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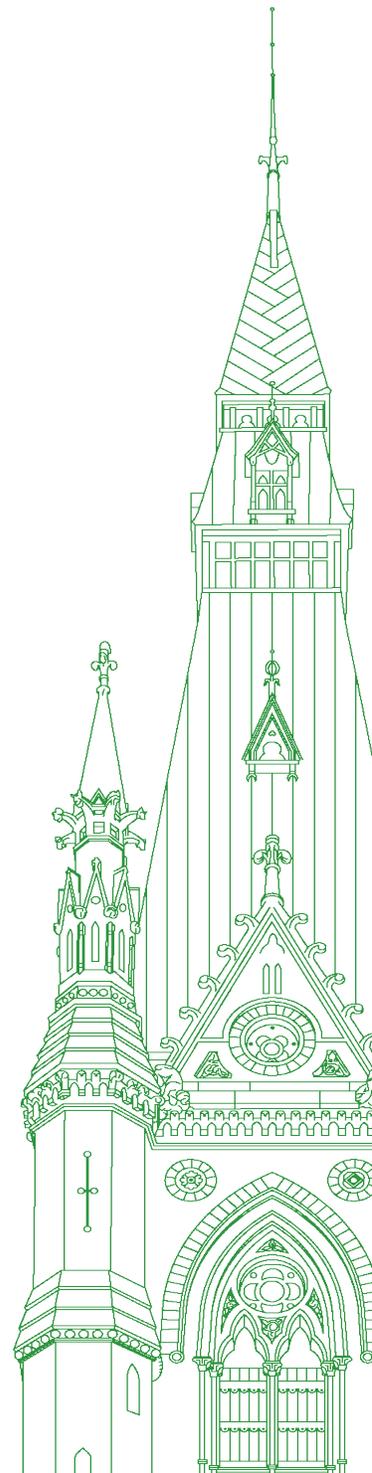
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Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number six of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of September 23, 2020. The proceedings are being made available via the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

We have with us this evening an experienced group of parliamentarians and witnesses, so I'm going to spare you all of the repetitive detail. I'll just remind you that when you're speaking, your mike should be open, and when you're not, it should be closed. Please address all comments through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) and the order of reference of Wednesday, September 30, 2020, the committee will continue its consideration of the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021, and pursuant to Standing Order 81(5) and the order of reference of Thursday, October 22, 2020, the committee will now also consider the supplementary estimates (B) for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021.

I will now call vote 1b under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which will permit general discussion of the supplementary estimates (B) and the questioning of witnesses.

It's my pleasure to welcome our witnesses, the Honourable Filomena Tassi, Minister of Labour. From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Gary Robertson, acting deputy minister, labour program; Anthony Giles, assistant deputy minister, labour program, policy, dispute resolution and international affairs directorate; Brenda Baxter, acting assistant deputy minister, labour program, compliance, operations and program development directorate; and Mark Perlman, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister.

Madam Minister, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Hon. Filomena Tassi (Minister of Labour): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Good evening to you, to members of the committee and to the officials who are joining us this evening. Thank you for inviting me to be with you.

I'm thrilled to join you virtually from the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabe peoples within the treaty covered by the Upper Canada treaties, as well as the Dish With One Spoon wampum agreement, to discuss the main estimates and supplementary estimates (B) for Employment and Social Development Canada's labour program.

This year, the department's main estimates present a total of \$68.6 billion in planned budgetary expenditures to carry out its mandate during the 2020–21 fiscal year. More than 94% of this amount will directly benefit Canadians through the department's programs, services and initiatives. We are proud of the work we do to help Canadians build better lives for themselves and their families, and to be resilient in facing the challenges.

The Government of Canada took a number of extraordinary but necessary steps to protect and support Canadian workers and businesses during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. To make sure that employees in federally regulated workplaces would be able to take time off work to deal with situations related to COVID-19, like school closures and self-isolation, the government introduced a new job-protected leave under the Canada Labour Code. We also waived medical certificate requirements to access certain existing leave.

In addition, the government took action to protect the employment of employees in the federally regulated private sector. New measures gave employers more time to recall employees who were temporarily laid off due to the pandemic. This gives workers a better chance of staying connected with their organization, and puts employers in a better position to restart, or start growing their business, as we transition out of the pandemic. This is a big part of building back better.

As well, the government temporarily extended the eligible wages period for the wage earner protection program by up to six months. We did so to ensure that any delays in insolvency proceedings, due to the pandemic, did not harm, hurt or compromise the worker's eligibility for that program. Moreover, throughout the pandemic, we have been reminding employers of the importance of having an evergreen hazard prevention plan.

That leads me to my portfolio's supplementary estimates (B). The department is requesting \$0.4 million related to supporting business resumption for federally regulated employers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges on many fronts for workers and employers in Canada. An effective business resumption requires focused occupational health and safety efforts, including addressing mental health. That's why the labour program will increase proactive occupational health and safety activities, outreach and guidance, as well as enhance technical and mental health expertise to support business resumption in the federally regulated sector.

The government recently announced that the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety will receive \$2.5 million over two years to continue the excellent work it has been doing to provide COVID-19 resources to the workplaces. This funding is part of the coordinated efforts by federal, provincial and territorial governments, public health authorities and CCOHS to ensure that businesses have the necessary tools to protect their employees.

One of the key pieces moving forward is ensuring workplaces are both safe and equitable. That is why we are implementing the Pay Equity Act, which introduces a proactive pay equity regime that will ensure that people working in federally regulated workplaces receive equal pay for work of equal value.

This unlocks people's productivity, creativity and enthusiasm, because they know they are being paid justly. Quite frankly, we have told our children that women and men are co-equals. It's high time that our legislation indicated that we practice what we preach. In fact, I am sure future generations will find it bizarre that this debate was ever had.

We are also raising awareness of wage gaps that affect women, indigenous people, people with disabilities and visible minorities in the federally regulated workplaces through new pay transparency measures.

As you know, we passed legislation to help prevent violence and harassment in the workplace. We will soon move forward with implementation of this legislation and regulations, which will come into force on January 1, 2021.

• (1840)

Workplaces are evolving even faster now due to the pandemic. Mental health is a key element of occupational health and safety. That's why we will consult and work with unions, workers, employers and experts to further improve support for mental health of workers.

Mr. Chair, these are just some of the actions we are taking. There's no doubt that the financial resources requested under these main estimates and supplementary estimates (B) will enable us to continue this work. These efforts we are making, which connect things we are already doing with our direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, are all part of our government's plan to build back better for all Canadians.

I will now be pleased to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We will start with Mr. Kent for the Conservatives.

You have the floor, sir, for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, and thanks to your officials for attending this evening's sitting.

As you mentioned, along with the extraordinary steps taken for Employment and Social Development Canada's labour program, several of the COVID emergency support programs have required harmonization with provincial and territorial labour laws and codes. Have the provinces essentially given you, the federal government, carte blanche in terms of these programs and the new programs as they evolve?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: The collaboration piece is extremely important. At the very beginning of this, I convened a meeting with my provincial and territorial partners, as I have with the unions and labour and industry, in order to work together. As a result of those meetings, there was an opportunity for people to express their concerns. One of the main issues that came through in those meetings was the concern with respect to standards or guidance to keep workers safe.

My number one priority as Minister of Labour has been occupational health and safety. In that regard, we reached out to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. The provinces and territories were very happy about that, because it enabled a resource to provide guidance with respect to moving forward. They did sector-specific tipsheets, an information-sharing portal, e-learning resources and the like in order to ensure that this was available to provinces and territories in all of the sectors that would help keep workers safe.

Hon. Peter Kent: Speed was obviously of the essence. Many of these programs in normal times would have taken months, perhaps even years, to develop. Can you share with us any of the tougher decisions you had to achieve or some of the differences that had to be resolved early on? I know that, in the rush, some gaps appeared and some things had to be corrected. We had special sessions to catch up. How smoothly has this harmonization gone?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Well, MP Kent, I would say that I have been very impressed with the level of collaboration. People came together in the spirit of really wanting to work together to protect workers and ensure their health and safety across the board. I've been in this portfolio for a year. To see that level of collaboration was absolutely fantastic.

I want to really commend CCOHS, because in record time their team turned those sector-specific tipsheets around. I know they were working around the clock. That transition was smooth. I think the idea was that we needed to have those in place as a guide, so that was important. The other area, of course, was the mental health piece, which was also something that was shared as an area of concern. Supporting workers in occupational health and safety also includes mental health, in all of our minds.

I would say the level of collaboration has been absolutely fantastic.

Hon. Peter Kent: Okay.

There was obviously no time for anyone on the federal side to meaningfully liaise with the provinces when Bill C-2 became Bill C-4, rewritten at the eleventh hour in September as a result of the confidence vote concessions to the NDP, which included the two-week paid sick leave. I've heard concern in recent weeks from some Ontario small businesses that the paid leave provisions are so broad, they fear—they haven't yet experienced it, or at least no one's told me they have—possible future unwarranted absenteeism.

Have the provinces accepted specifically the two-week paid sick leave, which overrides some provincial private sector sick leave provisions, or are you leaving provinces to decide whether or not it applies to the private sector?

