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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey



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• (1655)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 11 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.

The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so that you are aware, the webcast will show only the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

As all of the members of Parliament and all of the witnesses have heard the spiel before, I'll keep it mercifully short. Please open your microphone when you're speaking and close it when you aren't. Please address all questions and comments through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will continue its study of the supplementary estimates (B).

We're pleased to have with us this afternoon the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion; Graham Flack, deputy minister, employment and social development; Benoît Robidoux, associate deputy minister; and Mark Perlman, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister.

Welcome back to all of the officials, and also to you, Minister. You have the floor for five minutes for your opening remarks.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

I am accompanied, as you said, by Graham Flack, my deputy minister; Benoît Robidoux, my associate deputy minister; and Mark Perlman, my chief financial officer for ESDC.

Today I will be speaking to supplementary estimates (B) for 2020–21. As you know, these supplementary estimates were tabled in the House of Commons on October 22 and passed through the House just three nights ago.

These supplementary estimates represent an additional \$31.4 billion in planned budgetary expenditures. The bulk of this investment, \$28.5 billion, can be attributed to the Canada emergency response benefit payments under statutory authorities, delivered by Service Canada and the CRA. From March to September, the CERB helped almost nine million Canadian workers get through a very difficult period. I also note that these supplementary estimates

include funding for the safe restart agreement, training for workers, early learning and child care, youth programming, and training for personal support worker interns, just to name a few things.

Since March 2020, our world has completely changed, but our government's priorities of supporting Canadian workers, investing in youth, and helping people overcome barriers to training and working remain the same.

When the pandemic first hit, we put a moratorium on Canada student loan and Canada apprentice loan repayments and introduced the Canada emergency response benefit. We then quickly put in place the Canada emergency student benefit to support students and recent graduates who were faced with fewer job opportunities in the summer. We also created thousands of jobs and training opportunities for youth and provided a one-time payment for persons with disabilities.

As the CERB was coming to an end, we made changes to the EI program so more people could access benefits, including regular and special benefits. For Canadians who don't qualify for EI, we introduced a complementary new suite of recovery benefits: the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery sickness benefit, and the Canada recovery caregiving benefit. Together, these measures are helping millions of Canadians through this challenging time.

I would now like to share a few words about the fall economic statement. There are a lot of important investments being made as a result of the FES to help ensure that Canadian workers, young Canadians, students and vulnerable populations, such as Canadians with disabilities, are part of Canada's recovery, through things like easing the burden of student debt by eliminating the interest on repayment of the federal portion of the Canada student loans and Canada apprentice loans for 2021-22, expanding the Canada summer jobs program to fund 120,000 jobs, and enhancing the youth employment and skills strategy to create 45,000 job placements to help youth facing barriers.

We will also maintain our commitment to implement the changes to the registered disability savings plans announced in budget 2019 for beneficiaries who cease to be eligible for the disability tax credit. We'll make targeted investments in training to support the most vulnerable and those hardest hit by the pandemic, including women, racialized Canadians, indigenous people, persons with disabilities and skilled newcomers to Canada. This will be the largest investment in training in Canadian history.

We will invest in the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities, the indigenous skills and employment training program and the foreign credential recognition program. Lastly, we are investing in a new pilot program designed to support marginalized women by providing and testing pre-employment and skill development supports. I am confident it will be a game-changer for women by providing better ways to support them to join the workforce or get better jobs in communities across the country.

The fall economic statement is a plan to build back better. Together, we have the opportunity to provide Canadians with the certainty they need, along with the resources that will help them achieve success. I hope we can work together to pass Bill C-14 and see these important measures come to fruition sooner rather than later.

The appropriations requested in the supplementary estimates (B) passed this week have allowed us to continue to support Canadians during the pandemic and beyond. My officials and I are happy to answer your questions.

Thank you.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We're going to begin with Mr. Kent for the Conservatives, please, for six minutes.

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

I would like to begin by thanking the minister for her direct answers in committees of the House and the Senate during the COVID pandemic, which is a sterling example, I think, for some of her cabinet colleagues.

Chair, I'd like to begin today with a letter from a Thornhill constituent, David Burke, who writes: "I received a letter from CRA yesterday saying they would not confirm that I met the requirements under CERB, namely, that I earned a self-employment income of at least \$5,000 during 2019, or for the previous 12 months from the date of my first application for CERB."

He writes, "I did in fact earn over \$13,000 during 2019, but with some expenses, depreciation and home office expenses it brought my net income to zero. The website for CERB made no mention of net income, but rather asked if I earned self-employment income of at least \$5,000 during 2019. I believe they are now changing the rules and they are asking for the money back."

"Money in the bank," Mr. Burke writes, "versus tax return at net income are two distinct things. One is accounting, the other is real life. Please try to rectify this problem."

Chair, through you, does the minister see where the original wording promoting CERB was misleading for thousands of self-employed Canadians?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: May I, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Okay. Thank you. I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure you could hear me.

I thank you for the question. I think there's a couple of things that I guess I would say.

First of all, we have to remember that CERB was there to help nine million people, you know, pay their bills and support their families.

The CRA has suspended collection activity on new debt during COVID-19. The letters that were issued were not letters demanding immediate payment. Rather, they were letters informing Canadians that CRA could not verify that they met the criteria—in this case, the \$5,000 income threshold. I feel like I've been clear from the beginning when asked, and I know our background information... When I was always asked from the beginning how self-employment income was calculated, I always said "net income". The backgrinder said that.

I feel bad that people have misunderstood or that maybe the way we communicated has resulted in this misunderstanding, but I can assure the member that we didn't change the eligibility criteria. This is how CRA calculates self-employment income. I don't know how the individual constituent's income flows or what have you, but there's also a chance that during the 12 months, not just 2019, perhaps he made enough income net to qualify for the \$5,000 threshold.

The purpose of the CRA letter was to give people information that at this time we couldn't verify their eligibility, so if they could prove eligibility, if they could maybe file their 2019 taxes or prove income during the past 12 months, then please do so. If they turn out not to be eligible, if they could remedy it by the end of the year, their tax income information would be more accurate going into next year. That's what we're dealing with.

Hon. Peter Kent: Okay, Minister, as long as you understand that with the dozens of complaints that I have received—and I've heard hundreds more from others—it would seem that there are probably thousands of Canadians who, in the COVID crisis, with the loss of income, read that original promotion for CERB where there's no mention of “net”. Many of them say that the first time they saw the word “net” was in the CRA letter, which they find very distressing. Some of them say they simply can't afford to repay \$14,000. Some are talking about having to sell tools, equipment and even their homes.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm deeply sorry for that. I'm worried about that. What I can say is that the CRA can do very, very minimal and flexible repayment plans, based on the ability of individuals to pay. It's small comfort—I hear myself saying that—and this is not a requirement to pay at this time. CRA is not requiring to people to pay at this time.

Hon. Peter Kent: Okay. Well, thank you, Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

Hon. Peter Kent: I'd like now, Chair, to speak to the minister about Bill C-7, which was just passed in the past hour in the House and was sent to the Senate.

Does the minister agree with the parliamentary secretary to the government House leader, who says that amendments in the Senate to better protect the disabled and the most vulnerable Canadians would be unacceptable? I know that the minister said it would be worthy of consideration when she testified in—

• (1705)

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Just a second, Mr. Kent.

Mr. Long, go ahead.

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, I question the relevancy of the question.

The Chair: The minister is responsible for the status of persons with disabilities. Bill C-7 clearly touches on that, and she wandered into the fall economic statement, which is outside the scope of the supplementary estimates, so I'm going to allow the question.

Go ahead, Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

I'd just like to come back and again and ask whether the minister agrees with the parliamentary secretary to the government House leader, who says that amendments in the Senate to better protect the disabled and most vulnerable Canadians would be unacceptable—amendments that the minister said in testimony in the House a couple of weeks ago would be worthy of consideration.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Well, thank you, and as I have said, probably in front of this committee—well, maybe not—I'm very open to making any piece of legislation that I'm involved with better. I made that statement probably eight times in my last appearance in front of the Senate. I am open to hearing the content of proposed amendments. We take these and, as a government, analyze them. I'd rather not comment on the positions of my colleagues, but

my position is being open to consider anything that might make a law better.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Thank you, Minister.

Next, we're going to go to Ms. Young.

Go ahead, please, for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before our committee once again. It's a pleasure to get a chance to talk to you before the holidays. It's been quite a year, to say the least, and these main supplementary estimates are a real testament to how busy this year has been. You mentioned the programs: CERB, Canada emergency student benefit, the one-time payment for persons with disabilities, and the Canada recovery benefits. There are massive programs that were put together in record time. How do the size and scope of these undertakings reflect on the public service as a whole?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks for the question. It's nice to hear your voice as well.

I think the effort and the work by the public service during these past months has really shown, and it's certainly lived up to its reputation of being world class during this pandemic. We've asked a lot of the public service during this crisis, and it's really delivered for us. We asked it to do new programs, as you said, and it has done them. We asked public servants to do this from their kitchen tables and they have done it. We asked them to do this while their kids were at home and they were juggling the extra demands of child care and worries around COVID, and they did it. Really, it's been incredible. These were massive public policy programs, new programs. Early on at ESDC, for example, we took stock of all of our resources, what we had at our disposal, and we went into the pandemic response very well aware of our limitations and very committed not to fail, and we didn't.

