paul University, and Sister Sue Wilson, director of the Office for Systemic Justice for the Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph in London, Ontario. Their thoughtful commentary on the need for an ethical framework for the post-COVID-19 world is but one example of many voices of faith calling for real change when it comes to issues like income inequality, the environment and indigenous reconciliation, voices that include 43 Lutheran and Anglican bishops who have collectively voiced their support for a guaranteed annual income. Engage and involve these voices.

I am going to change my focus a bit for my final point and address the role of committees like yours.

I was the government house leader during Ontario's last minority government. I recognize the important role committees play in listening to Canadians, advising Parliament, and reviewing legislation and programs. I also understand the power of committees to send for persons, papers and records, virtually unchecked in a minority government situation. Yes, this power can be used to hold the government to account. Unfortunately, it can also be used to go on wild fishing trips and exploit gotcha moments by demanding an endless supply of documents and witnesses from government simply in an effort to make them look bad.

I have witnessed committees paralyze governments as scores of public servants drop everything to hastily respond to a complicated committee request dreamt up on a whim by opposition research, neglecting the needs of citizens and being forced to remove flexibility and nimbleness from programs in order to escape committee scrutiny.

Yes, hold the government to account, but recognize that decisions over the last few months were made quickly in uncharted waters. Lots of mistakes were undoubtedly made by people working in good faith. Resist the temptation to make them the focus of your work.

This is not partisan advice. I would offer the same advice to the Liberals if they were in opposition.

That brings to a close my presentation today, with four admittedly different points: focus on education and training, respect jurisdictions, engage faith communities, and resist the temptation to use the power of committees in a minority parliament to undermine the work of government.

I look forward to any questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Milloy.

Before we go to questions, Dr. Mahboubi, the background you have makes it difficult to see you on ParlVU. You have an artificial background behind you. If you have any way to disable it, that would be quite helpful.

We'll begin with Mr. Vis, for six minutes.

Mr. Vis, you have the floor.

**Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC):** Thank you to both witnesses for their excellent testimony.

Dr. Mahboubi, I was particularly interested in the point you referenced regarding a temporary bonus to ease the transition for going back to work, and the points you made about the eligibility criteria and the relatively generous nature of the emergency benefit for low-income workers.

In my riding of Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, food security is a major issue. Our blueberry crop is one of the largest in Canada. Every farmer I'm speaking to right now is telling me that they cannot get the workers they normally get to pick the blueberries during the very small window they have to pick the crop.

I actually asked the Minister of Agriculture yesterday whether she would consider lifting the \$1,000 income cap for the food sector at this very critical time. She didn't seem very open to that point. Could you provide any comments on that? I want to thank you for raising this, because it's a great suggestion to help people get back to work. Are there other sectors of our economy that you think could really benefit from a temporary bonus to ease the transition for going back to work?

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** Thank you for highlighting those things. As I said, right now as we are moving toward reopening the economy, the program creates great disincentives to work, because the amount of payment is not linked to the income. Many low-income earners, before the crisis, earned similar or even less than the amount of the benefit, so there is no incentive for them to look for any job at the moment while they are in the CERB program.

At the same time, for those who are working and not eligible for the CERB program, it creates great unfairness in the program: Why are some people receiving the CERB and others not? That bonus would help to address the fairness issues.

In terms of the agriculture industry, finding labour in that specific industry has always been a challenge. The temporary foreign worker program has been handy and helpful for this specific sector, to provide sufficient labour to address labour shortages.

• (1520)

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Yes, most of the farmers I represent use foreign labour, but many of them also rely on a stable base of seasonal labour from Abbotsford, Mission and the surrounding areas close to the fields.

I'm going to switch direction to both of the witnesses, and I'll have Mr. Malloy respond to this one, please.

Something that neither of you covered but is very timely today relates to infrastructure spending, the delays we're seeing and the impact this might have on COVID-19. Many of the projects funded under this government actually went out under the 2014 new building Canada fund, which were the final dollars remaining from the Conservative program before the 2015 election.