• (1845)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I have not been the lead on that particular part of the file. I would say that in discussions with provinces and territories, it was clear that some provinces more than others were really advocating for this 10-day paid sick leave provision. Everyone agreed that we did not want workers going to work if they felt sick. That would put people in a position wherein trying to contain this would be very difficult. Everyone agreed with the principle that if someone felt sick, we wanted them to have the opportunity to stay home.

That was part of the \$19-billion transfer that we would make to the provinces and territories. With respect to the actual terms, I believe it was the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance who was the lead on that, together with Minister Qualtrough.

Specifically, we agreed in principle with the idea and wanted to support workers and give them the ability to stay home. We didn't want them to have to think that if they did stay home, they wouldn't be able to pay their bills or put food on the table.

Hon. Peter Kent: How's my time, Chair?

The Chair: You have about 15 seconds, not enough for a question and an answer. Thank you very much.

Hon. Peter Kent: I'll release it, then. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Kent.

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

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good evening, Minister. It's great to see you. I harken back to our days when we sat together on HUMA.

I am obviously coming to you from the beautiful riding of Saint John—Rothesay, located on the unceded territory of the Wolastoqey peoples.

Minister, you know my riding and you know the strong labour component to the riding. I wanted to touch base, talk to you a little bit about pay equity and ask you some questions on that. We've seen over the last nine months the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It's been more severe, obviously, for some Canadians than others. In fact, the pandemic has highlighted a variety of systemic inequalities that need to be addressed.

Minister, you know my riding and the wonderful labour leaders in it, like Darlene Bembridge, Ciara Vanderbeck, Angela Campbell and Maureen O'Hearon-Lang, from the Public Service Alliance;

Erin Howell Sharpe, whom you've met, from Unifor; and Tammy Nadeau and Sharon Teare from CUPE. Obviously we work with them daily and hand in hand, but when it comes to equal pay for equal value, according to recent data, women earn 89 cents for every dollar earned by men. In 2018, our government put forward and Parliament adopted a revised Pay Equity Act. Recently the draft regulations were released and consultations will run until January 13, 2021.

Minister, can you tell the committee what these regulations will mean for Canadians when they come into force?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thanks, MP Long. It's nice to see you virtually. I do remember the days on HUMA, and they were good days.

In my view, this is transformational legislation because it's not just about giving men and women equal pay for doing the same job. This is about giving women equal pay for work of equal value. That's the transformational piece. We know that when women can count on equal pay for work of equal value, there's not only a moral imperative. It's not only the right thing to do, but it's also the smart thing to do. Our economy is going to grow stronger.

We have been moving forward with this. We think it's very important. We have appointed the first pay equity commissioner, Karen Jensen, and she and her team are working now on materials and resources for employers, because we want to make this transition an easy one. She and her team are working very hard. I've had a couple of conversations with her, and then, as you have said, on November 13, the regulations were published in the Canada Gazette, part I. There is a 60-day consultation period now and it's really important that we hear from stakeholders. We don't want to just get this through fast. We want to do it the right way, so there is a 60-day consultation period. With the feedback we get after the consultation period, we will be moving forward and putting it in the Canada Gazette, part II, with, hopefully, a coming-into-force date later in 2021.

• (1850)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thanks for that.

Minister, obviously I appreciate the response and I agree with you that it's important to move forward with pay equity. However, there are detractors who will want to know why you are pursuing implementation of the Pay Equity Act now, given that our economy is still working to recover from the pandemic.

What are the advantages, Minister, of moving forward now?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I appreciate the question and the concerns that some are raising, but I think it's really important to take a look at what we are doing here.

As I have said, it's not just the right thing to do; there is a moral imperative to do this. As I said in my opening remarks, women should be receiving equal pay when they are doing work of equal value, but the second part is the economic benefit, and the economic benefits have proven themselves.

Over the last 40 years the greater participation of women in the workforce has resulted in about one-third of Canada's economic growth, and there are estimates that Canada could add \$150 billion in the next decade by taking steps towards getting more women into the workforce.

This is something that I think is a priority. I'm happy it's a priority for the government. We're going to continue. We know this is going to benefit all Canadians. I'm very confident that Karen Jensen, as the commissioner, is going to do a fantastic job. We look forward to bringing this in fact into fruition.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Minister, this is my last question. In addition to bringing into force pay equity measures, you're moving forward also with pay transparency measures. I understand making this data publicly available will help identify the wage gap experienced by women, indigenous persons, persons with disabilities and visible minorities in federally regulated workplaces. These are clearly important measures given many of the inequalities that have been highlighted during the pandemic.

Can you explain quickly what the benefits are of these measures?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Absolutely.

We're committed to reducing the gender wage gap, and this is going to do that. The result of this is going to be that pay is going to be transparent for the four groups that are subject to this—women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and visible minorities—and this is going to provide Canadians with a user-friendly availability to see where the gaps are. Then, of course, the result is going to be that the employers are going to respond to those gaps by making efforts to correct them.

This is another measure that we think is important in moving forward. Getting rid of that wage gap is going to encourage women and the other groups to continue in the workforce, and we want to do that because we want everyone to have an equal opportunity.

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

[*Translation*]

It is now Ms. Chabot's turn for six minutes.

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

Madam Minister, we are pleased to have you here. I hope you are doing well.

I wanted to ask you some questions related to pay equity, but I will come back to that.

My first question is this. Your first mandate letter, after the election, called for a minimum wage of \$15 per hour for people working in the federally regulated sector. The crisis revealed that the guardian angels or essential workers we heard so much about were, for the most part, the lowest-paid workers. The mandate you had makes so much sense.

In the main estimates, money was to be allocated to implement this amendment to the Labour Code.

Where are you in the process of increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour?

• (1855)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thank you for the question, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

It's very nice to see you. Thank you for the important question.

As you can appreciate, my focus, of course, has been on occupational health and safety, ensuring that workers are kept safe. Of course, the pandemic has presented a lot of challenges, but there are other commitments in my mandate letter. I think COVID-19 has absolutely demonstrated the importance of our moving forward with the \$15 federal minimum wage.

This was a commitment we made during the campaign, again then reaffirmed in my mandate letter, and we want to make sure that we get this right. I agree with you absolutely that we have a lot of workers who are packing our groceries, stocking shelves and keeping us safe during this time, and although the federal minimum wage would apply to federally regulated workers, this is an opportunity to show leadership. I am committed to maintaining this as a priority as we move forward.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I have a question for you on workplace equity.

In the main estimates, there's a grant of about \$2.3 million for the labour funding program. As we understand it, the program is designed for projects related to occupational health and safety and workplace equity, and "equity" here means "access to employment".

Can you tell us which project deals with equity for women in employment, not in terms of wages?

[*English*]

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Just for clarification, are you talking about the \$2.5 million for the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety? Is that the fund you're referring to?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: No, Madam Minister, I am talking about the \$2.3 million for the labour funding program. This program is designed to provide financial assistance to organizations to carry out projects related to labour relations, occupational health and safety and workplace equity. I think the budget includes health and safety, and it also has a component on employment equity in the workplace.

[English]

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I will turn to my officials to get clarification with respect to the actual number and what is going to what program. Gary, I'll refer to you in a minute for that.

With respect to employment equity, it's my strong opinion that everybody deserves a fair chance to succeed.

With respect to women in the workforce and with COVID-19, I think we saw some advances prior, but there's no question there's more work to be done with respect to the promotion of women. The initiatives the federal government has taken, like the passing of Bill C-65 to prevent violence and harassment in the workplace, the proactive pay equity legislation that I just spoke about, pay transparency, the commitment with respect to child care, and the \$5 billion that Minister Ng has talked about with the women entrepreneurship program, are all going to help encourage women to be in the workforce.

I agree with you 100% in saying that we all benefit when we increase women in the workforce.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, is my time up, or do I have time for one last short question?

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, I was surprised by your answer—if I understood correctly—that the pay equity legislation would see the light of day by the end of 2021.

Why is it taking so long to implement legislation that has received royal assent?

[English]

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That is a very good question. I'm not indicating the time in 2021, but that it will go through in 2021.

The important point here is that we absolutely have to get this right. This is transformational legislation, as I have said. You're not looking at work that's the same work. You're looking at a different job. As Ms. Jensen has explained to me, we compare different jobs and then come up with a formula that will make it so that those jobs of equal value will be paid.

We have to approach it in a manner so that we're going to bring employers with us, provide them with the tools and have the consultations prior to the implementation date to ensure we are hearing from all stakeholders in an effort to get this right. We have a real opportunity here. I want more than anything else to make sure we get this right.

• (1900)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

It is now Ms. Gazan's turn.

[English]

Ms. Gazan, you have six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much, Minister, for joining us today. It's really nice to have you here.

We know that, before COVID, people were left behind. I'm talking specifically about BIPOC individuals, persons with disabilities and women. We certainly know it has been occurring and that it has been exacerbated by COVID. I think we can assume that those who were left out before will be worse off after COVID.

In your opening comments you spoke about raising awareness of the wage gaps that affect women, indigenous people, people with disabilities and visible minorities in federally regulated workplaces to renew pay transparency measures.