I'm just super grateful for their hard work and I really believe that Canadians have benefited. The unsung heroes of this entire effort are our public servants.

Ms. Kate Young: Well, thank you for that. I think it needed to be said, and I appreciate that you have given them all a pat on the back that doesn't come very often, so thank you for that.

You and I have had a number of conversations about how our government supports people with disabilities, and I was very proud to be a part of the Canada accessibility law that came into force just over a year ago. We have made great strides for people with disabilities, but I know we can do more. What do you hope to accomplish for people with disabilities as we find our way out of this pandemic?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We have had the Accessible Canada Act as our foundation as we have built our pandemic response. We were committed to being disability inclusive from the beginning, but, quite frankly, the pandemic has really exacerbated already existing inequalities in our systems, and people with disabilities have faced unique and heightened challenges. Our systems have been stretched, and some of them have broken. For me and for our government, that meant responding very clearly in the Speech from the Throne by committing to Canada's first-ever disability inclusion plan, which will include a new Canadian disability benefit modelled after the GIS for seniors, which will include a robust employment strategy for persons with disabilities, and which will include a modern approach to disability inclusion within the Government of Canada—which, again, will be a legacy piece moving forward. Thank you for the question.

• (1710)

Ms. Kate Young: Mr. Chair, do I have time for one more?

The Chair: You do. You still have two minutes.

Ms. Kate Young: In your speech at the start of this committee, you mentioned the pilot program for marginalized women, and you said that it was going to be a game-changer. What will make it so special?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Again, taking a broader, inclusive approach to our programs, we recognize that we have to take broad measures that will target all workers. As examples, we had employment programs for indigenous individuals and persons with disabilities. We had a women's entrepreneurship initiative, but not really a project targeting women and the barriers they face to get into the workforce.

This is exactly what this does, providing tailored support for women, whatever that looks like, and piloting it, trying to figure out the best ways we can help remove those barriers, help provide those wraparound supports, working from the perspective of the worker at the centre who is a woman. I think we've never done this before, and it was time to do it.

Ms. Kate Young: Are you worried about a “she-cession”, something that is...?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes. I don't even think that's up for discussion anymore. As I've said before, this pandemic has sidelined our women and it has front-lined our women. We have women being the hardest hit by the economic side of this and being at the forefront of our public health response at the same time. We absolutely risk losing a lot of the gains we've made in the women's movement if we don't very strategically target and support women to recover from this pandemic.

Ms. Kate Young: Okay. Thank you very much, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Young.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes

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

Good evening, Minister Qualtrough.

Thank you again for being available and for being here. We would have liked to meet with you in person.

I'll continue along the same lines. I don't doubt your sensitivity towards people with disabilities. However, as you just said, we have concerns about the status of women in the labour market. My questions won't surprise you, since I asked them in the House.

We have a major concern tied to this issue. This concern has nothing to do with the quality of officials at either Service Canada or the Canada Revenue Agency. It involves employment insurance and all the women who must wait—I say “women” because most of them are women—because they've been on maternity leave under the Quebec parental insurance plan in the past few months. Some people have been waiting for 10 weeks, and others for two months. These people are no longer employed, and there are no prospects. This is a problem.

Can you ensure that, within a few hours or days, or before Christmas, this gap in file processing guidelines will be addressed?

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I know that our offices have been working very closely together on the issue. The specific issue I think you're referring to is when individuals transition from the Quebec parental insurance program to EI, and the delay that people have been experiencing. We know this is unacceptable.

I'm pleased that many of the files of people in these circumstances have been resolved. We believe we're at the point now where we've streamlined the process. The reality is that we have to independently and manually verify—it is not an automated process—both that the individual hasn't been receiving two types of benefits at the same time, that the individual hasn't exceeded the 50-week total they're entitled to, as well as the interplay, if any, between having received CERB and.... It's not that it would impact their entitlement to weeks of benefits, but of course, you can't be receiving benefits at the same time. Having all of that in the mix means it is taking longer for people to get their benefits. That's unacceptable.

I think we're there, Madame Chabot, but I'm sorry it's taken us so long.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: A few cases have been resolved, and this has been acknowledged. However, there are still hundreds of cases left. Not all of them have been brought to your attention. The issue is the same, so the response should be the same. I urge you to remain vigilant in this area.

I have another concern. It involves employment insurance. The Auditor General clearly stated today that the employment insurance fund deficit could amount to \$52 billion.

Can you reassure us about this? As you know, the system couldn't sustain this type of deficit.

Can you tell us whether there's another accounting approach? A large portion of this amount is related to emergency measures, and not to the regular employment insurance system.

Can you give us any answers?

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll quickly answer the first part of the question and say that absolutely I am watching these files personally and am committed to getting these dollars out as quickly as possible.

I'm going to ask either Mark or Graham to answer the EI account question, because their answers will be much more succinct than mine.

Mr. Mark Perlman (Chief Financial Officer and Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): I could take that one.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

Mr. Mark Perlman: With the EI account, initially what was happening is that charges related to the EI emergency response benefit were coming out of the EI account, just because of the way our systems were laid out. But there was an announcement made by the government to reimburse the EI account for the impacts of the EI ERB, so it will be held harmless. Any amounts that were used for that particular purpose will be reimbursed.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I have one last question for you, Minister Qualtrough.

Are you currently working on a comprehensive employment insurance reform?

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We are absolutely looking to modernize and improve the employment insurance program—for sure.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left, Ms. Chabot. You can ask a quick question if you want.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I didn't catch that, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have time to ask a quick question.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Okay.

Regarding Canada Summer Jobs, the fall 2020 economic statement noted that there would be changes. You seem to want to renew the program put in place for COVID-19.

I want to know whether this is accurate and, if so, whether it would be for the current year.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Very quickly, the fall economic statement committed to 120,000 Canada summer jobs next year. There will be flexibility put into this program similar to the ones that were in place for COVID, but I believe responsive to the feedback we got from MPs about how we managed the program this year. This year, it was really tough, because we did the call and we had employers express interest, and then the pandemic hit. Then we had to change [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the program and it was a lot of work and confusion. It won't be that way this year.

I apologize, Mr. Chair, for the audio. I'm getting a ton of feedback in my ear. I'm hearing myself three times.

The Chair: Can we perhaps—

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I have the same issue.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. Perhaps we can take a short break to try to get that resolved, Minister, because it's important that you have good sound quality—

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I don't need to hear myself that many times.

The Chair: It's distracting, I know.

Mr. Clerk, I'm not sure if we can get someone from IT here, or if there's some quick resolution of this before we resume. That would be ideal.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Wilson): I'll look into it, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: For now, colleagues, I'm not going to suspend. We'll see if this can get resolved quickly, if you could just stand by.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to work through it. I was just commenting that it's a bit distracting, but I would not want you to suspend.

The Clerk: I'm sorry to intervene again.

Minister Qualtrough, IT in the room is telling me to make sure that you don't have any other speakers or anything like that turned on. That could be interfering with the sound you're receiving.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Okay. Could it be another cellphone, perhaps? I've moved everything away, so maybe that will be helpful. Sorry.

That's good advice.

The Chair: We'll give it a try. Let us know if there are any further issues that require intervention.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I appreciate it.

The Chair: Ms. Gazan, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

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

I'd like to welcome the minister here today.

Minister, people who were struggling to make ends meet applied for the CERB in good faith. Now your government is going after people who are barely surviving the pandemic, yet your government isn't going after big corporations that received massive dividends to rich shareholders.

This is problematic, particularly in ridings experiencing severe poverty, including mine, which currently has an outbreak of trench fever, something that hasn't been seen for 100 years. Many people got the CERB or decided to take the CERB because of higher costs, for example, keeping their kids home from school, food costs, bill costs, and even being able to get their kids technology, for example, so that they could participate in school.

I want to ask you today, Minister, whether your government is willing to provide CERB repayment amnesty for low-income Canadians who claimed the CERB, including youth who have aged out of care during the pandemic.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question.

I'm heartbroken when I hear stories like the ones you're sharing, and they're certainly not unique. This is happening across the country.

We put the CERB in place to help people who experienced job loss because of COVID, for COVID reasons, and we've been committed since the beginning, in cases where, in good faith, people accessed the CERB and they weren't eligible to do so, to work with them to repay it, because we had to have some integrity measures. We consciously chose to put them at the back end of the program in order to get money out to people quickly. We are now in that difficult period of running through the eligibility criteria and determining who was actually eligible for this benefit.

I remain as committed as ever to working with citizens in a dignified way on repayment plans. We are not currently contemplating an amnesty but we are looking to find ways to minimize the impact.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Just to let you know, Minister, I don't doubt that you have heartbreak, but in Manitoba, for example, people who were on income assistance and who accepted the CERB are now being cut off from income assistance completely—

• (1725)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: —and are no longer receiving a benefit, so regardless of how bad we feel, this is going to result in families, certainly in my riding, being really impacted by the government's current actions and ending up on the streets—families that I am now having to assist through my office.

I would hope that your government would consider amnesty. It is unacceptable, certainly, in Canada that families, including children, could end up on the streets, particularly during a pandemic.