The current investing in Canada plan was announced under the Liberals in 2016. My province of B.C. was one of the first to sign an integrated bilateral agreement with the federal government, and the deadline for community infrastructure projects in Mission was January 23, 2019. That was a year and a half ago, but we have yet to see any announcements. The website states that the final decisions are expected in spring 2020, a timeline they continuously bump back, so unless everything is announced tomorrow, we're into summer 2020. I'm not sure if this is just straight incompetence, but many municipalities are getting very frustrated with this.

In my community especially, we're waiting on a pump station at Miami River, the indoor pool at Kent, and the ice rink in Lillooet, in particular.

What assurance is there for Canadians that the COVID-19 infrastructure program stream under Minister McKenna, which the Liberal government has been foreshadowing, will be able to deliver projects in a timely manner?

Mr. Malloy.

**Mr. John Milloy:** Thank you.

In moments like this, I'm glad I retired from politics.

I can't speak to the specifics of what's happening federally, but certainly I can talk about the importance of infrastructure. I hope we see those partnerships, and that the partnerships take into account the views of municipalities and provinces.

The other thing is making sure we have people who can undertake the work. That goes back to my remarks. When I was speaking about post-secondary education, it wasn't simply the university or college sector. I also think about apprenticeships and their importance in making sure we have individuals who go into the trades. We have young people who, right now, are feeling a lot of pain and saying, "What is the future for me?" Certainly the trades are real opportunities.

I apologize; obviously I can't comment on the specifics of what's happening with the federal government, but infrastructure is obviously going to be a huge injection into the economy in two ways: in immediate jobs and in creating that framework. I said, all hands on deck. If we have infrastructure projects, I'm hoping we're also tying in educators, trainers and the unemployed, to make sure that we can take advantage of local labour and that people want to get involved.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** We've had some great testimony on community benefit agreements at an earlier time.

Dr. Mahboubi, how can we get the investing in Canada plan moving? I know that C.D. Howe has touched on this in some of its COVID-19-related briefings. Would you have any recommendations for the federal government to get out the door those infrastructure dollars that the communities need so desperately right now?

**The Chair:** Give a short answer, please, Doctor.

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** It's not exactly in my area to comment on, but because of the crisis, investing in that area is definitely going to help recovery, because anything that creates more jobs is going to contribute to the economy and help the recovery.

At the same time, we know the amount of spending has been significant and right now governments are seeing less income and spending more, so to make a balance and to be able to spend more on other items is definitely going to be challenging for the government, to rank the priorities and make a decision about which project has to go forward.

Again, in thinking about how we can restart the economy and help it go back to where it was before, some projects are going to be helpful in the recovery.

● (1525)

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Mahboubi.

Thank you, Mr. Vis.

Next we have Mr. Dong, please, for six minutes.

**Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both panellists for their wonderful opening remarks.

John, it's really good to see you. As a former Queen's Park staffer and Ontario legislator, who also spent four years at TCU, I want to say, for the record, that it was a pleasure and an honour to have served with you for the province of Ontario.

John, there has been some reporting by the CBC showing that very few inspections have been done in our long-term care facilities in Ontario since June 2018. What role do you think that plays in the scale of the current outbreak?

**Mr. John Milloy:** I can only comment as an observer, and a former politician, too, who sat around the table. I was never minister of health.

Obviously, I think this has given us an opportunity to look at a lot of systems, including the long-term care system. There's been a big rethink. Long-term care was something that every government has grappled with. I don't know if it's necessarily a partisan issue, but I don't think any government has done particularly well in ensuring that you have both community supports, enabling seniors to live within their communities with supports so they can age at home, and a good and effective long-term care system.

I think there's been a lot of exposure of some of the problems, including with inspections and the ability to find out what's been going on. Oftentimes, seniors don't have a voice and their families can become frustrated. As an MPP I remember meeting with families and then following up with the homes and the ministry, but you often wish that you had come in front of it.

Obviously, it's a concern, but, again, I am only a keen and concerned observer as to what's happening.