We know we need immediate action to address gross inequalities but also systemic racism in the workplace. We need more than awareness. Other than raising awareness, what are some concrete actions you are taking to end discrimination against women, indigenous people, disabled persons and BIPOC persons? As part of these inequalities in wages, is your government considering a guaranteed livable basic income?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thanks for that, MP Gazan. There's a lot in that question.

Ms. Leah Gazan: There is a lot. There are big problems.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: If I miss some of it, when we come back maybe you can flag that.

Pay transparency is there, so that there are public listings of the wage gaps that exist among the different people who are identified, whom we have mentioned. I think that's important because it demonstrates to employers who have those wage gaps that more needs to be done to address those wage gaps. Those wage gaps should not be there. We know they exist, so now this is going to be made public. It's going to be open for everyone to see and the employers will have the responsibility to do things to correct that wage gap.

In terms of other areas where we can do more, I agree with you that we absolutely have to do more. In terms of employment equity, I would like to see the playing field levelled or the floor raised, depending on how you view the issue, so that everyone has a chance to succeed, because when we give everyone a chance to succeed, we as Canadians all benefit. We know that when we can allow people—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, but what are you going to put in place to make sure we level the playing field and that everybody can succeed?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: There are measures we're doing through pay equity that are going to have women compensated equally to men. There is pay transparency, so that the gaps that exist will be corrected. Bill C-65 was introduced to prevent violence and harassment in the workforce because we want to ensure that people are comfortable at work and they're not being targeted in any way and not feeling safe. Mental health is a part of occupational health and safety.

All these measures we are taking are going to make the workforce fairer, and we think and we hope more open and transparent. Those are some of the measures we are taking.

Is there more work to do? Absolutely, and I look forward to working with you as we take on those measures.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you very much.

How many times, Minister, have you met with unions regarding occupational health and safety concerns related to COVID-19 to date?

• (1905)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: To give an exact number is extremely difficult, but I would say that every day I'm talking to labour and reaching out to industry and my PT partners. These calls are happening on an ongoing basis. I've had many conversations with union leaders with respect to issues of concern to them.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I was happy to hear you mention measures to address mental health because we know the mental health, certainly and particularly, of front-line workers and essential workers during COVID has been hard hit understandably, but we also have seen incidents of poor treatment of workers during COVID, particularly those in food production, including migrant workers and newcomers. They have been subjected to employers who have shown a complete disregard for their workers' safety, well-being and human rights during the pandemic.

For example, I can think of the outbreak at the Maple Leaf facility in Brandon, Manitoba, and many others, including places in Ontario.

Many of the outbreaks have been in meat processing plants, for example, and many who work there are low-income workers and BIPOC. I was wondering if you could speak to whether your department is addressing this and what you will be doing in relation to the high number of COVID outbreaks in food production to better protect workers going forward.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That's a great question.

As I've said before, occupational health and safety and the safety of workers has been my number one priority, and that has been the focus. It's fantastic that we have organizations like the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety that are helping us to say, "Okay, food processing, here are the standards. Here's the guidance that you should follow in order to keep workers safe."

I also want to point out that we have to acknowledge the difference between federal and provincial jurisdiction. We are putting

supports in place, such as that investment with CCOHS, to ensure that workers are safe and to do what we can to support that. Every worker has the right to a safe work site.

In the federal jurisdiction, if a worker feels that their work site isn't safe, then they can make that claim and they will not be forced to work there. The labour program will go in, do an assessment, determine if the work site is safe or not, and if it's not safe, the employer has to fix that site and get it up to standard so that it is safe.

Those are the measures we are taking in order to keep workers safe.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

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

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for being available to the committee today.

Long-term care homes in Canada, we know, have borne the brunt of this health crisis. In my capacity as shadow minister for seniors, I have had the opportunity to meet with many individuals and groups representing front-line health care workers in long-term care facilities.

The conditions that have been described in first-hand accounts are dire and are not unique to any individual home. While many of the challenges in the long-term care sector pre-existed COVID, they were exponentially heightened by this pandemic. Immediate actions are needed to safeguard the health, safety and well-being of long-term care residents and the staff who care for them.

One of these urgent and serious challenges is a sector-wide staffing crisis. In the supplementary estimates, there is an allocation of just under \$12.5 million in funds for personal support workers—training and measures to address labour shortages in long-term care and home care.

Minister, I'm wondering how these funds are being used to address the urgent labour crisis in long-term care.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thank you, MP Falk, for that important question.

We're very aware and very grateful for the workers who are in long-term care facilities.

I have spoken with Sharleen Stewart, who's the lead of the SEIU, and she has explained to me—Linda Silas, as well—the concerns with respect to long-term care workers, with respect to both the safety piece and burnout and the need to ensure we have more long-term care workers.

This provision that you're talking about is under Minister Qualtrough's jurisdiction. I know there is funding money set aside that is going to be used to train PSWs and long-term care workers.

• (1910)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Do you know if that's been used at all? We're in the second wave, and this definitely needed to be addressed before yesterday. What is the government doing? There is just under \$12.5 million allocated for this, so I'm wondering. It's something, as I said, that should have been done before yesterday.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I can ask my officials if they have information on that.

As I said, it's Minister Qualtrough's portfolio with respect to that funding.

Either Gary or Tony, do you have something you'd like to say?

Mr. Gary Robertson (Acting Deputy Minister, Labour Program, Department of Employment and Social Development): I'm wondering if Mark Perlman maybe has a comment, from the CFO perspective.

Mr. Mark Perlman (Chief Financial Officer and Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you for that.

The funding is there. As of the end of September, I don't believe a lot of funding has been spent. However, the whole purpose was to recruit up to 4,000 new personal support worker interns for accelerated training.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It's unfortunate, though, because seniors are dying in these facilities. Most of this is because of a staffing shortage that the PSWs, especially in Ontario, have been very loud about. They need that manpower. When we look at the care that's needed for residents in long-term care, the average is four hours a day. In Canada, they're getting 2.6 hours. It's absolutely unacceptable that the people who built this country are not being made a priority.

That being said, Minister, I'm wondering if you have advised your officials to look at the opportunities to leverage existing labour programs such as the sectoral initiatives program, SIP, to address the shortages of staff in long-term care.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: First and foremost, I agree with you that we absolutely owe a debt of gratitude to those who are working in long-term care, and we want to make investments to ensure that those who are able to can scale up to get the skills they need in order to take on these roles, because these roles are very important. We absolutely owe seniors who are at the end of their lives everything, and we should be doing whatever we can to ensure they are properly cared for.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Absolutely. If the money isn't being used under the fund allocation that was specifically for PSWs, have you

asked or directed your officials to look at other avenues to make sure we can get staffing in long-term care facilities?

The Chair: Could you give us a short answer, please, Minister? We're out of time.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: You're asking me questions about things that are under Minister Qualtrough's portfolio. The workforce development piece and training are all under Minister Qualtrough.

We're happy to get back to you with answers and details with respect to those things, but we would be actually reaching out to her ministry in order to get those answers.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you. I would hope the government would work as a whole.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

The Chair: Next, we're going to go to Ms. Young.

Go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister Tassi, for giving us this time tonight, and thanks to the officials from the department.

Minister Tassi, you and I talked about mental health issues on a number of occasions prior to COVID. We know how important it is that people recognize that a part of health and safety is mental health. I was very glad to hear that you're doing even more and that your department is doing more.

Canadians, of course, are facing unimaginable pressures because of COVID, whether professionally or because of finances, and these stresses are going to linger for a long time. You talked about the government being committed to mental health. I'd like to drill down and understand what you have undertaken and what you are planning to do in order to address mental health concerns of workers in all sectors.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: You know that mental health is an area that is extremely important to me. I'm happy that you've raised the question.

COVID-19 has absolutely taken a toll—emotional, psychological and social—on all Canadians. With respect to the mental health piece, when I convened the meeting with labour and industry, concern was expressed with respect to the mental health obstacles and challenges that workers were facing.

On behalf of the government, the Minister of Health introduced the Wellness Together Canada website, which is a good website because through that portal you can do everything, from reaching out and getting an assessment right up to talking to someone. I think that investment was really important and one that I know all Canadians, including workers, can access.

MHCC has put out numbers showing that 500,000 employees each week are unable to work because of mental health challenges, illness or issues. They say the cost to the economy is \$6 billion a year. That's what they are saying. I'm happy to see that mental health as part of occupational health and safety is something that is included in my mandate letter. I look forward to moving forward with this particular mandate item because I think that mental health is absolutely a part of overall health. We have to ensure that workers are getting the mental health supports they need.

This is another thing that is a smart investment. In fact, 10 of Canada's largest companies have reported that for every dollar they have spent on mental health, in return they've received \$1.62. That is an example of a worthwhile investment, an important investment, a much-needed investment, and at the end of the day employers will gain and benefit if their employees have the mental health supports they need.