I have another question, and again I don't question your sincerity in that, but I'm letting you know that we have to do more.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: We have to do more than that. This is a human rights matter.

During the debate on Bill C-7 there has been a very clear message coming from the disability community that the human right to live in dignity is denied, and we know that, for example, 70% of adults with severe cognitive delays, individuals who might not even be able to work, live in abhorrent levels of poverty.

Will your government uphold its legal obligations and respect the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, something that we are obliged to do under our international legal obligations, and ensure that disabled persons have everything they need to live in dignity—things like a guaranteed livable basic income, affordable accessible social housing, and all other supports required to live in dignity, or will this government continue to break the rule of law by not upholding the convention going forward?

I ask that because I was really disappointed today, particularly in light of Bill C-7, that members of the Liberal Party and Conservative Party who boasted about dignity voted against this.

Is your government open to exploring that, yes or no?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: The short answer is yes. We've built in recognition of our obligations under the UNCRPD right into the preamble of Bill C-7, because we understand the relationship of equality rights to access to social, mental health and disability community support services. We can't fully realize those rights and have the choice that is afforded through those rights if we don't have access to these services.

That's why we're putting in place the Canada disability benefit. That's why we're going to work to have a more modern, dignified approach to disability within the federal government, absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Chair.

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

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

Thank you, Minister, for being at our committee today. I want to follow up MP Kent's concerns about repayment of benefits.

I've had a number of constituents—it seems this is a trend across the country—who have reached out to me specifically regarding the letter they received from the CRA. These letters state that they have until December 31 to repay the CERB they've collected or they will be taxed in the next year. These constituents applied at the direction of Service Canada, but now have been told that they were ineligible because the income threshold was based on net income and not gross income.

One constituent—and this is a little concerning to me—was even told by a Service Canada agent that the government wanted to get money in the hands of people as quickly as possible and that the rules were developed later. I'm sure you would agree that these individuals—I would say most of them—applied in good faith, according to the information provided to them, but now they're facing hardship at Christmastime. When these constituents do call in to attempt to make flexible arrangements, they're put on hold endlessly. In some cases, they're disconnected, so they've waited for hours and then are disconnected.

I'm just wondering, Minister, what steps you are taking to ensure that these Canadians who received misinformation about CERB are not facing undue hardship this Christmas.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for a follow-up. There's a lot in your question. Let me try to answer.

I can assure you that the rules were not made up after the release of the program. We thought about this from the beginning. As I said, I feel my messaging has been clear on this regardless of where we are. It's really unfortunate that people are in the position they're in, and we're trying to find a way to work with people who aren't eligible. We had to have some eligibility thresholds. Graham can give you more detail on how we came up with the \$5,000, but that was the level of income we determined would show some connection to the labour force.

• (1730)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Regarding the Service Canada messaging, I would argue, being a member of Parliament, that when Service Canada closed its locations and all of a sudden our offices and our staff were doing that because everything was overloaded.... I understand that we were in crisis and all of that, but even the information that offices were receiving wasn't necessarily accurate. There's a disconnect there. I guess we're going to have to move forward.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: March is March, and hopefully 2021 will be better.

I'm interested to know how you were working with the Minister of National Revenue to ensure that there are enough agents to help

Canadians in a timely fashion, who are calling in for payment flexibility. I ask because it's not okay for somebody to wait on hold hours upon hours and then be disconnected or end up not talking to anybody at all.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for that segue. That was going to be my next point, that the Minister of National Revenue and I are speaking regularly about this, as recently as this morning, to make sure that both Service Canada and the CRA have the human resource capacity to answer questions.

I think specifically the reality is that if someone got the CERB, they're going to get a tax slip that says they earned a certain amount of income and that income is going to be taxed. We're trying to have our tax slips be as accurate as possible for people going into the 2020 tax season so that the receipt of CERB doesn't negatively impact people's entitlement to other benefits like the GST credit or the CCB or the GIS. That would be a double whammy, if you will, if people are then deemed not eligible for the GST or GIS next year because of their having collected CERB, which they're ultimately going to have to pay back, potentially; and they then get neither and they have to reapply.

It's a very complicated tax reality and, proactively, we're trying to get as many tax slips as accurate as possible by the end of December to avoid that for as many people as possible.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: You said you were in communication, but I'm just wondering if you could you could tell me what you and the Minister of National Revenue are doing to ensure that there are enough Service Canada agents so that we don't have added stress at a very difficult time when people are alone, depressed and whatnot?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Graham, could you give us the Service Canada uptake numbers—just how many people are now responding for Service Canada?

The Chair: Please keep it brief, Mr. Flack.

Mr. Graham Flack (Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): On the repayment side, there are none for Service Canada yet, because it's CRA doing this for the CERB on the collection side. This is only on the CRA side for now, but, yes, eventually Service Canada will get to this too.

Right now, the letters that have gone out are for people who collected the CERB, which was delivered through CRA and it's their centres that are dealing with this right now.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: But we definitely have increased our capacity of Service Canada personnel and their people who call.

Mr. Graham Flack: Yes.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's what I'm getting at.

Mr. Graham Flack: Knowing the surge we were going to get, with a year's worth of work in September, we doubled the call centre capacity in terms of the number of agents, over the course of four months.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack, Madam Minister and Mrs. Falk.

Next is Mr. Dong.

Go ahead, please, for five minutes

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

Minister, thank you very much for being with us today.

Before I begin my questions, I think it's important to get on record that, on behalf of the people of Don Valley North, I want to say thank you for your good and hard work this year. It's been a very tough year. I know that the majority of the public service are still working from home, and things are not back to normal yet. There are a lot of decisions to be made in a very short period of time. Also, people often forget that we are operating as a minority government and that we need to work with all parties. It's not easy, but I just wanted to make sure that you heard that your leadership and compassion and the hard work by the public service are felt and, in fact, they are making Canada one of the top-performing countries in the world in responding to COVID. I just wanted to make sure that appreciation was on record and passed on to you on behalf of my constituents.

I have a particular interest after seeing \$12.65 million in payments for personal support workers' training and measures to address labour shortages in long-term care and home care. I heard in the fall economic statement as well that this was something we were going to do in the future, or something along those lines.

Can you give the committee more information on this initiative?

• (1735)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

We all know how the pandemic has really highlighted the need for additional workers in long-term care facilities and assisted-living services. There really are workforce challenges in the supportive care sector, and that's what this is all about. This funding is to create a program. We will ultimately be working with Colleges & Institutes Canada to develop and implement an accelerated online training program for approximately 4,000 new personal support workers. It will have an online component and an integrated learning component, and it will be offered at no cost to the trainees. This is really *la relève*, the next wave of workers into this system, which we're hoping to professionalize and which we expect will lead to higher wages. We're hoping that these individuals will pursue careers in this field post-pandemic and will increase the capacity. It will really make the training for personal support workers consistent across the country. I'm very excited about this one. This is really good news for Canada.

Mr. Han Dong: One more detail on this: Is the program available only to Canadian citizens and permanent residents? Can any-

one with a valid work permit or a study permit working allowable hours apply for this program as well?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I apologize. I honestly don't know.

Graham?

Mr. Graham Flack: I don't have that design detail, Minister, but we will get it.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes. We can find out and follow up for sure.

I'm sorry about that.

Mr. Han Dong: No, it's all good. I know that it's maybe a bit of a curveball, but we've seen a lot of foreign international students and work permit holders step forward during the pandemic and help out their local health facilities, so I'd be interested to get that information.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you. I will follow up.

Mr. Han Dong: Changing gears a bit, I want to ask about the Canada summer jobs program and the youth employment strategy. We all know how important these programs are to our ridings and to the not-for-profits and businesses in our ridings. Can you give us a bit more information on these two programs?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

Wow. There's a lot to say about these two programs as well.

Over the last month, we have seen how hard hit young people have been by the pandemic. Quite frankly, there's a real risk that if we don't take significant action, this will have a generational impact on our young people. We still have higher youth unemployment rates than average. There is reduced participation in post-secondary education among lower-income students. We've seen how the pandemic has disproportionately affected our students who face systemic barriers, including indigenous youth and youth with disabilities.

That's why we put in place our COVID student response package. I'm proud to say that the emergency student benefit supported over 700,000 students, and the Canada student loan program helped more than two million students. We did about 150,000 job placements through our enhanced measures. That's what we're continuing.

The youth employment and skills strategy focuses on students who face additional barriers to participation in the workforce and provides them with supports. We are torquing that up.

For Canada summer jobs, of course, everybody here is familiar with that program. We see how every year it's oversubscribed. We think there's a need to even have more summer jobs available next year, and that's exactly what we're doing.

With these two programs, we're supporting both the students who are job-ready and looking for work through Canada summer jobs, and the students who need a little more help, are more marginalized and face more barriers, by supporting them with wraparound supports to succeed in work.

● (1740)

Mr. Han Dong: Definitely, there is a need for it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Qualtrough, I want to ask you about the disability tax credit. You know that this tax credit is non-refundable.

As minister, have you ever considered making the disability tax credit refundable?

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

You are asking the question that I am asked most and have been asked most over the past five years by advocates and individuals with disabilities. The reality is that what has happened over time is that the Government of Canada disability policy has been driven through tax policy, and the DTC has really become a gatekeeper for a number of important federal government programs, but because it's non-refundable, low-income or no-income citizens with disabilities don't apply for it because there's no benefit from a tax point of view. Therefore, they don't have access to these other really important programs for which this is the gatekeeper.