**Mr. Han Dong:** Thank you, John.

The federal government has, as you are aware, made money available to help pay the front-line and essential workers during the crisis, but I've heard from many constituents in Don Valley North, typically those who have been working on the front lines during the COVID period since March. In one case, the person works in a hospital and shares the same office where they do the lab testing for the virus, but they have been left out. They actually never saw the money from Ontario.

Now, I read this morning that the premier of Ontario is planning to cut statutory holidays for retail workers. Obviously, this is not what anyone had in mind when they talked about supporting essential workers. What are some of the things the province could have done to better support those workers?

**Mr. John Milloy:** I'm going to go back a bit to what I said. I hope for two things. First of all, I hope that we have a real rethink in our society about essential and precarious workers and issues like sick leave, and even issues around benefits, and obviously with issues around pay. I'm in front of a federal committee and the temptation is to say, "You have to get to the front of the parade", but that is really a provincial matter.

Obviously, you have a role in voicing your concern, but ultimately the provinces are in charge of this piece of the puzzle as far as provincial workers are concerned. I realize there is a federal piece. I do hope that Ontarians, the opposition in Ontario, and the provinces more generally, will be part of this rethink moving forward.

Where the federal government can play a very valuable role is as a convenor and as a source of support. As I said in my remarks, on everything from EI to tax, those sorts of things, I look to the folks at Queen's Park. I'm hoping that we're looking forward on this. There were mistakes made, but how can we rethink this? How can we rethink the role of precarious workers, because we've seen what an amazing job they do, such as the personal support workers who are being paid a pittance? I was happy to be part of a government that increased their wages. It was one of the first wage increases, but they're being paid a pittance. How do we rethink this? I hope this committee and the federal government encourages it and plays a convening role, but, ultimately, we have to look to Queen's Park and other provincial capitals.

• (1530)

**Mr. Han Dong:** That leads to my next question.

How important do you think it is to have a decent wage in place for the working population, especially during this economic recovery, coming out of COVID?

**Mr. John Milloy:** I think it's crucial. Again, I think we need to rethink those who are at the bottom, meaning at the bottom of the wage scale. There were some steps made. As I said, we can get all hung up on the partisan aspects and who made what and all that, but there were some steps made at the end of the Wynne government that I think anyone who is looking at it objectively through the COVID lens would say, "Hey, that made some sense", in terms of sick days, increasing the minimum wage and some of the worker protections. I think now is the time to revisit them. It doesn't have to be all about eating crow and humble pie and all that. You can say, "Hey, the world's changed and I think there's energy out there that says we have to think about those at the bottom."

I'll put a plug in again for faith communities. Some of the work they've done has been very much about how to deal with those who are struggling. I hope society is going to demand of all of us that we pay closer attention.

**Mr. Han Dong:** Thank you, John.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Milloy, and thank you, Mr. Dong.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank our two witnesses.

Ms. Mahboubi, thank you for sharing your thoughts on the emergency benefits that have been put in place by the government, and the transition periods. That's what my question is about.

As you know, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit has just been extended for eight weeks. This seemed to us to be an unavoidable decision, since the crisis is still having a major impact on the economy, and its effects are far from being resolved. The repercussions of this crisis have had a particular, even disproportionate, effect on women and low-income workers.

However, many of us in the Bloc Québécois agree with you that the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and the Canada Emergency Student Benefit should have been adapted in order to become employment incentives and not disincentives. The Bloc Québécois has proposed that we follow the employment insurance model exactly. In this way, a person earning more than \$1,000—let us say \$1,500—could keep half of it. However, the government is telling us that this is not technically possible and that we do not have the necessary tools.

Shouldn't we make what is politically desirable possible? We should take advantage of the recovery to do so.

Is the measure you were explaining to us going in that direction?  
[English]

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** In terms of extending the CERB program until the end of the summer, we thought that was a good call and a good direction to go in. First of all, not all provinces and not all sectors are ready to open the workplaces so that individuals can go back to them. At the same time, there are issues related to children and schools. The approach varies across the provinces. For example, in Ontario there is no summer camp. There is no alternative option for parents with children to be able to return to work during the summertime.