• (1915)

Ms. Kate Young: I don't want to state the obvious, but you say that we don't want workers to go to work if they feel sick. I imagine you mean in terms of their mental health as well, because there are people who are actually afraid to go back to work right now and who will be afraid over the coming months and possibly years.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I believe that mental health is a part of our overall health. This is why it's important that we, as a government, provide supports and resources. In this area, again, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety has provided materials. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has also provided materials. I think that these are really important investments because if our employees are healthy and well, we know that employers are going to benefit with productivity and with retention. This is an area that I believe is extremely important, and I look forward to doing more in order to ensure that all workers are healthy and well and get the supports that they need.

Ms. Kate Young: I hope—if I can just sum up—that the federal government will be a leader in this field because if we can show other businesses that this is important, they will take note and realize that they need to understand that mental health means so much to the overall wellness of Canadians.

Thank you very much, Minister Tassi.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Young.

[*Translation*]

Now it's your turn, Ms. Chabot.

You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

Madam Minister, let's continue to talk about occupational health and safety and mental health or psychological health.

I know that this was a concern even before the pandemic, as reflected in your mandate letters. You are being asked to make mental health a specific element of occupational health and safety. I also know that you have been concerned about consulting with unions

on these issues. I have heard about it in Quebec, and even from labour market partners.

My question is this, and you've already touched on it quite a bit.

You have budgets for mental health, but they are mainly the result of measures put in place by each of the provinces. In Quebec, the Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail (CNESST) takes care of that. Workers' mental health is increasingly recognized as one of the most significant stress factors, as all surveys show.

How, with additional budgets, are you able to coordinate and support the efforts that are being made in the provinces?

• (1920)

[*English*]

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thank you for that question. I'm very happy to have that question.

First, the federal government has demonstrated the importance of mental health. Prior to COVID-19, there was a \$6-billion investment in mental health and providing mental health supports. Actually, I think it was \$5 billion for mental health and \$6 billion for palliative care and home care. It was \$5 billion; sorry, I will correct myself. That was an area where, normally, we were not giving specific money for mental health, but we knew the importance.

COVID-19 has demonstrated this even more. As I've said—and I'm happy to hear that you're hearing that I'm engaging with unions—I have heard in my engagement with unions that this is really important. In terms of my mandate letter and including mental health as part of occupational health and safety, I think this is an important step forward. There is case law now that demonstrates that mental health should be a part of occupational health and the safety for our overall health. I know that, in terms of my mandate commitment, there is a discussion paper that is going out with respect to mental health and a survey, and that's going to be released very soon. I'm talking about within the next two weeks. That is an opportunity for us to get the information so that, as we move forward, if we are spending money, if we are putting supports in place, these are supports that are going to make a real difference in the lives of workers.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With this next question I just want to speak a little bit about the sick leave. I know that the NDP fought really hard to get 10 paid days of sick leave for anybody who was symptomatic during the pandemic. We know that this is critical if we want to contain the virus—certainly a really critical health and safety issue. Pandemics will occur in the future. That's what they're predicting, unfortunately. With this in mind, will the government be moving forward on ensuring a permanent two weeks of paid sick leave for every worker in Canada as a critical health and safety measure?

I know that many people want to stay home, but they cannot afford to stay home and that places them and others at risk.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Through the \$19-billion safe restart agreement, it was understood that a portion of those funds were going to be for those 10 days that, yes, the NDP advocated for and people agreed. You're absolutely right. If someone is sick, you don't want them going to work. You want them to be able to stay home.

In addition to that, under the Labour Code, we allowed job protection for that time. If people are sick, they don't have to worry. It's not only financial support. It's also the fact that they're not going to lose their jobs if they're off. They're taking time off because they're sick, or there are other measures they needed to take time off for because of COVID-19.

We're open to discussions in terms of how we move forward. The issue is really about the pandemic. We've had to work closely with the provinces and territories. This is provincial jurisdiction that we're moving into, and you can appreciate that. The pandemic has demonstrated the collaborative nature, and we can continue to dialogue to determine how we can get to a place that is going to best support workers.

Ms. Leah Gazan: We know that many workers have become sick during COVID, resulting in permanent physical health issues. In the spirit of being all in, is your government considering implementing a guaranteed livable basic income, particularly for those who want to work but can no longer work as a result of the pandemic?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Ms. Gazan, you'll be happy to know that I have said that a universal basic income is a progressive policy that needs to be looked at. I know it has support from all parties. Having said that, the federal government is offering so many different supports to ensure that no Canadian falls between the cracks. You've heard my position on it. It's something that needs to be considered with further study.

• (1925)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Mr. Vis, please go ahead, for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Minister Tassi, we are very thankful to have you here today.

You said in your opening remarks that the labour program will increase proactive occupational health and safety activities, outreach and guidance, as well as enhanced technical and mental health expertise. Just for clarification, is that related to federal work sites?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I want to make sure that my official confirms that.

Is that correct, Gary?

Mr. Gary Robertson: That is correct, yes.

Mr. Brad Vis: I represent Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon. I'm home to four federal penitentiaries. Last week, the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers said in no uncertain terms that it “deplores” Employment and Social Development Canada's “lack of transparency and seriousness when it carried out their investigations...into safety complaints related to the cases of COVID-19.”

If you're not aware, Mission was the home of the largest outbreak of COVID at any federal institution. How would you respond to my constituents and federal workers, and that description of your department?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Mr. Vis, you've raised this concern before, and I've heard you. At the end of the day, we want to ensure that every employee has a safe place to go to work, and every employee has that right. It's the employer's obligation to provide a safe work site. If employees go to the site and the work is not safe, they have the right to refuse work, and the labour program goes in and carries out an investigation. If at the end of the day it's not safe, the employer has a responsibility to make the corrections to the work site in order to make it safe.

Mr. Brad Vis: I agree with that assessment, but in some cases, Corrections Canada employees are front-line workers that are federally regulated and can't live up to that standard, because they put their lives on the line for the protection of our community. When I hear from these guys that they don't feel safe going to their workplace, and that they're asking simply for a professional firm to clean their facility, the department should take another look.

I'm going to raise another point. They said ESDC rendered its decision on COVID-19 only three hours after hearing from officers. After hearing from front-line workers, how can it make a decision in three hours about COVID-19 safety protocols?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I hear your passion. I want to say to you that we want every worker to be safe, absolutely. In terms of this particular issue, my understanding is that the labour program goes in and makes that assessment.

I can turn to my officials to see if they have any specific details on this particular case and the allegation you're making that you don't—

Mr. Brad Vis: It's actually not an allegation. Everything was written in their press release, which was published in the Mission City Record on November 19. Those are not my words. Those are the words of federal employees. They say that your department lacks transparency. They deplore the actions of your department and say that you're not taking their health and safety seriously.

Are you willing to come to Mission to meet with Derek Chin and other representatives of the union to try to get this right? I can tell you about the nightmare that those workers faced this past spring. Practically every inmate in that facility was infected, and Corrections Canada did not do a good enough job of communicating with the public. There was even a child who got COVID-19 from their parent, who was at the prison.

Do you know what? I really appreciated your testimony earlier, and I know that you meant those words you were saying. In good faith today, will you come and meet directly with those corrections officers—I don't even need to be there—to get these labour issues right? They need your leadership right now to do their job well. Can you provide that commitment today?

• (1930)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: What I would say to you, MP Vis, is that I am going to continue to work as hard as I possibly can to ensure that every worker, in every place that's federally regulated, is safe. If there's an issue, then of course I will look into it. I will ask my officials to provide me with feedback with respect to what the concern is and what the response of the department is. Workers are entitled to a safe work site. There's a process in place—

Mr. Brad Vis: They're not getting it, though. They're not getting a safe workplace.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, we're out of time.

If you want you can finish up your answer, Minister, and then we're going to go to Mr. Vaughan.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: MP Vis, listen. I've heard you loud and clear here. The commitment I make is that we want to ensure that every workplace is safe. If there are workplaces that aren't safe, there's a process that one goes through. If there's a concern with respect to that process, I've heard you. I will take what you've said back and have a conversation with my officials. It's a right that exists. It exists in the Canada Labour Code. Every worker has a right to a safe workplace, and no worker—

Mr. Brad Vis: But it's not applied.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: —is forced to work in an unsafe site.

If you're saying to me that's not the case, then I will look into it with my officials—

Mr. Brad Vis: It's not me. It's the federal employees.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I thank you for your input and for your passion.

Mr. Brad Vis: I thank you for the exchange. It was actually very productive.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

The final questioner for you, Madam Minister, is Mr. Vaughan, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): Mr. Chair, thanks very much.

Good evening, Minister. I just wanted to check in to make sure we're clear on this. The training money that was set aside to create new personal support workers doesn't fall within your ministry, but

because you're part of a quartet of ministers in similar departments, your officials may be able to get us answers to that question.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That's absolutely right. I have no jurisdiction over that particular funding. Absolutely, we work together as a government, as a cabinet. We make decisions, and we have discussions. The support for this particular group is one that we absolutely want to ensure is there.