We're going to change all of that. Part of our commitment in our disability inclusion plan is to modernize our approach and reconceive our eligibility requirement for these programs so the DTC doesn't perform that gatekeeping function. As we do that overhaul, we're going to look at the DTC itself and see what we need to do to modernize the tax elements of our disability delivery mechanisms as well.

I don't have a strict yes or no to that answer—it's a bit premature—but it is very much for discussion as we work on this modernization effort.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

You know that the Standing Committee on Finance is also considering this matter. You raised the issue of tax fairness. This would be something to consider for people with disabilities.

I'm bringing up more of an economic issue related to the Canada Summer Jobs funding. Many members have noted that the funding for this program is based on last year's minimum wage. In the meantime, the minimum wage has increased. As a result, there's less money to fund the projects of organizations that submit an application.

Have you ever considered having the funding indexed to the minimum wage in the year when the projects take place, rather than to the previous year's minimum wage?

[*English*]

The Chair: We're well past the time. Minister, if you answer briefly, that would be greatly appreciated.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you. I'll ask Mark to talk quickly about how monies are rolled over from one year to another.

Mark.

Mr. Mark Perlman: When it comes to operating budgets, we're able to roll over up to 5% of our consolidated revenue fund budgets that have not been spent, or up to \$40 million in total of our employment insurance budget.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

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

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

CCPA Manitoba just came out with a study that said that if you want to reduce COVID rates, address poverty. In this case it was Manitoba, but we know there is a direct correlation between rates of poverty and rates of COVID, primarily within BIPOC communities who often live at higher rates of poverty, as you're well aware.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I was really disappointed that the Prime Minister said recently that a guaranteed livable income is not a priority at this time even though we know that most Canadians are supportive of the idea of a guaranteed livable basic income. I think it is a very modest estimate that 3.5 million Canadians currently live below the poverty line.

I shared in the House today that in the last two months, four people living in shelters in Winnipeg have contracted trench fever, a rare, preventable disease of poverty often seen in refugee camps. This made international news. This is abhorrent.

Again, as I asked you the last time, particularly given the kind of money we spent on TMX, for example—which I think it was \$17 billion—are you and the government open to supporting a guaranteed livable basic income, so that the millions of people who live below the poverty line, including many in the disabled community, could live with dignity and human rights?

• (1745)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: This is a really important conversation that we need to have. There is no reason why any Canadian should live in poverty.

I can assure you that when we look at targeted income supports, like the Canada disability benefit, reducing poverty levels is one of the primary goals. By targeting them to specific individuals and their specific lived realities, we are able to better tailor the supports to that group of individuals.

We have the CCB, which targets families; we have the OAS and GIS, which target seniors. By targeting working age Canadians with disabilities—ages 19 to 64—we will be lifting a significant number of Canadians with disabilities out of poverty. Again, the program parameters haven't been decided, but that is what's currently on my mind

I think it's a matter of a difference in approach, not a difference in desired outcome, where we are looking to target income supports at particular groups instead of a broad-based, one-size-fits-all approach that might not meet the needs of a specific group.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Minister, and Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, please, you have five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the time today.

Minister Qualtrough, it's great to have you back at committee.

Under the Employment Insurance Act, the government must set EI premium rates to generate just enough revenue to ensure that at the end of a seven-year period, EI revenues equal EI expenses. By law, every dollar paid out of EI must be recouped through EI premiums within seven years.

The government has not indicated, in its fall economic statement or elsewhere, whether it plans to address the projected shortfall of \$52 billion through either higher premium rates, reduced benefits, or through payments from the consolidated revenue fund.

Would you be able to answer that question today? When can we expect the government's plan?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll give it my best, and then Mark can correct me if I'm wrong.

I believe we have confirmed to the Canada Employment Insurance Commission that we will be crediting the EI operating account for the costs related to the EI CERB, and that we will be reconciling this.

Mark, that's how I understand it, but can you please—

Mr. Brad Vis: Through the consolidated revenue fund?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's my understanding.

Mr. Mark Perlman: Yes, it's through the consolidated revenue fund, and the amounts are already shown in these estimates. It makes up part of the \$88 billion that you see under the CERB statutory amount. The transaction has not taken place yet.

Mr. Brad Vis: Would you guys clarify that with the Parliamentary Budget Officer, because he said in his update this morning that this hasn't been done yet. That would be very useful to his office.

Mr. Perlman, it's great to have you back again. I'd like to pick up where we left off on Tuesday.

You mentioned that ESDC has a very elaborate evaluation organization, formally called the evaluation directorate.

Have you found an example to share with the committee on where a division of ESDC is underperforming? I mention that, because I reviewed the 2018-19 and 2022-23 departmental evaluation plans, and they were really hard to follow. I say this because back in 2017, the evaluation directorate committed to modernizing its communication approach to increase awareness and the use of evaluation findings, kind of along my line of questioning at our last meeting.

Could you provide some concrete examples of how ESDC has implemented this approach from 2017? How are the findings of the evaluation directorate presented? What metrics are used?

• (1750)

Mr. Graham Flack: Mark, I can take that at the front end.

The evaluation directorate publishes all of our evaluations. As you will see in the evaluations, each of them has a management action plan associated with it. We evaluate not only our own programs and how they perform internally but also our external facing programs. For example, we do external evaluations as well of the pathways to education program that Minister Flaherty launched years ago.

There are adjustments across the board. The list would be virtually everything. There's something we take away from it where we improve performance coming out of the evaluation.

Mr. Brad Vis: On the second part about following-up from the committed to modernizing its communication commitment in 2017, can you outline any specific steps that were taken?

Mr. Graham Flack: We publish all evaluations. We've attempted in the evaluations—but you'll be the judge of this—to make them more understandable, not just for our own managers, but in the case of many of these evaluations, they're quite ground-breaking in assessing the effectiveness of programs for parliamentarians. I encourage feedback on that if you don't think they're doing that, particularly for those externally facing programs, because that's our aim.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Flack, and I will be following-up with the committee with respect to that and the questions I had regarding telephone services operated by the department.

I have one final question for the Minister.

I had a constituent come to me recently who had a tragic accident. The individual is disabled. He was an able-bodied person his entire life, and now he's facing this brand new reality. It's obviously been a challenging transition for him since the incident. He was wondering whether you could provide recommendations—and I actually sent you a letter about this, but because I have you at committee, and I respect you, I wanted to ask directly—on where individuals can go if they want to participate in any federal advisory board related to disability issues?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Wow. I'm kind of rubbing my hands together. We're always looking for people to contribute. I'll provide you with some specific options. It might depend on the nature of his disability if we can get him to come through a specific disability group.

One of my team can meet with him, and pick his brain on what-ever he would like to contribute. Honestly, we would like to hear from as many people as possible, and absolutely, we'll follow-up with you on that.

Mr. Brad Vis: I would be happy to facilitate that, because when he went to the department website, but said he couldn't find where he could go to make a difference, because he's a person with a lot of resources. He wants to help others who don't have those resources, so thank you for that commitment, Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll reach out for sure.

Mr. Brad Vis: And have a Merry Christmas.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: You as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis and Minister.

The last member to pose questions is Mr. Vaughan, for five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): I have a couple of questions about the letter that went out from CRA. I want to confirm that it wasn't your department that wrote the letter.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: No. I am responsible for CERB.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Absolutely. Even when we all get our tax refunds, if we get them, and we get that brown letter with the windowpane envelope from the revenue agency, our heart always sort of skips a bit of a beat. There's a reason for that, often. The language is stern, but the possibility for accommodation is always there.

There are a couple of things I want to highlight and just get your thoughts on. One, this is really about trying to get Canadians to rec-

tify their tax situation to make sure they qualify for CERB so they don't have to repay anything. The advice that's being given by CRA is to do that by December 31 so that you have even fewer problems downstream qualifying. Is that not the intent of the letter, from your understanding?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Absolutely. If you haven't filed, file your 2019 taxes. If you can show us proof of sufficient income in the past 12 months, show us. If you can't and you need to repay, try if you can so that your tax slip will have a lower number on it so that you might be eligible for benefits and credits next year.

Absolutely. It was really a proactive outreach.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: While the incomplete records may be because you haven't filed taxes for two years ago, with regard to the capacity to revise and refile your taxes, especially when it comes to independent income earners, there are expenses that sometimes can be carried over year to year that may allow you to qualify. One piece of advice that is in the letter but that should also be distributed by MPs is to take a look at those options in terms of some of the flexibility that gig economy or self-employed workers enjoy.

In other words, if you file now, you can always revise it later if new information becomes available or new tax law is applicable.

• (1755)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: You're absolutely right, particularly on the 12-month aspect. You're not wed to just your 2019 tax year. You have the ability to look at the income you received from January to March or April—Graham can clarify this—this year, which gives you flexibility with your income amounts.