Extending CERB was the right call. It was right to do that. As well, it will give the government some time to think about how they want to transfer the large number of individuals from CERB to EI, if that's the right approach, and to either reform EI and use it as the main income support program or think about what needs to be done about CERB.

At the same time, I would emphasize that extending CERB for another eight weeks is fine, but we need to revise the program. We need to give consideration to some or all of the tools I mentioned here in order to be able to tackle the issues with the current design of the program. What will happen after CERB? What will be needed? We definitely don't want two types of income support programs to run for years.

This will be really important to make a decision about. We really need data and we need to think about how long the crisis will take—

• (1535)

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you.

I'd like to check a point with you.

The employment insurance system is an important stabilizing factor. Shouldn't we focus on more structural measures, such as a comprehensive reform of the system, to broaden access and improve benefits, rather than on a transition period?

[English]

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** If I understand the question, I want to emphasize that we need a separate program for those who are unemployed, but as for which program is necessary for the crisis, it's necessary to think first about how, for example, we need an income-tested program that links benefits to the monthly income of the individuals. This is something that the government is—

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I'm sorry to interrupt you, Ms. Mahboubi, but I'd like to clarify my question.

Given that the Canada Emergency Response Benefit will end soon, should we not focus on structural measures, such as reforming our employment insurance system, rather than relying on another formula?

[English]

**The Chair:** A short answer if you could, please, Dr. Mahboubi.

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** Yes, definitely. This is actually what I was trying to say. We need to go back to the EI program, but we need to improve the program to address the issues that it had even before the crisis.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Dr. Mahboubi.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** Ms. Kwan, please, for six minutes.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for their presentation.

I'd like to turn to you, Dr. Mahboubi. In your presentation you referenced the issue around child care. One of the real problems for people in returning to work, I think, is the lack of child care. Even as it stands, as we re-enter, child care spaces are really only operating at half their capacity. For those with younger children, the spaces are simply not available. That's notwithstanding COVID. In fact, this was a problem even prior to COVID.

Do you think it's time for us to actually bring forward a national child care initiative so that we can support workers—and particularly women, I might add—to enter the workforce?

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** Certainly, this is something important to consider. The reason is that, during the crisis, women were hit harder in terms of job losses than other population groups, and usually child care responsibility is on the shoulders of the woman in the household. To make sure that women, or even parents in general, are able to go back to work placements where there is no child care option available or where child care options are limited, we need to think about how we can provide the other options, such as child care subsidies.

Right now, the provincial support that individuals can receive is just through licensed child care centres. To be able to provide more options for families, we need to increase the number of child care options, specifically because child care centres are not able to open easily and they have to follow a specific protocol, which is going to affect the number of spaces available for children in each centre. What I mean is that a family could receive a child care benefit or subsidy when they use other, alternative child care options that traditionally weren't considered as something that individuals would be eligible to receive that benefit or subsidy for. One of the—

• (1540)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you. Maybe I can jump in here, because we actually do have a child tax benefit, and even then it does not actually address the child care problem.

In my own riding in Vancouver East, I regularly have constituents who are desperate. This is particularly the case with new parents who need to return to work—and this is pre-COVID—but cannot find a space. They cannot find a space. They cannot find a quality, affordable child care space for their children.

When you talk about these other options, the spaces need to be made available. To that end, doesn't the federal government need to be a real partner at the table in creating the spaces with the provinces and making them available so that people have a place to place their children and they know their children will be safe and taken care of while they're at work?

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** Collaboration between the federal and provincial governments is definitely needed to achieve that goal, but this is also something where provincial governments have to step in. They have to contribute. They have to support such an initiative.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Yes, thank goodness that in British Columbia we have a B.C. government that's more than ready and willing, and if we can have substantive investment from the federal government in creating a national child care initiative, we'd be more than interested in complying, because that is what we need to support the economy. By the way, the chambers of commerce have been calling for this for years and years now.

I'm going to now turn to Mr. Milloy.