With respect to the actual oversight of the training and development and the money that's set aside, that's not my portfolio. That's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Does your ministry work with the provinces to develop the labour force agreements that prioritize immigration patterns across the country to try to meet key labour shortages? Is that one of the things your ministry—

Hon. Filomena Tassi: No, that again is Minister Qualtrough.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of taking a look at, for example, how in 2019 Quebec focused on bringing in artificial intelligence experts and high technology experts, as opposed to fast-tracking personal support workers, that would be the work of Minister Qualtrough, if that decision is to be made.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That is correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the issues that were raised by MP Vis about a complaint from front-line workers in an employment setting—in this case a penitentiary—in terms of those investigations, is there an appeal process to a complaint?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I would like Gary to confirm, but my understanding is that the Canadian Industrial Relations Board, CIRB, handles the appeal process.

Mr. Gary Robertson: That is correct, Minister.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Okay. Thank you.

If there is a complaint with respect to the process, then one can take that to the CIRB for a decision.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Are you aware of the complaint being lodged with the Canadian Industrial Relations Board?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: With respect to this particular...?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Yes. Was it was raised beyond going to a headline in the newspaper? Was it raised through formal channels through the union to the review board?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I have not been made aware of that. It could still be in the process of coming to me, but as of yet, I have not been made aware of that.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Okay.

Perhaps if we could get a report back as to whether or not a formal complaint has been lodged, or whether it's just a complaint through the media. That would be helpful.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the mental health work and the investments we made as a top-up to the Canada Health Act, above and beyond the inflationary increase, those dollars are at the discretion of the provinces to spend. It's up to them to decide whether or not to carve them into workplace environments under provincial jurisdiction.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That is correct, yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Is there a reporting mechanism for this that allows us to figure out how provinces have spent those dollars in the health care sector, or are they largely left to their own devices to decide how to use those monies?

• (1935)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I can speak to my experience as minister of seniors with the home care and palliative care piece. There are agreements that go back and forth, and there are sort of pockets, but with respect to a detailed analysis, that does not take place. There is accountability to say “this has been spent in this particular area”, but this now would fall under the Minister of Health with respect to the terms of the mental health transfer.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: For example, if we wanted to direct mental health support to front-line workers, in particular those working in long-term care facilities and in supportive housing facilities doing work around addiction control, who have had a really difficult year this year with COVID and the opioid crisis, and if we wanted to get those details, it would be a conversation with provincial ministers that would produce the information we were looking for. It's not simply a federal expenditure or a line item on the budget.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of mental health support in the federal sector, are you seeing areas that we need to start to study or advocate for that would provide this committee with an opportunity to add to the federal government's initiatives around mental health? Are there suggested areas of study you would like to see us work on that are related to your field of ministerial responsibility?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: For me it's moving forward with the mandate item, which is mental health as part of occupational health and safety and, yes, what supports work best with workers. I've had those conversations as I've spoken with unions, labour and employers to ask what supports are needed. Some employers actually create their own support system and they pay for the system, and that is offered to the employees in their sites.

Yes, definitely, it's what supports are most beneficial, and also, since some companies are actually making investments, perhaps the value of those investments and the impact the dollars have had would be helpful.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Thank you, Madam Minister, and thank you so much for being with us. We're going to suspend now briefly to give you a chance to disconnect. I understand that we have a couple of other officials who are going to join us for the second hour.

Minister, thanks again for being with us. It's always a pleasure to have you here. We hope you have a wonderful evening, and we'll see you before too long.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thank you so much.

I want to thank each and every one of you. I thought that was a very respectful dialogue and I appreciate the input. Always always feel free to reach out. Thanks so much.

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

We're suspended for three minutes.

• (1935)

(Pause)

• (1935)

The Chair: We're back in session.

In addition to the witnesses that were introduced at the outset of the meeting, I would like to welcome one additional witnesses, El-isha Ram, associate assistant deputy minister, skills and employment branch.

We're going to begin now with rounds of questions, beginning with the Conservatives.

I believe it's Ms. Falk. Is it?

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I believe it's MP Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): I'd say Brad Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay. I'm ready to go.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you so much, and thank you to the officials for being here.

Can you comment on what the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers said in respect to the workplace safety investigations that your department undertook, and their comment that a decision was rendered within three hours of reviewing the situation at Mission Institution?

• (1940)

Mr. Gary Robertson: I'd start off by acknowledging that the correctional officers as well as others, such as the food inspection officers, work in very challenging environments in the normal course of affairs, and certainly the current context makes that much more complicated. I just want to acknowledge that.

Having said that, without getting into too much detail, what I could say is that it is I think true that a decision was made three hours or so after the inspector spoke to that particular individual, but the broader picture is that the officer had done additional work and had additional interviews and interactions with other folks in that employment context. They did a complete review. Part of our process, because we're quite concerned about making sure we get it right in COVID in particular, is that there's always a program adviser—someone separate and apart from the officer—who provides them with advice and guidance and makes sure that they've considered all the various factors that they should in the current context before they render a decision.

What I would say is that I'm pretty sure that the process was followed. I take the point that a number of folks are concerned about the outcome of that. I would reiterate the point the minister made, which is that there is an opportunity to appeal to the CIRB. In fact, what I would offer is that the Canada Labour Code was set up in part II to ensure that there was not undue political interference at any point during the process. Therefore, when the officer acts, they act on behalf of the minister, and once they have a ruling, it's considered *functus*.

I wasn't familiar with the term before I filled this role, but *functus officio* basically means once the decision's made, it is permanent unless it's appealed and overturned. The CIRB really is the right organization to approach if there's a concern about the outcome.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

Regarding personal protective equipment in federal institutions, I did write Minister Blair about certain labour issues on October 2, 2020. I have yet to receive a response, but one of the questions and one of the issues that federal union members raised with me was on the protocol around PPE. As you will note, at the very beginning of the pandemic in the spring there was not sufficient PPE in federal penitentiaries, and it was a very big problem. That's part of the reason why there was such a massive outbreak.

Have the PPE policies been updated since the spring, and what measures are available to officers to enforce the mandatory mask wearing and social distancing in common areas?

Mr. Gary Robertson: What I would say is that I think it's clear to a lot of people that there's been a challenge with obtaining enough PPE for the present circumstances, particularly when a lot of it is produced out of country. I do appreciate that Corrections is one of the institutions that had a challenge along with a number of others. In terms of the use of PPE, it is prescribed by the Canada Labour Code.

What I would share with folks is that when we make decisions we use the authoritative adviser organization to make those decisions. In our particular case, we've referenced the Public Health Agency of Canada, and in the absence of advice from them we would go to the World Health Organization. What I would say is that the guidance has evolved over time, but the guidance around non-medical masks, just for a technical point, is not considered to be PPE. It's considered to be a public health measure.

Mr. Brad Vis: I want to get one more quick question in there.

I have four federal penitentiaries in my riding. There is also the need for broader public information to be made available to keep our community safe. In this instance, the Mission Institution is just a few kilometres up the road from where I am right now. There were no federal protocols in place to ensure that the decisions being made at the Mission Institution were shared with the broader community. The only avenue I had as an MP was to ask questions and go to federal officials myself and literally beg for them to communicate with the public.

How have you, as public servants in charge of labour policies, improved, or are you making improvements, to ensure that in cases where there is federal responsibility the broader public is being made aware of the decisions to ensure that they feel they're being kept safe as well? Our numbers in B.C. are only going up as it relates to COVID.

• (1945)

Mr. Gary Robertson: Thank you for the question.

Part of the Canada Labour Code mandates that every organization has the hazard prevention program and that it be kept up to date. Within the corrections context, they would have two different mechanisms to ensure that was done in collaboration with labour.

Because of the size of the organization, they would have workplace health and safety committees in the different locations. Because there are over 200 employees nationally, they'd also have an occupational health and safety policy committee. The operation of that policy committee should ensure that policies that relate to health and safety—and COVID in particular—are portable and used across the country, where they apply to multiple institutions.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm saying that, in this institution, we need to do a better job of making sure that information is disseminated. I say that in good faith, just to improve it for public awareness.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

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

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here. I really appreciate the hard work and probably long hours you're putting in. The testament to your hard work is just being here late into the evening with us. I appreciate the conversation.

I have a couple of questions for Mr. Perlman. Could you give us an overview of how COVID-19 has impacted planned expenditures within the labour portfolio? I think that would be really helpful for all of us. What's increased and what's decreased?

Mr. Mark Perlman: I look at the department overall. Maybe Mr. Robertson would be able to speak more directly to the labour program itself.

Mr. Gary Robertson: I'd be happy to.

There are a number of pockets where programming activity has changed quite dramatically. If you'll permit, I'll just cover a few of them.

One of them is the wage earner protection program, which is a program we haven't covered yet tonight. It provides compensation to workers who were terminated as a result of being associated with a company that has gone bankrupt or into receivership. While the number of bankruptcies associated with this program are actually down slightly from the previous year, the number of individual applications have gone up. That means more large companies have gone into bankruptcy or into receivership.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] more activity there than we normally would. That particular program normally has a statutory cap of about \$49 million, but we [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] close to \$30 million compensating former employees in that capacity. We would project forward that we're likely to exceed that statutory cap, which is fine. If you meet the requirements, you get the money. There's no challenge for the individuals, but that program has grown quite a bit.