Graham, would you add anything—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: No, I think that's actually enough. We have compressed time here.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Okay.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I think part of the communication strategy going forward, because of the anxiety you're hearing expressed by MPs from their constituents, is to make that pathway a little wider, a little clearer and a little bit more obvious to people so that they don't feel like the Grinch is showing up when in fact we're maintaining much closer to Santa Claus on this one than acting like the Grinch.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Message received. Thank you. I hear you.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I want to explore another area. As we move toward stronger disability income supports and support for people with disabilities, one of the challenges we had this year was that there is actually no federal database of people with disabilities. That was one of the hurdles we had to clear to get dollars out the door. Also, because of the “gatekeeping” component, as you describe it, of the way that tax credits were designed, we're not getting a full view of people with disabilities.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: No.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Is that one of the issues that need to be corrected as we move to stronger income supports?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That is the issue. That's the fundamental underlying issue. We got the one-time payment out to 1.7 million Canadians, and 22% of our population identifies as having a disability. We absolutely need to look at that and find a way to connect directly with our citizens with disabilities so that we can help support them directly and also test our programs and get some lived-experience feedback, in a meaningful way, for everything we do around disability.

Yes, that's the issue. That's the big nut we have to crack.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of our approach to income supports, the provincial governments provide the basic support with social assistance, and we support that with their federal transfers for social supports in that regard. But what we're trying to do is create a basket of income supports. Effectively, if you look at them together as a system, you could call it a form of basic income. The challenge is that each program has a separate design strategy. That's what creates the gaps that prevent us from calling it basic income.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Would it be fair to say, then, that the government is looking at how to knit those together so that we stop creating cracks that people fall between, and that's the movement toward basic income, even though it's not branded as such?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes. It would be more than fair to say that. That's what we have to do. We have to harmonize our income supports, as I said, for targeted groups of individuals.

We also have to work with the provinces. They are responsible for disability supports in one way, but if we provide a federal top-up, if you will, and then that's clawed back because of provincial rules, it's not helping the individual. There's a really important conversation, like the one we had on the CCB with the provinces—we managed to move through that—around seeing whatever we do around the disability benefit as an “additional” amount to be received by Canadians with disabilities, not an “instead of” amount. It's not something that can offset their expenses but is really to allow individuals to live a life of dignity; I guess that's how I would say it right now, as we all talk about Bill C-7.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's why we can't move unilaterally.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan. That's our time.

Minister, thank you so much for being with us. I do hope you get a chance to put your feet up. You've certainly been front and centre with the measures that have been taken to support Canadians through the pandemic. We appreciate you being here at committee, and we appreciate the work you're doing in the service of your country.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, and have a wonderful holiday.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Don't tell the other committees, but you are my favourite committee.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I really enjoy engaging with all of you, because these topics all matter so much to all of us, and I can tell that by your questions, so thank you.

No offence to the finance committee when I say that, but it's the truth.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you, and happy holidays.

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, we're going to suspend for about three minutes. We do have two additional officials who are going to connect. In about three minutes, we'll get a chance to pose questions to them.

We are suspended.

• (1755)

(Pause)

• (1800)

The Chair: We are now back in session.

In addition to the outstanding public officials who were introduced at the top of the meeting, we are joined by Cliff Groen, senior assistant deputy minister, benefits and integrated services branch, Service Canada, and Elisha Ram, associate assistant deputy minister, skills and employment branch.

Welcome back to the committee, gentlemen. You know the drill. We'll dispense with the preliminaries and get right to questions, starting with Ms. Falk, please, for six minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much, Chair.

It's nice to see the regulars back at committee again. I feel like it hasn't been very long since I've seen all of you. Welcome back.

I know—and I think we all know—that long-term care facilities have been the epicentre for COVID outbreaks and, unfortunately, for fatalities as well. We do know that residents have faced the harshest restrictions and that health care workers who care for them are definitely experiencing burnout. This is a long time to be asking them to work so diligently.

I think we all know that there was a sector-wide staffing crisis that pre-existed this pandemic, but the pandemic has exacerbated that and has made us notice how urgent that staffing crisis is. I know that in the supplementary estimates there is \$12.5 million in funds allocated for “personal support worker training and measures to address labour shortages in long-term [care] and home care”. I'm just wondering if this specific line item is part of the PSW announcement that was in the fall economic statement.

• (1805)

Mr. Graham Flack: This predates that. This is \$12.5 million that was set aside specifically for the program the minister described. That's providing online training for 4,000 support workers as well as work placements, where we pay for the work placements around it. It predates the FES.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I'm sorry, but for clarification, it pays for the training, or pays for the placement, or both?

Mr. Graham Flack: Both.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay, so what is that \$12.5 million...? Or in the economic statement, what is the difference there, then?

Mr. Graham Flack: Mark.

Mr. Mark Perlman: I think the economic statement may have referenced that. I just don't have the text in front of me. The \$12.5 million that we had has been planned and in the estimates; hence, it's been in the supplementary (B)s for a while. I just have to check the FES on whether it re-mentioned that, but I don't have it in front of me.

Benoît, do you happen to know that?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): I'm sorry about that.

Yes. It's the same measure that has been restated in FES on funding this program to form 4,000 new personal support workers, and transfers.... It's the same. The total that is going to go to CICan is \$23.2 million and the amount is mentioned in two places: one is in Gs and Cs and one is in operations. I think it explains the difference a bit, but it's the same measure.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay. Thank you.

In my conversations with the Canadian Support Workers Association, they indicated that they were not consulted on the announcement that happened in the fall economic statement. I think it's very unfortunate that this is the case, because these are people who work on the front lines. They have lived experience, worked experience, and they could probably add very valuable advice to any program that is being created. I guess I'm wondering about it. Was this program informed by any consultations at all?

Mr. Graham Flack: Yes, and I can give you the context. That's why I'm trying to date the program to when we developed it, which was deeper into the crisis.

Our role obviously is on the training side. That's where we can add value as a department. We were asked to look at the capacities in the post-secondary and training institutions. How much could they take to do short-term training that would address these needs? That's the basis of the proposal—consultations with Universities Canada and Colleges and Institutes Canada to determine what was thought to be the maximum that we would be able to do in that short period.

We had done that months ago.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: In conversations with these groups there was also a concern about a decline in the quality of care that could be a result of compressed, quick training. Is the department aware of this concern? What measures will be built into the funding to en-

sure that the quality of care is not lessened as a result, so that we get the quality and not just the quantity?

Mr. Graham Flack: The course is structured on the assumption that we could not initially have people in classrooms—that's the on-line component—and that we pair it with the placements to get at the quality issue. The placements are like internships where people are supervised. They're not on their own in the placements; they are supervised on the job.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: By somebody else or a worker who's already—

Mr. Graham Flack: Yes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay.

Mr. Graham Flack: I believe by a worker who's already there.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It's a worker who's going to have an additional workload of caring for the people, and also teaching somebody in the middle of the crisis?

Mr. Graham Flack: The limitation—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: If you don't mind, could you provide me with a list of all of the groups that were consulted? If just the universities were consulted and not the front-line workers, there might be a gap. I hope that's not the case. I'm just hoping that we have the quality of care with these students.

Mr. Graham Flack: I'm happy to get back to you with more details. Yes, quality was very much in mind, which is why there's both a practical component and a theoretical component.

• (1810)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk, and Mr. Flack.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

The Chair: Next, we have Mr. Long, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening to all of my colleagues. First and foremost, Mr. Flack and Mr. Robidoux, on behalf of the constituents in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay and all Canadians, thank you so much for the work you and your department have done over the past seven to 10 months. The work you've done for Canadians has been incredible. You stepped up when you needed to. Certainly, I know Canadians know that.

For me, in my riding, one of the greatest privileges and top priorities I've always had over the past five years has been to work with and advocate for the rights of Canadians with disabilities. As my friend and colleague MP Young referenced earlier, it was a privilege to be able to work in this committee in the last Parliament on our government's groundbreaking Accessible Canada Act, Bill C-81, along with some of my colleagues who are still here today, including MP Young and MP Falk.

On this Human Rights Day, I would like to focus my questions on what our government is doing through the investments shown in the estimates to help ensure that the rights of Canadians with disabilities are upheld, particularly throughout the pandemic.

The supplementary estimates (B) 2020-21 allocate \$848.6 million towards a one-time payment to persons with disabilities, pursuant to an act respecting further COVID-19 measures.

During its study on Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee heard, and I know all MPs did, about the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities during this public health crisis.

How many people is this measure expected to assist, Mr. Flack?

Mr. Graham Flack: First, thank you for your appreciation of the wonderful employees of our department, who I think have done a terrific job—and, if I could, I will express my disappointment at the fact that this will be the first year in my life I will not be home in the Maritimes for Christmas, so please take care of it for me.

Mr. Wayne Long: Oh, no.

Mr. Graham Flack: The estimates are that 1.7 million Canadians will benefit from the disability payment, and 1.6 million were paid within the first short weeks after we put this brand new benefit on a brand new platform in less than 18 weeks. But there are additional windows where people can apply. We have given people until the end of December to qualify for the DTC, which is one of the routes they can use to qualify for the benefit.

People were automatically enrolled in the payment; they did not have to apply, but we've given people until the end of the year to apply to the DTC. For those who come in afterwards, we will make additional payments. I think those will be in February and March, if I'm not mistaken.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thanks for that, and just for clarity, you said 1.7 million people.

Mr. Graham Flack: Our estimates are 1.7 million, and 1.6 million have already been paid as I understand it.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

What was the rationale for making the one-time contribution rather than an ongoing payment for people with disabilities?