Mr. Milloy, I was very intrigued by the fact that you wrote an article in the newspaper entitled, "Basic income makes sense, but that doesn't mean it will happen." In that article you indicated that, even though it makes sense to proceed with this, the political environment might not be ready for it.

In the province of Ontario, in fact, there was a pilot program, the UBI pilot program, that was brought in, I think, by your government and that is being cancelled prematurely by the Doug Ford administration. Can you comment on that? What are your thoughts on the pilot program that was introduced by your government?

**Mr. John Milloy:** Just for the record, I had retired at that point, but I was certainly supportive and intrigued when then Premier Wynne brought it forward.

Basic income is huge. It has a lot of political challenges to it. That was what I said in my article. I also think that we don't know what that kind.... First of all, we don't even know what basic income is. There are different definitions out there, but even with one of the more modest programs where those under a certain income level are receiving a minimum stipend, how is that going to work? For some people, intuitively you know, it's going to be a good thing. For others, perhaps intuitively, you don't know. Maybe it's not going to be a good thing, which is why I love the fact that Premier Wynne suggested that we have a substantive pilot—I believe that it was about 3,000 families and individuals who were on it—and then have a look at the data to tell the stories of these individuals.

I have to tell you, both from a political point of view and from a pure policy point of view, I think the outcome of that would have been wonderful in terms of a public policy debate. It would have really set the table, so it was just such a shame it was cancelled. It was a shame for the individuals who were part of that pilot program, but also a shame for all of us to not know how it would have worked. Perhaps there would have been kinks in the system that we would have been able to address, but I was quite disappointed with it because I was also minister of community and social services, and it makes sense. I see the challenges, and I think people have a right to say they want to know the facts and figures and how it would work, and as I say, even hear the stories.

• (1545)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Milloy.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Next we're going to go to Ms. Kusie, please, for five minutes.

**Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both of our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Milloy, your second point was about respecting provincial jurisdictions. I'm wondering if you were thinking of specific instances during the management of this pandemic where you feel that provincial jurisdictions weren't respected or should have been respected. Could you provide some specific examples that come to mind as you raised this point, as well as perhaps some recommendations for going forward?

**Mr. John Milloy:** You know, when I expressed those opinions, they weren't so much based on the individual actions of the federal government as much as the mood out there, particularly in Ontario, where people were saying that the federal government needed to take leadership in long-term care.

We've seen the discussions that have been going on about having 10 guaranteed sick days, which is a great idea for provincial workers. Again, there's this momentum that's coming up that says that the federal government should be taking over all of this, and I've got to tell you, as a provincial minister, this isn't so much my being a constitutional purist.

I used to deal with the federal government on post-secondary education initiatives, and I can go on and on at length about them. We had the capacity and the knowledge. We knew exactly how to do it. We knew how to do it in a fair way. We knew the players, yet the federal government would often tell us that they were going to come up with their own federal program, which would duplicate a lot of what we'd done and would be slow and cumbersome.

When I look at some of the things like job training, which is primarily a provincial and territorial matter, I tell the federal government to just work with the provinces and let the provinces and territories take the lead.

I see this momentum that's out there, this political momentum that the federal government should sort of be redrawing society, and I say, "Amen, let's do it, let's have that debate", but it's important to remember that the provinces and territories are in charge of so much of social policy—education, training and those key areas that are such a hot topic these days.

**Mrs. Stephanie Kusie:** Thank you for that.

I'm going to go to your fourth point now, where you mentioned unchecked power in a minority government. Given that, I want to get your thoughts and opinion, especially as you were previously elected as a representative, on the fact that Parliament essentially will not be sitting this summer, outside of four meetings, with no opportunity to present opposition motions and no opportunity to present private members' business.

Do you see this having any negative effects on your evaluation of democracy and this "unchecked" power in a minority government, as you referred to it in point four of your initial comments?

**Mr. John Milloy:** Sure. I mean, listen, I think we have to find a balance. We're in the middle of a global pandemic. There are all sorts of logistical reasons. At the same time, as someone who has lived and breathed this, I do see great value in having Parliament find a way to sit, to have the back and forth, and to have government being held accountable.