Another program is a Government Employees Compensation Act program. There, our volumes have actually gone down. Because a number of employees are working at home outside of the workplace, in the first quarter of this fiscal year we only had about 30% of our typical volume for that same period. In our second quarter, we only had about 60%. There's been a precipitous drop—if I can call it that—in the first half of this year.

If I turn to labour standards, because of the initial adjustment period, we're only at about 92% of our monetary complaint capacity. We're not far off of what it was last year. There is a fair amount of work going on there.

In our occupational health and safety area, we've actually reduced the amount of proactive work we have done historically fairly significantly. Our reactive work is still sitting at about 80%. That's driven principally based on complaints. There's quite a bit of variation through the various programs as a result of that.

In employment equity, which I didn't cover—the fifth program—we would have actually seen a delay in people submitting their reports, but we're not concerned about that.

In our international area, there's still been a fair amount of work with our colleagues in the provinces—as the minister spoke of—and also internationally. Also, our federal mediation and conciliation service is still very busy assisting stakeholders in the employment context to resolve outstanding challenges within their context.

I think that's a fairly broad coverage.

• (1950)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's really helpful.

The next question I have is related to multiple streams of funding related to business resumption.

If I'm reading it correctly, there's one through ESDC and then one through the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. It looks to me like the one through ESDC focuses more on inspection, compliance and advice to employers.

How much has funding increased from the ESDC side? As well, how much has it increased on the CCOHS side?

Mr. Gary Robertson: Thank you for the question.

On the ESDC side, we did obtain a commitment for a multi-year amount for the ESDC labour program, which will total \$2.5 million. In the supplementary (B)s, you'll notice almost \$500,000 of that, which is the first tranche. That is because the money will come late in this year. We'll have about a quarter of full activity and then four quarters of full activity next year.

CCOHS is also about to receive \$2.5 million for activities that they'll undertake nationally and on behalf of all jurisdictions. Again, they're receiving about \$1.3 million of that this year, with the balance to follow in the subsequent year.

The one element that doesn't pop out to you in the estimates as they're profiled here is that Transport Canada is also receiving just short of \$200,000 this year and a balance of \$800,000 next year for a total of \$1 million. It's to do the same type of work as the labour program, but in the three modes of transportation that they're typically responsible for.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull and Mr. Robertson.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, it's your turn now.

You have six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much.

Good evening, everyone.

You have answered some of my questions. I had some questions about the wage earner protection program.

The minister also talked about that and the extension of the deadline. I understand that this budget has a cap. Please confirm if I understood it correctly.

However, our concern is that a lot more workers may be taking advantage of it because of COVID-19. It is estimated that, in Quebec alone, 18,000 SMEs are at risk of bankruptcy, hence the bill we introduced yesterday to protect pension funds if necessary.

However, this is not what the wage earner protection program provides for.

Can you tell us how many workers have registered in the program because of the pandemic and because of bankruptcy situations this year? Were there more than usual? Do you know how many?

Mr. Gary Robertson: Thank you for your question.

Actually, I have the number with me. Just give me a minute.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'll give you a minute if I don't lose a minute.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Okay.

I think the number is about 9,000 so far, but I'm just checking it.

I'm going to ask Ms. Baxter whether she has the exact number, but I think it's about 9,000 people.

Ms. Baxter, do I have the right number?

• (1955)

[English]

Ms. Brenda Baxter (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Labour Program, Compliance, Operations and Program Development Directorate, Department of Employment and Social Development): Yes. We've just had over 9,000 applications this fiscal year.

[Translation]

Mr. Gary Robertson: As I said, of course, if we have—

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

If I understood correctly, the cap could be higher if the effects of the pandemic continue to increase the requests from these workers.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Yes, you understood correctly.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I've already asked the minister my other question. Perhaps I wasn't clear enough, so let me try again.

The question is about the labour funding program, which has three components. There's the health and safety component, with \$2.3 billion, and there's the employment equity program component, meaning women's equity.

Are these amounts broken down by program, and is it possible to find out how much is allocated to projects that address employment equity for women?

Mr. Gary Robertson: Thank you again for your question.

The documentation refers to \$2.3 million, and about \$500,000 is earmarked for employment equity activities. In fact, now we have a big project with Ryerson University.

[English]

Ryerson is right now conducting work to the tune of about \$500,000 over the life of the project, for work that is expected to inform that particular area.

[Translation]

Another amount of approximately \$1.7 million is planned for international activities related to our obligations with our international partner. If you have more questions about this amount, Mr. Giles will be able to answer them.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you. That answers my question.

Just out of curiosity, are there any equal employment opportunity programs for companies under the authority of the federal government? Are there any obligations for organizations or companies under federal jurisdiction to implement employment equity programs for minorities or women?

Mr. Gary Robertson: The law requires every organization under the federal government to report annually and monitor progress. With that approach, it is clear to all Canadians and they can see whether or not we have made progress in each of the four areas.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I have one last question.

The Chair: Please keep your question very brief.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Has money been earmarked in the estimates to raise the minimum wage to \$15? Has money been budgeted for that mandate?

The Chair: Please provide a brief answer.

Mr. Gary Robertson: As the minister said, the system has a plan to implement this initiative in the near future.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today. I know you have been working really hard, as all of us have during the pandemic.

My question is actually about child care workers, or early childhood educators. Although I know that its an overlapping jurisdiction, for many child care workers, conditions that really are conducive to meeting proper health and safety measures are non-existent. We know that child care workers are essential. Child care workers allow families to go to work, particularly women who have been really hard hit by the pandemic, yet in Manitoba—I'll give you one example—we recently had to return all the masks because they did not meet health and safety standards, and these masks were provided by the province.

This is horrific. It's not only unsafe for workers, but it's unsafe for children and it places families at risk. I'm wondering if your government or your department has any plans to put in place measures, national standards to protect child care workers.

• (2000)

Mr. Gary Robertson: There are two parts to my response. One is that at the federal level, we are having discussions with our colleagues in the provinces and territories about common approaches. While I know you're aware that we don't regulate child care and early childhood learning facilities, I will say that the CCOHS, which the minister referred to a number of times, has been developing information and guidance for those contexts.

To give you a little more about CCOHS, because it's one of our unknown gems nationally, it has a governance body comprised of employee representatives and employer representatives. Each jurisdiction is represented on the council or has an ability to be represented on the council, so when they do provide guidance, it is something that resonates with everyone, not just us at the federal level. The work they've been doing really has been well appreciated. I know that when I talk to my colleagues from the jurisdictions, they very much appreciate it.

On the last part, around PPE, it is a theme that we have heard in a number of different contexts. I would share with you that there was recognition early on that this was going to be a challenge nationally. Public Services and Procurement Canada has been facilitating bulk purchases of equipment that is available within the different jurisdictions and within the different sectors. As they obtain it, it is made available. I would share that with you, because it is another initiative the federal government has undertaken.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes. I mention it because early childhood educators are not only grossly underpaid; they're often not respected. These jobs are primarily comprised of women. If we're going to talk about equity in the workforce, then I think we need to target resources at, particularly, jobs occupied mainly by women, and that includes early childhood education. Thanks very much for your response.

My next question has to do with individuals living with compromised immune systems. I have several constituents in my riding who have compromised immune systems and whose workplaces put them at higher risk, of course, because it's a pandemic. They do not have the right to refuse unsafe work for this reason. They can't say they're not going to work because they have a compromised immune system.

Your government allows for Canadians in this position to receive only two weeks of the CRSB, which isn't a solution. That puts these particular individuals with compromised immune systems at risk. What is your department doing to protect immunocompromised workers during the COVID-19 pandemic to make sure their health is not put on the line to survive?

Mr. Gary Robertson: I will turn to both Tony and Elisha to help support the response.

To start, I will say that every employer has a duty to accommodate folks with physical or mental challenges. Immune challenges are health challenges like any other. While there are approaches that we've taken to help address this, it's not exclusively through this mechanism that folks should have these conversations.

Tony and Elisha, can I turn it back to you?

• (2005)

Mr. Anthony Giles (Assistant Deputy Minister, Labour Program, Policy, Dispute Resolution and International Affairs Directorate, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thanks, Gary.

I can just say briefly, from a labour policy point of view, that the government recently passed legislation providing job-protected leave for all employees with any kind of COVID-related concern well beyond the two weeks that are actually paid by the new benefit.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Does that include pay? Most people can't afford to have leave without pay.

The Chair: Make it a short answer, please. We're out of time.

Mr. Anthony Giles: No, it doesn't. The labour code provides unpaid job-protected leave.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Giles, and thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Next we have Mr. Kent for five minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair. Mr. Schmale will take this slot.

The Chair: Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for their contributions here.

With respect to the wage earner protection program, does your department keep track of how many companies have declared bankruptcy or have gone into receivership since April 1 of 2020?

Mr. Gary Robertson: Yes, we do track the number of folks who have had challenges in this space. As I was saying before—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I'm sorry. Could you repeat that? It just went all robotic on me.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Okay. Yes, we do track the number of organizations that access the WEPP as a result of bankruptcies. As I said before, it has gone down. I believe it is 83% of what we experienced last year that have declared bankruptcy and have come through our program, which is less. However, as I mentioned before—which I find quite interesting—the number of folks, individuals, who worked for them is higher, which means that more larger organizations have gone bankrupt than small or mid-sized organizations. That's the only explanation for that strange dichotomy.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay, I appreciate that.