Mr. Graham Flack: That's a policy question I tread lightly on.

The decision at the time in the crisis was to try to compensate for additional expenses that individuals were incurring, or income loss that individuals had as a result of the crisis. As a result, all of the measures that we've been working through—the student support, the senior support, the recovery benefits and the disability benefits—have been time-limited benefits associated with the crisis, on the theory that when we move out of the crisis, those incremental expenses or income losses will no longer be a factor. That was the principle behind it, such that we were focused on dealing with the effects of the crisis, as opposed to using these measures to permanently restructure the system.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thanks for that.

We have all lived this, but the one-time payment was announced during the summer, and eligible Canadians only began receiving

the payment in October. I can certainly speak firsthand that it was a source of frustration. We were getting calls daily asking, “Where is the payment, how come we're last, how come it's delayed?”

Can you give an explanation to the committee about the delays? What happened there?

• (1815)

Mr. Graham Flack: We had no system in existence to provide such a payment. In fact, we had no system that linked together these various databases, including the veterans database, the CRA's DTC database and the payments through the CPP or Quebec plan, from which we had to get data.

We are very sorry it took as long as it took, but what I can tell you is that in normal times, for us to construct a system from scratch, as we had to do, that could bring these together on an automated basis, it would normally take an estimated two years to do in peacetime, and yet the team found ways to do it in, I think, 17 weeks at the end of the day. I know 17 weeks was too long for people, but I think there will be awards for the record time we went from literally a computer system having to be built from scratch in an automated way to pull, test and do this. It's quite miraculous, but I appreciate that the minister has made it clear that she does not want to be in a position in the future where we have to build new systems to do this and that we should make the investments necessary to have these in place.

But, Cliff and others did miraculous work on this to get it done as quickly as was humanly possible.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thanks for that.

Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: None, thank you. I'm sorry, Mr. Long.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I have a few questions about employment insurance.

I asked the minister a question earlier. As you know, a number of emergency measures have been implemented, such as more flexible employment insurance measures and new benefits. Unfortunately, this has led to administrative delays for claimants who had to transition from one program to another.

These measures will end in June. Is work already under way to see how a comprehensive reform of the system will be carried out?

At the end of these 12 months, if nothing is done, we'll go back to the old program. This would be unfortunate, when we know the eligibility coverage rate, and so on.

Is any work being done on this review?

Mr. Graham Flack: As you said, Parliament made changes to the Employment Insurance Act that will apply until September 2021. If the act isn't amended, these exceptional measures will end on that date. As the minister said a few minutes ago, we're working on a more permanent reform of the employment insurance system. This was noted in the Speech from the Throne.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Has a time frame been announced? Will you use the temporary measures to build the new program?

Mr. Graham Flack: Nothing has been announced. Of course, the government will make the decision and will determine when to make the announcement. However, I can assure you that Mr. Ram's and Mr. Robidoux's teams, who are also online, are working very hard to propose options to the government.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

Mr. Flack, I have a question about the Social Security Tribunal of Canada. Quebec's major unions told me about their concerns regarding the commitment for the new employment tribunal. There seems to have been a setback. As you probably know, a commitment was made to go back to a three-member tribunal, with terms and conditions. However, some guidelines indicate a setback. This raises many concerns.

Where do things stand in this area? Have you met with the unions as requested? Can we hope for a return to the original plan?

• (1820)

Mr. Graham Flack: One of my roles is to act as chairperson of the Canada Employment Insurance Commission. To change how the tribunal operates, there would need to be some fairly significant amendments to the legislation.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Parliament didn't sit as often as usual, which caused delays. However, the government didn't announce any date for the introduction of a bill. In short, the crisis prevented a bill from being introduced in Parliament.

Ms. Louise Chabot: The fact remains that this sent the wrong message. It was still a step forward. However, things seem to be moving backwards in this area. People should be reassured, and things should be clarified.

My other question concerns Canada Summer Jobs. Perhaps my question for the minister regarding this issue was unclear.

Have you ever considered indexing the program to the current year's minimum wage and not to the previous year's minimum wage? Let me give you a basic example. This year, in Quebec, the minimum wage is \$13.40 an hour. However, the minimum wage was different last year. This would make it possible to provide a better budget to support projects.

Mr. Graham Flack: Not all provinces automatically index the minimum wage. When we launch the program and ask the Department of Finance for funding, our only figures will be for the current year and not for the coming year. If all provinces had this automatic indexation, it would be easier to take the indexation into account in

a budget request to the Minister of Finance. However, this isn't the case.

I can check with my team to see whether there are other possibilities. The issue is that we can't predict what most provinces will do.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack and Ms. Chabot.

[English]

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

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair, and all of the witnesses.

My first questions are for Mr. Flack.

During COVID we've seen groups coming to light that have consistently had to live with human rights violations, but that prior to COVID were often not paid attention to. I have questions about temporary foreign workers.

Could you let us know how many temporary foreign workers in Canada have contracted COVID-19 to date, and in which sectors are they generally working?

Mr. Graham Flack: Because I came to speak to the supplementary estimates (B), I don't have those figures with me, but I'd be happy to get back to the committee with those.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay.

I do have a follow-up question.

Mr. Graham Flack: May I just point out we don't get those figures directly. The Government of Canada's role with temporary foreign workers is to facilitate their entry. The actual outbreak numbers would be tracked by provincial health authorities, so we get them indirectly, but I'd be happy to track those down and get them for you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I asked because I am wondering how the employers of temporary foreign workers are being held accountable for not adequately protecting workers from contracting COVID-19. I'm thinking very specifically about temporary foreign workers in Ontario who were working in confined conditions not conducive to health guidelines and have ended up contracting COVID-19.

Are employers being held accountable for not providing conditions conducive to human rights?

• (1825)

Mr. Graham Flack: In fact, because a pandemic was not something fully contemplated within the TFW regime, we had to develop in real time major changes to the program. That included some additional funding for employers to be able to put additional measures in place, but more directly to your point, it also included putting in place a new penalties regime specific to the types of things you're talking about, with much steeper fines for sanctions.

Some of these things would not have existed before, but they include appropriate distancing and all of the pandemic-related measures for safety. We have rolled that regime out as well in real time, and those sanctions are starting to be applied.

We also had to move, though, to a virtual inspection regime, and this was a real challenge. We were not able, because of local health conditions and the advice of local health authorities, in the initial phases to physically visit many of the sites. The team adapted and developed virtual inspection tools, where video cameras were used to follow...as well.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I asked because I do have many temporary foreign workers living in my riding, and I know some of the stories coming out because of COVID-19 are pretty horrific.

Sorry, but I have many questions for you today. Supplementary estimates (B) 2020-21 allocated over \$12.6 million toward personal support worker training and measures to address labour shortages in long-term and home care, pursuant to the Public Health Events of National Concern Payments Act.

We know the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly shown us the importance of care work, as my colleague Madame Falk shared earlier. Part of the reason for this workforce shortage in home care, as you know, oftentimes is related to workers not being paid a living wage, which we know, during COVID, is a wage for people who are often doing dangerous work.

Will these new measures include ways to ensure that care workers are paid a living wage and extra benefits in lieu of the fact they are doing life-saving but very dangerous work?

Mr. Graham Flack: As you may be aware, the Government of Canada did, through the safe restart agreement, transfer additional funds to the provinces to allow them to top-up wages.

However, I would point out that, under the Constitution, with regard to property and civil rights, the regulation of this sector is the exclusive domain of provincial governments. It would be unconstitutional for the Government of Canada to impose salary levels on the provincially regulated sector. We can only do that on the federally regulated sector.

Ms. Leah Gazan: But you do have the power to put in place national standards. For example, we're talking about putting national standards in place for child care. Would that not also be true for being able to put national work standards in place for front-line care workers, especially around public health and safety?

Mr. Graham Flack: In any areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction, there are limits to how far the federal government can go in setting standards. The more specific the standards are, including something very specific like setting wage levels in provincially regulated jurisdictions, the more outside the federal scope they are.

It's a question of which standards you're talking about, but if the standard is an area of exclusive provincial jurisdiction, there are limits to how far it has gone.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes.

Mr. Graham Flack: That's why the measures the government has put forward have been about providing resources to provinces and giving them flexibility in how to apply them.

For example, the federal government does not have, under the Constitution, the power to legislate wage levels in the provincially regulated sector, which would make up about 96% of the work force in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

You're at time.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack.

Next is Mr. Kent, please, for five minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to come back, Mr. Flack, to the \$848 million that were allocated for the one-time \$600 disability payment for those who were certified with disabilities.

Have all 1.7 million cheques gone out, digitally or otherwise, to those who were certified?

• (1830)

Mr. Graham Flack: Yes. The initial run was automatically generated by the system because we didn't ask anyone to apply. For everyone in the DTC, who already had a certificate in the system—everyone who was a recipient of CPP/QPP in the system and everyone who had a Veteran's Affairs benefit—all of that data was put into the system and an initial payment went out immediately to 1.6 million.

We are estimating that another 100,000 will come in as they get themselves certified, but it could be more. We have extended the period in which they can certify until the end of December. Then we will issue additional payments in January and maybe even into March. That's an estimate and it's hard for us to know how many will.