However, to go back to my fourth point, I think each side has to have that balance. The opposition has to recognize that this is a tough time and a lot of people are working in good faith, but I think the government has to recognize that it needs to be accountable. I would certainly like to see more sittings and more back and forth and just the cut and thrust of Parliament. That is so essential to our democracy. I have sympathy for the government's position, but I also recognize that some of the complaints from the opposition appear, to me at least, quite legitimate.

**Mrs. Stephanie Kusie:** Thank you.

Finally, you are in a faith-based post-secondary environment. I have one in my riding as well. I want to ask you, as someone who has a position of high administration within a faith-based environment such as that institution, for your thoughts as to the Prime Minister participating in large gatherings while at the same time giving public safety advice that gatherings are not permitted, which many faith groups must abide by and did abide by.

Do you have any comments on that, please, in terms of the difference between what the highest level of leadership did compared with what was expected of those from specifically faith-based backgrounds?

• (1550)

**Mr. John Milloy:** Well, I think I will be echoing what a lot of commentators said. I think the Prime Minister and a lot of political leaders were in a sense backed into the corner of damned if you do, damned if you don't.

I can't remember if that's unparliamentary, Mr. Chair. I apologize.

The fact of the matter is that there is anger out there. There is concern. There is need for action. I think it's great that the Prime Minister was showing his support, but at the same time, there was the whole public health issue. He found that balance. Other politicians found that balance. Other politicians decided to stay away. I think it was an unbelievably difficult situation and I think we should respect both. I respect what the Prime Minister did. I will also respect those who said they wanted to stay away for personal health reasons and also to set an example.

**Mrs. Stephanie Kusie:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Milloy, and thank you, Mrs. Kusie.

Next we'll go to Mr. Housefather, please, for five minutes.

**Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Dr. Mahboubi and Dr. Milloy, for the important work you both have done and for coming before this committee.

Dr. Milloy, especially with respect to your fourth point, I completely agree that in these times, people don't care that we're from different parties. They want everybody to work together to find a solution to a crisis. We don't want gotcha moments. Government members shouldn't come to the committee just to defend everything the government did and opposition members shouldn't come just to attack everything the government did. We should be working together. So I thank you for saying that.

I want to address the workforce question. You mentioned in your first point that jobs will rapidly disappear. I imagine that the jobs that will be disappearing all the more quickly will be the jobs that were being driven away by technological change. That will be exacerbated by the pandemic. One of the areas you have great experience in is with respect to trades. While you now represent an academic institution, as we know—you know more than I do on this—a significant percentage of people in trades are retiring in the next 10 years. What would you advise the federal government and the provincial governments to do to promote the need for people to get into the trades?

**Mr. John Milloy:** In the longer-term picture, it's always about working with very young people, elementary school and up, on the value of trades and telling them that these are good jobs. Often-times, many of these trades are very technological. They are skilled jobs, where you're making good pay, and you're making a difference.

In the shorter term, what we need.... I spoke about the second career program; I was proud of it. There were all sorts of hiccups and warts and all of that, but one of the things we learned is that you really need to have the employer, the training institution, and the laid-off worker really working closely together. In the second career program, we asked people to come forward and say, "Look, I want to be skilled in area X, and here is some evidence that some hiring is going on". That evidence, as I recall, was a few job ads and things like that in the paper.

One of your colleagues asked about infrastructure programs and major construction programs. We need those employers saying, "We need the following trades. We need them now. The jobs are available." When people get a better sense of what a trade involves, get a sense that there's a good paying job at the end, and there is a way in.... We have a post-secondary system that is so out of date that sometimes if you show up in October and say, "I want to be a plumber or a carpenter", you may be told, depending on the institution, "Well, you have to come back in January", or "You have to wait a year", even though you came six weeks earlier. That's the sort of thing where it's nimble, everyone's working together, and I, as a laid-off individual can say, "Hey, you know what, here is a direct route. I don't have to bang my head against the wall and wait six months or go here or go there", and it moves through.