I don't know about anyone else.... It was an in-and-out connection, but I think I heard enough to understand what you said. I don't know if anyone else had the same issue.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Would it be helpful if I restate it?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Is that okay with the chair? Some of it was robotic. Peter Kent's waving too.

Maybe restate just that last little bit, as it just went silent, if that's okay with you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, by all means. I'm not having any trouble with the sound quality, but if you are, you want to hear your answer.

Go ahead, Mr. Robertson.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Again, my apologies.

My understanding is that, year-to-date, and that goes up to the end of September as that's when we most recently tracked, the number of bankruptcies that we've had is 186 versus 223 in the same period last year. That represents 83%, so that's fewer bankruptcies than normal. However, during that same period, the number of individuals associated with those bankruptcies went from 7,900 last year to over 9,000 this year, so the number of individuals who have benefited from the WEPP has gone up by 15%.

What I want to say is that last year, which we're comparing it to, was an unusual year. We had very high volumes last year, so the volume to date is about 1.5 times our normal annual volume.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay. It must be my computer if everyone else is hearing okay.

Can you tell us, if you have these figures handy, how much money has been paid out to cover the outstanding wages to employees as a result of COVID-19 shutdowns?

Mr. Gary Robertson: I don't have the exact number. I will turn to Brenda in case she does. What I do know is that the average payment is between \$4,000 and \$4,500, but she might have the precise number.

Brenda, is there any chance that this is the case?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I'm sorry, sir. I did not hear a word you said, and Peter is waving his hand, too. Peter Kent is saying that he can't hear either.

A voice: Me too.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Okay, so, I'm going to try again. I had stated—and, again, I apologize that I don't have the precise total number—that I do believe that the average payment for the individuals who have accessed it is somewhere between \$4,000 and \$4,500 each.

Brenda, if you could confirm that, it would be helpful.

• (2010)

Ms. Brenda Baxter: The total that's been paid out as of September 30, 2020, for the fiscal year is just over \$29 million to recipients. This is monies that were owed to them.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

Can you tell us how the shutdown of Service Canada during the early months of the pandemic affected the clarity of information required by employees in order to apply for the WEPP?

Mr. Gary Robertson: I can comment that it actually wasn't a large challenge for us with regard to this particular program. Service Canada does manage it on our behalf, but what happens is that the bankruptcy folks or trustees actually administer most of the calculations. They provide the packages in final format to Service Canada, and then they process it.

We have a service standard of 35 days. This year, we're meeting it 99% of the time, so we're feeling like the payment frequency and timeliness is pretty high this year, even though the volume of individual applicants has gone up.

The Chair: Mr. Schmale, you're out of time, but you had some technical difficulties, so please ask one more question if you have another.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

Yes, I will. I just had technical difficulties on that last little piece, but I was able to read your lips and I think I got my answer. I don't know about anyone else who might not be watching on Zoom, CPAC or another platform.

About Service Canada and its closures, I think many MPs across Canada had to pick up where Service Canada left off when they shut down. Can you give us a number, if you're aware, for how many Service Canada offices are still closed?

Mr. Gary Robertson: I don't have that information. It's not something we manage within the labour program.

In the unlikely event that either Elisha or Mark happens to be aware, I might turn to them.

Mr. Mark Perlman: Yes, I can answer that.

Out of the 317 Service Canada centres, 300 are now open, and we currently have plans under way to reopen the remainder.

The whole intent or the purpose is to make sure we're opening them safely with the right social distancing, personal protective equipment and guard services to manage the traffic in and out to ensure that the safety of our employees as well as our clients is maintained.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I need a headset like that. That was clear as a bell.

Thank you, everyone.

The Chair: Thanks for hanging in there, Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Dong, you have five minutes.

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

I also would like to thank all the witnesses for joining us tonight.

I listened, and I heard you say that the safety and well-being of our employees are very important. That's true. In my riding, I reached out to employers and workers on the front line during this COVID pandemic. I have heard that they are being very innovative, following the rules, protecting their employees, social distancing, allowing employees to work from home and supporting their work at home, which is great, but it's still very challenging.

With regard to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, can you tell us the steps you've taken that speak directly to the concerns of Canadian workers and employers, especially during COVID? Nobody was really prepared for it, so everything had to be learned and executed in a rather quick fashion. Could you tell us some of the steps you've taken?

Mr. Gary Robertson: I can. What I should do is be clear. While I am currently the acting deputy minister of the labour program, in addition to that and separate from that, I also happen to be the chair of the council for CCOHS. It's from that perspective that I'll respond.

What I would say is that they have undertaken a significant amount of work to ensure that people were well positioned to respond, again, in all sectors and across all jurisdictions within Canada. They've issued a large number of tipsheets. They have a significant amount of training material that they've released for free, which is normally for a charge. I can tell you it's running into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, but there's not a person on council who has a concern with that. It's understood what a benefit it is to workers across the country.

They've advised a number of folks, including the court systems across Canada, on their reopening so that they could do those successfully. I think we will have all noted that this happened without too many hiccups, which was quite great. They've also established MOUs with a number of organizations, such as PHAC, so that they can operationalize information that's of a public health nature in an employment context.

• (2015)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I'm having a very hard time hearing the answer. It's very choppy and coming in and out. I don't think I could say that I heard any of his answer.

The Chair: This is strange. The clerk tells me that in the room they're not having any trouble. For me, it's clear as a bell.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I'm in the same boat. It's choppy.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I can't hear either, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's bouncing in and out. It's sounds like an open channel.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman. I hear it perfectly. We're probably listening on the floor channel. I'm guessing some of our colleagues who want translation are listening on the English or French, so they're probably hearing it on those channels while we, on floor, don't hear that.

The Chair: Thanks for that suggestion, Mr. Housefather.

Let's try that. If you require interpretation and you're not getting it, make sure you raise a point of order as we absolutely want people to hear.

Mr. Robertson, you were in the middle of an answer. Please, go ahead.

Mr. Gary Robertson: I appreciate the time and I'm sorry for the technical challenge.

I happen to be the chair of CCOHS so I have some visibility into its operations from that perspective. It has done an extraordinary amount of work to issue tipsheets that are helpful to all jurisdictions and sectors, not just those that are federally regulated.

It has released for free a large segment of its training material. It's to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars, the value of that, to ensure that people have access to timely information that will help keep them safe. It has established MOUs with a number of key organizations, or large organizations, that have the ability to influence COVID prevention measures, such as PHAC. It has done quite a bit.

The one example I intended to give earlier was that it provided advice to the court systems across Canada when they were doing their business resumption, so that it could be done safely. Under the leadership of a number of justices, it went extremely well. It's a very complex environment when you think about all of the moving parts. The CCOHS has been quite active, and it's something we're really quite proud of.

Mr. Han Dong: I heard earlier a mention of an additional \$2.5 million being invested this year to strengthen the contribution of CCOHS. Some would consider that amount to be relatively modest when we see billions of dollars invested to support businesses and individuals during the pandemic.

Could you outline how this investment, this \$2.5 million, will improve your reach and your ability to support the needs of the Canadian economy during both the worst time of the pandemic as well as a targeted recovery going forward?

Mr. Gary Robertson: For \$1.3 million this year and \$1.2 million in the subsequent year, CCOHS is hoping to do significantly more advisories, tipsheets, direction, guidance, and most importantly, additional training capacity to ensure that as people retool and return to the workforce, or re-return to the workforce, that they're doing so in a safe context. A lot of good work is going on. I agree that it sounds like a modest amount, but there is full value for the dollar.

• (2020)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dong and Mr. Robertson.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I'm going to ask a broader question about work. We know that the departments have been separated within the federal government. There is the Department of Employment and Social Development, and the Department of Labour is separate.

We are concerned about broader labour issues. I want to see how you are dealing with this issue.

I'm thinking of sectors such as aeronautics or aerospace. This is a major challenge if we don't want to lose expertise and workers in the field. We know how many jobs have been lost. How do you work collaboratively to implement broader work strategies?

I have another question about the minister's mandate letter. How are you working with other jurisdictions to think about transitioning workers to a greener economy? Solutions involve, not exclude, the workers. You can't think about making transitions without thinking about the workers.

How are you addressing those issues at the Department of Labour?

Mr. Gary Robertson: Thank you for your question.

We have worked very hard with industry and the aerospace sector. Despite the fact that our proactive activities have declined overall, our proactive activities in this sector have increased by almost 80% over the previous year. We are aware of the challenges in the area. We have decided to work harder to support this sector.

With respect to transition, we have put in place a number of initiatives to minimize the likelihood of individuals being laid off. One of the initiatives is to extend the period of time before a person can be laid off. This initiative has allowed people to remain in their positions for an additional nine months.

These two initiatives are part of our response.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you very much.

Moving forward, we know that in many places, workers are becoming sick with COVID because they are not provided with proper protection or are not provided with budgets to properly support staff. I'll give you an example.