Hon. Peter Kent: Sure and I understand—

Mr. Graham Flack: [*Inaudible—Editor*] almost immediately.

Hon. Peter Kent: Given that the deadline is open until the end of December.... That that would seem to be a small percentage of additional certifications, given that there are more than six million adults in Canada who claim disability of one sort or another. I know that the severity of the disability may determine acceptance or not.

Would you expect that there may well be a rush in these final weeks before the end of the month?

Mr. Graham Flack: I think Minister Qualtrough, if she were here, would say that she would hope there are a great number of people who come forward and rush to do that. We have provided merely an estimate, but obviously if additional people beyond that estimate come forward and qualify, they would be entitled to the benefit. There have been advocacy campaigns through disability organizations to encourage people to apply.

I just wanted to underscore that it's merely an estimate. If more come in, then they will be entitled to the payment.

Hon. Peter Kent: Would the statutory authorities cover that many more? Again, it's a hypothetical number.

Mr. Graham Flack: Mark, I believe the answer is yes?

Mr. Mark Perlman: Yes, hypothetically, the statutory authorities would cover that.

Hon. Peter Kent: Okay, thank you.

I'd like to go now to the \$912 million that were contracted to the WE real estate holding foundation until the cancellation because of the WE scandal. I see that there's no shrinkage in that amount of money. Has the government been indemnified for all of the expenses associated with starting up the WE contract before the scandal led to its cancellation?

Mr. Graham Flack: The WE Charity Foundation returned all of the monies that had been advanced to it. What you're seeing in the estimates is a closing out of that amount. We had initially booked the amount you cited in the estimates and as that is not going to be spent, this amount in the estimates is closing that out to show there is not an intention to spend that money.

Hon. Peter Kent: No re-profiling is intended?

Mr. Graham Flack: No. We are removing that item from the request. As these estimates would be approved, we would eliminate that amount we had originally asked for.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

Coming back to the temporary foreign workers and the additional \$4 million, what specifically is that \$4 million targeting?

Mr. Graham Flack: Employers are required to do labour market assessments in order to get their certificates. They pay fees for those labour market assessments. As you can imagine, there were individuals who had paid for the labour market assessment, but now because of the crisis they determined that they no longer needed those workers.

With the \$4 million, the government is providing a relief from the need to pay those fees. We are reimbursing the fees that those individuals paid for the labour market assessments.

Hon. Peter Kent: We're moving into a new calendar year, a new crop year, with planting and harvesting and so forth. What are the provisions for rollover into the next season with regard to, again, previous contracts and previous obligations?

Mr. Graham Flack: Happily, we have Elisha online. He runs the temporary foreign worker program.

Elisha, can I throw it to you?

• (1835)

Mr. Elisha Ram (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Certainly.

We've taken a number of steps to ensure that employers and workers have some certainty in a very uncertain time. That includes extending the duration of labour market impact assessments that the deputy just referred to. Those have been extended from six months to nine months in cases of seasonal workers.

We have also removed some of the recruitment requirements that employers have to undertake in order to be able to receive those labour market impact assessments, given that we recognize that it's very, very difficult to recruit Canadians for certain jobs in the agriculture sector particularly. Employers who don't have active LMIA's will still have to apply for them, but those who have active LMIA's that they've not used will be able to take advantage of those for longer than they normally would.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ram, and thank you, Mr. Kent.

Next is Mr. Turnbull for five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses. It's great to have you here again.

I want to ask a question about the national autism strategy. My constituents in Whitby are very excited at the prospect of the development of a long-overdue national autism strategy. I know that your department is working alongside the health ministry. The consultations, I believe, are ongoing.

I've met with several constituents and hosted two consultations sessions on this. It's critically important to people in the Durham region. I want to give a specific shout-out to a group called the "Durham Crew", which is an incredible group of advocates on this issue in Durham region.

Could you provide me with an update on the timeline for the national autism strategy and any progress to date?

Mr. Graham Flack: I don't have an update on the specifics. It's obviously the minister's prerogative to determine when ultimately it would be announced. As you indicated, she has been working with the Minister of Health on this, who is the lead on the strategy.

I don't have specific details to offer, but maybe I could take that back and then get back to the committee on what has been made public about the timelines on this.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That would be great, Mr. Flack. I would appreciate that very much. I know that my constituents would love to continue to be consulted on and participate in the development of that strategy.

I'll move on to another exciting announcement that came in the throne speech. That was the disability inclusion plan. Many of my constituents have written to me about those supports being so important, especially since COVID-19 has laid bare so many inequities that exist in our current system for people with disabilities. Could you outline the department's progress on this plan and what steps have been taken to date?

Mr. Graham Flack: I appreciate that the committee has benefited from the speed with which the department has been able to deliver some of these benefits. I would just caution that this pace for every new measure that was announced in the Speech from the Throne, which is quite expansive in terms of what the department is looking for, isn't sustainable. What I can say is that, as would not surprise you, Minister Qualtrough has made it clear that this is her most personally important priority and is pushing us very hard on that.

That includes work we have done around what an actual benefit would look like, looking at the OAS and GIS system, at the model for that and the legislation around that. It includes mapping the federal-provincial dynamics. This will be a very tricky area. As you would know, provincial governments all take very, very different approaches. Some have specific disability benefits and others really leave it more to their welfare system. That will be a very tricky issue in terms of how to knit those areas together.

The second piece that you are starting to see some early movement on, and announced in terms of employment, is that the minister is determined that not only the existing employment programs we have in the department, including the youth employment programs and Canada summer jobs, will put a real focus on disability. For example, in the new ISET money that was announced in the fall economic statement, in indigenous communities up to 30% of individuals on those training programs are people with disabilities. It will have a real focus.

The last piece of the three in the Speech from the Throne was changing the way we determine the benefits. I will say candidly that that this is the trickiest piece, it's probably easiest to say, and the piece that will take us the longest.

• (1840)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I recognize there's a lot of hard work ahead on this, and that everyone has been working flat out. I totally understand that this is going to take some time, but I appreciate the updates nonetheless.

For the Canada summer jobs program, there were new flexibilities introduced in the last round for COVID-19. A lot of those were well-received.

Could you tell us if any of those flexibilities are being considered for future iterations of the CSJ program?

Mr. Graham Flack: The minister's intention, with the announcement in the fall economic update,—and, Benoît, you may want to come in on this—is not only to increase the number of jobs from 80,000 to 120,000 for the coming year, in recognition of the fact that we fear the scarring from the crisis may be strongest among youth, and there will be the strongest need to do that but, in-

deed, to also maintain the flexibilities that many on this committee have asked to be put in place to maintain those going forward.

Benoît, was there anything else out of the economic statement that I missed?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: You are quite accurate in the sense that the statement mentioned that we planned this year to use the flexibility we used last year to make sure that.... One of the goals is to ensure—as was amended last year in the program—that we meet our target of increasing the number of jobs and opportunities for our youth.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull, and the witnesses.

[*Translation*]

I'm sorry, Ms. Chabot, but we need to take the last 15 minutes to discuss committee business.

[*English*]

To all of the witnesses, thank you so much for being with us, and for your outstanding work during the pandemic. I do hope you get a chance to breathe over the next little while, and that we see you back raring to go in the new year. Again, thanks for your patient and professional approach.

We are now going to move to—

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Chair, before you adjourn—

The Chair: Actually, I'm not going to adjourn. We're going to go into committee business, but we're going to be in public.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I have a motion I'd like to read. Can I do that now?

The Chair: Let's go to committee business, and then I'll recognize you first.

I'm going to recognize Mr. Schmale, and then we'll go into committee business.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you, Chair. I'd like to put this motion on notice, and into the record.

I move:

That the committee conduct a study of no less than three two hour meetings on the implementation of the seven recommendations found in the committee's 14th report entitled: "Supporting Families After the Loss of a Child"; that the committee invite the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and departmental officials to appear for one hour each; that the committee invite pregnancy and infant loss stakeholder groups to appear for no less than two, two hour meetings; that the meetings be televised; and that that the committee present its findings to the House.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schmale. That was provided as notice. It will either go before the subcommittee or before the full committee when we meet again. I presume that's okay.

We've set aside this time aside, colleagues, to ensure that we will be efficient over the break. We're not going to be meeting again until after the holidays, but we have a substantial amount of work completed on the urban, rural and northern indigenous housing study.

The analysts have asked—and I think it's an excellent idea—for us to give them some preliminary drafting instructions so that they can get a bit of a start over the next six weeks, understanding fully that we will have at least two and probably more meetings with witnesses, but this would allow them to get a bit of a jump-start to try to get some sense of what the committee might like to see.

I remind you, as I open the floor on this, that we are in public. I know that normally drafting instructions would be done in camera, but with the technology, it is what it is.

I'll lay out a few questions to frame the discussion, and I'll ask you to use the “raise hand” function to provide some direction to the analysts. I would also invite the analysts to participate in the discussion by asking questions to make sure that we have clarity on what is being requested. Don't be shy, analysts.

Here are a few questions. Do we want the analysts to integrate the PBO's findings into the draft report? Do we prefer to have recommendations integrated into the report text or presented at the very end of the document? Are there any particular themes that have been raised in the testimony to date that stood out to committee members?