It's a lot of work, but it's going to be a huge payoff. Certainly, the trades is one area where we can see great growth.

**Mr. Anthony Housefather:** Thank you very much.

Dr. Mahboubi, I want to thank you as well for your presentation.

I take it that you both agree that the CERB has been a very valuable program, that its rollout was quick and effective, in the sense that it reached a lot of people very quickly, but that as it gets extended more and more, we need to make changes to the program, and I took note of the suggestions you made.

I want to explore one issue with you that you didn't raise, the issue of immigration. I read a paper you wrote a couple of years ago saying that in order to compensate for retirements in Canada and the aging population, we would need to bring in approximately 1.4 million immigrants per year.

Can you talk about immigration, because we're about to have the Minister of Immigration back to this committee? What role do you see immigration playing in helping us get out of the recession or the job crisis that we're now in?

• (1555)

**Dr. Parisa Mahboubi:** The crisis impacts the border specifically, and the impact on immigration has been huge. Canada is not able to meet its target levels for 2020, and we are not even sure about next year.

At the same time, immigration is necessary to address the challenges related to an aging population, and these are not going to stop. Just because we are facing a crisis, we shouldn't forget about the need to bring more people into the country. At the same time, regarding the need to address labour shortages, either through temporary foreign workers or permanent immigration, yes, we are facing a crisis, and the unemployment rate is high, but not all sectors

are affected equally. There are still some sectors facing shortages of seasonal labour, which need to be addressed through immigration.

At the same time, generally crises affect immigrants more than non-immigrants in terms of job losses. Recent immigrants have had challenges in learning the languages because immigration support programs that provide language training to immigrants have stopped working time since the beginning of the crisis.

All of these things need to be considered. We still need immigrants to come to Canada to address the issues related to the aging population and labour shortages, but there will be some unemployed immigrants and some unemployed Canadians. We need to reallocate labour into different sectors and industries to be able to provide them with jobs. Also, there's a shift that has happened in the labour market because, right now, many employees may not want to go back to traditional workplace operations, so working from home may become more attractive in the near future, especially as you can work from any place. You can then support the economy from your home.

All of these matters are really important, not only immigration.

As for international students, they were such a valuable source of revenue for universities. Not only that, but for future immigration, we need international students because studies show that they have better labour market outcomes.

Right now, we've paused everything, so it's really important, as borders are starting to reopen, that we think about what type of immigrants we need. We need to look at our labour market, the issues we are facing, the types of labour and skills we need. Then make a link between the type of immigrants we need and the number. We need to bring more immigrants here. Definitely, this is something that we need.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Mahboubi, and thank you, Mr. Housefather. On behalf of the committee, I want to offer our sincere thanks for your very thoughtful, constructive and balanced presentations today. These were greatly appreciated and extremely helpful to our work. We appreciate your being with us. We hope you have a wonderful weekend.

Colleagues, please remain as we have one item of committee business that I'm hoping we can dispense with fairly quickly, and that is a budget that has been circulated by the clerk of the committee in respect of this study. Hopefully, you will have received it. This budget is for \$7,100, and it is to cover the cost of dial-in phone lines and the headsets that you see worn by the witnesses. You will recall that when we started, we had untold problems with different configurations of microphones and speakers, so part of the budget is for the headsets that have been provided to witnesses and the rest is for dial-in phone lines that are required by our staff.

I can't move a motion, but I would be happy to entertain a motion for the adoption of the budget. If someone would please move it, then we can open it up for discussion, if any.

● (1600)

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I move the motion, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Chabot.

Colleagues, are there any other comments about the motion?

[*English*]

Is there any debate on the motion to adopt the budget, as presented?

Are we ready for the question? Madam Clerk, would you please conduct a recorded vote?

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

**The Chair:** That takes us to the top of the hour and the end of our business for today.

Colleagues, I wish you a wonderful weekend and will see you back here on this channel on Monday. Take care.

We are adjourned.

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