Currently in our shelters in Winnipeg, shelters that are all housed within my riding, we have a COVID outbreak. Workers are working around the clock. These shelters and front-line organizations, are doing everything in their power to keep people safe, including having to shut down our only detox now because too many staff have gotten sick.

Is your department willing to work very closely with provinces to develop national standards for work health and safety, particularly in light of COVID and particularly with an understanding that this is probably the first of many pandemics to come?

Workers deserve to be safe. This is currently not happening. Could I have a response to that? Thank you.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Back in late October the Canadian Standards Association issued a press release that indicated they were going to set up a testing and certification centre in Canada to ensure we had better capacity nationally to access PPE that met our requirements.

The labour program is linked to that. We're not responsible for the initiative, but we're playing a role as a stakeholder. That is an initiative that will benefit all provinces and territories equally as they set up their capacity and have the ability to offer those services.

• (2025)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Given the serious nature of this, we know many workers getting sick from COVID-19 are workers involved in care industries, whether it's health care or front-line organizations working with people with diverse needs. What is the timeline?

We know we could be in this pandemic for a few more months. Many people have lost lives caring for others. What timeline is your department proposing to put in this training to make sure that people are safe now?

The Chair: Please provide a short answer.

Mr. Gary Robertson: The CSA would want to comment on their own timelines.

The CCOHS training materials, which would in part address your question, are expected to start being developed very shortly and should be available in 2021.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan and Mr. Robertson.

Next is Ms. Falk for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Robertson, I'm interested in business resumption for federally regulated employees and the type of information being given by CCOHS. Is this where these tipsheets that you are referring to would fall?

Mr. Gary Robertson: They would fall for CCOHS, but in terms of the activity the labour program's going to undertake, we'll be focusing principally on the key elements that will contribute the most benefit based on the work we do. The key elements would be to make sure every organization that we link with is fully aware of its obligations related to the hazard protection program. We will have very clear guidance for them and be able to support them if they need to update that. We'll equally be working with them to ensure that their occupational health and safety committees—and policy committees if they're large enough to have those—are operating effectively. Again, this will work only if the employers are working with employees to address the fundamental issues.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: What does that guidance look like?

Mr. Gary Robertson: Many employers should have had biological hazards listed in their HPP—hazard prevention program—but many may not have. We will be working with them to make sure they understand that those need to be included, and specifically as they relate to COVID. We'll actually have industrial hygienists positioned to give them detailed advice as it relates to their particular sector. As you can appreciate, it would be very different for someone working for an airline in an airplane versus someone working in a telecommunications cabling tunnel. Both of them are limited spaces. I won't call them confined spaces, but in some parts they may be. There would be different variations. That's the type of activity we would be doing.

If environments have struggled with collaboration among their committee members, we would be in a position to help support them in identifying the key issues on which they would need to have a dialogue.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

With respect to the CCOHS line item of \$1.3 million, I'm just wondering if you could tell us how many employers have received information, training and education from them.

Mr. Gary Robertson: I don't have the statistics but I could certainly ask Anne Tennier, who's the president, to provide those and we could forward them to the committee. I think you'd find that it's a fairly significant number in both instances. I expect that it will increase dramatically as they bring the new capacity online.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Do you know if there is a procedure in place to measure the success of the rollout of that?

Mr. Gary Robertson: They do surveys with the people who use their products. I'm not sure to what degree they've kept that up, because they're very overwhelmed right now and they're focused on delivery. Again, I can check with Anne and ask her to provide the information.

I was part of a discussion just short of a week ago, in which they went through some of the statistics. They were pretty impressive, particularly on the training front, with the number of folks who were accessing their services. At a minimum, I know that they've tracked the regional distribution across Canada and it is fairly pervasive in all the different jurisdictions.

• (2030)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Perfect. That's good to hear, because we know that this pandemic especially has really shown the differences regionally even in the rollouts of programs. I'm in a rural riding and we've had great problems with even just Service Canada office closures and the lack of rural Internet. People are being told to apply for programs online or to look for information online, but a lot of these people don't have access to that, so it's good to hear that's being noticed.

Mr. Chair, that's all I have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Falk.

Finally, we're going to go to Mr. Vaughan.

Go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thanks very much.

To Mr. Robertson, just to be clear, your department, while it sets up safety protocols and employment standards in federally regulated work environments, doesn't actually manage the individual complaints between an employee and an employer until they are raised to the level of formal processes that you have governance over. Is that right?

Mr. Gary Robertson: Yes. The normal refusal-to-work process requires an employee to approach their supervisor with the issue. If it can't be resolved there, they go to the occupational health and safety committee. If the committee members can't come to a conclusion that's suitable to everyone, then it becomes a formal complaint to the labour program. At that point, we have a formal role.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In relation to the complaint that Mr. Vis highlighted, you'd be unaware of the fact that Minister Blair, for example, didn't respond in writing but took the extraordinary step to include both him and the MP for Abbotsford, Mr. Fast, in a telephone call with the commissioner of corrections, an extraordinary step that normally doesn't ever happen. Instead of writing a letter, they actually put them in touch with the person overseeing corrections facilities and the complaint process therein.

You wouldn't be aware of that because it wouldn't have been raised to your attention.

Mr. Gary Robertson: It wouldn't be associated with our department's correspondence, so no, I would not be aware.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In the same vein, you would be unaware of whether or not Public Health Agency of Canada issued directives to the provinces around safety standards in shelters and on front-line services serving vulnerable populations, especially in congregate living. You'd be unaware of whether or not Minister Hajdu actually issued directives and guidelines to provinces and municipalities and to indigenous governments around the operation of safe shelters. You wouldn't know that unless a complaint was forwarded to you under your jurisdiction, and you wouldn't have carriage of those standards being set or distributed to provincial governments.

Mr. Gary Robertson: That's correct. The only awareness I would have is what tipsheets the CCOHS has issued.

Yes, you're right. From a complaint perspective I wouldn't have visibility into that.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: You wouldn't have jurisdiction to impose standards on provincial governments like the provincial government in Manitoba vis-à-vis health standards for front-line workers in the municipal or provincial health shelter system.

Mr. Gary Robertson: That would be correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of Service Canada, it's good to hear that we continue to make progress on reopenings.

My understanding is that the small percentage of centres that haven't been reopened have been entirely because of health and safety concerns raised by workers. That's what prevented those openings. It's that and a secondary problem, which is the inability to hire security guards to manage the crowds accessing Service Canada. Those are the two major hurdles. Would you be aware of those as being the challenges?

Mr. Gary Robertson: I would maybe turn this one to Mark Perlman because he's responsible for accommodations in ESDC and would be more aware than I would be.

Mr. Mark Perlman: Yes, Mr. Chair, that's exactly the reason behind it—it is to make sure. There is also the configuration of some of our smaller centres, where it's just very difficult to find the two-metre distancing to keep the safety for everybody out there.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The only concern was, much like the concern raised by Mr. Vis around workers inside federal penitentiaries, that workers inside Service Canada shouldn't be subjected to unhealthy or unsafe workplaces.

Mr. Brad Vis: I have a point of order. It wasn't my concern. It was directly quoted from—

The Chair: Mr. Vis, that's not a point of order.

We're into argument here. He's allowed to ask those questions.

Go ahead, Mr. Vaughan.

• (2035)

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As I said, it's the article that he quoted, to be fair. It wasn't him who did the investigation or found this issue. It was from the reporting in an article and the conversation he had with a worker there.

The goal here, inside Service Canada, is to keep workers safe, the public safe and to manage a process as best as it can, based on physical limitations that an office might have. Is that not—

Mr. Mark Perlman: That is absolutely correct.

We have also made sure that we've had enhanced cleaning, plexi-glass, hand sanitizer, masks as well as appropriate signage and wayfinding. It's all about making sure that everyone, from all angles, is being protected.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Despite that, we have close to 90% reopened.

We also have staffed up the call centres at Service Canada with additional personnel to take the overflow, even though we're close to 100% now of reopening.

Mr. Mark Perlman: Yes, sir, we have done that and we have also expanded our e-services offering to compensate for the in-person service.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Are we still looking to hire commissionaires or security personnel to help facilitate the reopening of the remaining few? Is that a job offer that's gone unmet so far?

Mr. Mark Perlman: We are doing contracts with various organizations to try to find the appropriate people in the various locations.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Again, the paramount directive here is to make sure, when we reopen, we open safely both for the public and for staff to make sure we don't inadvertently, as we help people get through the COVID pandemic, deliver COVID to them. That's been the prime focus here.

Mr. Mark Perlman: That has been our focus.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I have no more questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Vaughan.

Thank you, Mr. Perlman.

That concludes the time that we have for questions.

I want to thank all of the officials for being with us, at least here on the east coast, well into the evening. Thank you for the work you do serving Canadians and parliamentarians. You have been extremely helpful. I wish you all a good evening.

To my colleagues and to all of the support people who make it happen, thanks a lot, everyone. Have a good evening, everyone. Thank you.

If there is nothing else, we are okay to adjourn.

By consensus, we are adjourned.

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