I'll open the floor for any advice that you would like to offer by way of drafting to the analysts. I'll recognize first Mr. Kent.

• (1845)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would say, from the Conservative side, yes, we would like to see the PBO report included.

Without sort of foreshadowing the eventual reported recommendations, I wonder if we might, in the next few days with a deadline to be set by you, submit written suggestions as to areas of emphasis and specifics.

I think we've heard some very wise counsel from indigenous leaders and band chiefs across the country. I would hope that some of these individuals with decades of history and successful entrepreneurial work, supplemented by federal funds.... I would hope that we would look very strongly at their advice and their criticisms of some of the existing protocols under CMHC's direction. As a number of witnesses have said, there's shrinkage of big dollar commitments made at the federal level by the time the money is delivered to the recipients and housing units are built.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Young.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much.

MP Kent raised a good point. The wise counsel from the leaders has just been amazing. I know we're going to hear much more of this, and it's great.

I just wonder about the urban, rural and northern piece. Are we separating those in our report or are we bringing them altogether? I just wasn't sure what would be the best way to present it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: In terms of the PBO report, my only concern with that was to ensure that the PBO report was identified in the beginning as having some missing pieces, in terms of an overall analysis. I have a concern about presenting the PBO report. For example, it didn't include wraparound supports. We've had a lot of testimony from witnesses that pointed to their importance.

In terms of our good colleague, Kate Young, the only issue I have with separating that is that there are differences between rural and urban jurisdictional issues. Rather than dividing it like that, another way to do it is to take into consideration jurisdictional differences in terms of funding.

In terms of the layout of the report, it would be very helpful to have the analysis in a document, and then the recommendations at the back. We've seen a lot of the great work that has been done over the past years, whether it be the national inquiry or the TRC, with having a set of calls to action clearly laid out. We can put references to where those recommendations came from in the document. It would be an easy, user-friendly model to present the research.

• (1850)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Based on what we heard, the urban, rural and northern areas appear to have things in common. It's also useful to talk about the differences between the on-reserve and off-reserve situations. There has been a great deal of discussion about on-reserve populations moving to urban areas for certain reasons.

To navigate this, I think that we should avoid proceeding on a witness-by-witness basis. Instead, we should look at the similarities and differences. We're also looking at programs. We could conduct a flexible analysis if the type of issue allows for it. This is more about building or writing. Basically, we could put the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report at the end and not incorporate it. That's what I would want.

The Chair: Okay.

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Mr. Vaughan, please go ahead.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thank you.

I have a couple of thoughts. Particular observations and components of the report are needed that relate directly to urban, rural and northern. My experience within the housing sector tells me that the construction timelines in the north require an approach that is different. The land values and some of the economic challenges of rural Canada are very different from urban, and also the land costs are very different in urban space, plus the multinational nature of the urban population is also a challenge to be reckoned with.

I would support splitting them into three distinct streams with distinct recommendations, but I also think the strength of this program will be made more profound if it's all included under one program. I would structure it in four ways: I would have general commonalities, and then specific recommendations around the urban, rural and northern dimensions, in terms of four distinct sections.

Secondly, I agree with Ms. Gazan in terms of the PBO report. It left out provincial transfers and didn't get into some of the social supports that need to be integrated within a housing system. While the PBO report was helpful, I wouldn't rely on it as a foundational document, because it doesn't cover the full scope of the testimony we heard.

From my perspective, in terms of where emphasis needs to be placed in helping the ministers responsible to deliver this program, we really need to have a firm understanding of the scale of the problem we're trying to address across all three sectors, what the populations are in all three sectors, if that's possible, and also a very firm, very principled and very strong statement about it being indigenous led, indigenous designed and indigenous delivered, and the importance of this program being standalone. While it may rely on CMHC for some expertise that it can bring in house, it is important that it be a standalone program in the same way that the AFN, the ITK and the Métis Nation are separate and distinct governing bodies.

I think we heard very clearly, especially from Mr. Swain, how critical it is for it to be an indigenous-led, indigenous-designed and indigenous-delivered program. That emphasis can't be understated, otherwise we will have failed in our mission.

As well, in terms of Mr. Kent's advice of submitting some details around evidence that we have access to in our notes or in testimony that might have been delivered to our offices away from the committee, because actually a lot of people have been following this online, if we could submit to all of us so that we can make sure we're all working from the same pages when we get back, it would be very helpful for the committee administrator to share the written submissions that come.

The last thing I'll say on this is that we had testimony, advice and observations and understandings from treaty-rights or treaty-holding organizations, as well as on-reserve housing programs. They are served by other programs in very distinct and very intentional ways, and we need to be careful to make sure we understand and adhere to the clear testimony that came from those people, particularly working in the urban spaces, about how far away from accessing those dollars, urban, rural and northern communities are. If we

conflate them, we will end up doing an immense disservice to the 87% of indigenous people who live off reserve.

The program was meant to focus entirely on off-reserve experiences and modern treaty experiences in the distinct way they are not served by the three NIOs, and I think that's the whole point of the study. I can't overstate that enough, having looked at it for a couple of years now.

● (1855)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you, Chair.

A lot of what I was going to say has already been said. I'll try not to repeat myself and others.

I agree with what Mr. Vaughan just said about the report, focused on those members who have left their communities and moved and migrated to urban centres. That is an important thing to focus on, the fact that there are so many of these issues and organizations trying to pick up the pieces on this. I agree that it has to take an urban focus.

Also, we heard from testimony that there are a number of issues on reserve that still need to be worked on, especially around opportunities and how we get there. We heard from a number of chiefs, including the one from Mr. Vis's riding, about what they are doing on reserve to provide opportunities for the people who want to stay or are able to stay, that type of thing. We just need to include that so we are aware and are able to deal with the problems, or at least hear about them in the report, and maybe some particular solutions on both sides.

The rest was already said by Mr. Kent as well.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Turnbull, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I agree with everything that's been said. I would just say that, if we can get a summary of the testimony in evidence that's maybe themed, based on the analysis that the analyst does, that would be very helpful in formulating recommendations. Then perhaps we can all submit our recommendations and then have deep discussions and debates about how those get combined.

One theme that stands out in my mind is that I think we heard very strongly that there needs to be some kind of a national coalition that's indigenous-led. Something else that stands out to me is that I think we heard a lot about innovative models about culturally based services. I would say that the report should centre on lived experience, which I think is really important.

Something else that stood out to me was the economic reconciliation and the opportunities to ensure that addressing homelessness and housing furthers indigenous people's economic self-sufficiency and self-determination.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Ryan.

One of our analysts wants to chime in.

Go ahead.

Ms. Brittany Collier (Committee Researcher): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a quick question for the committee. There was a bit of a discussion about members submitting suggestions for themes or recommendations.

How does the committee wish us to proceed in this manner if, for example, members submit ideas or themes that conflict or are quite similar? How should we choose what to include, or is this happening at the report consideration phase?

The Chair: I'd like to maybe take a run at that question, and we have a couple of other people on the speakers list.

You're getting a bit of a barrage of ideas. I'm not sure that there's any real conflict in any of them so far, but my sense of this is that you probably shouldn't be limited to the advice that committee members give you, either in terms of content or in terms of time, given that we're going to have at least two or maybe three more meetings before we get to any final drafting of a report and consideration of the report.

My view would be that all members should be encouraged to provide whatever guidance they wish to you. Once you see those written submissions, if you have questions, you're more than welcome to pose them to me, and then I can go back through the committee on an informal email basis over the break if that's what is necessary, but my thought is that we should maximize the opportunity for input, knowing full well that we'll have the chance to revise it, because this is still a work in progress. Nothing that is said or done would be final. That would be my gut on it, and I welcome the views of others.

Mr. Vis, please.

• (1900)

Mr. Brad Vis: The only thing I really want to add is that I wish everyone a merry Christmas, happy Hanukkah or Kwanzaa. I hope everyone takes some time. I just wish everyone a wonderful time to relax with their families. It's been a really crazy year for everyone.

We get a little heated sometimes, but generally we keep good spirits in this committee, and I wish everyone a restful break. Take care.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

Ms. Gazan, please.

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

I'm going to destroy the moment by getting back to talking about work. I apologize.

One last consideration, I think, would be really helpful, particularly because the government is currently in the process of releasing a national action plan and response to the MMIWG report. We had a number of witnesses testify about housing related to indigenous women and girls and 2SLGBTQIA. That's a very specialized area and, certainly, an area in desperate need of attention, whether it's safe spaces or more housing. I think it might be a worthwhile consideration to have a separate piece of the report specifically geared to that.

Also, in saying if there was anything that I noticed was missing, maybe in the future we need to have a disability lens on all research, certainly because the intersection between disabilities and being indigenous creates totally different scenarios. It'd be nice to learn more about that going forward.

With that, I wish everybody a happy holiday. I'm tired as well. I'm sure everybody is, and I hope you have a restful break.

The Chair: We've reached the end of the list, so I have a couple of points.

Members, feel free, at your leisure, to provide supplemental advice or direction to the analysts. To the analysts, if you have any clarifying questions or concerns about a potential conflict in terms of input, I'd be happy to quarterback a response informally through the committee to make sure you get what you need.

With respect to the PBO issues, my recollection is that we had given a mandate letter to the PBO. I'm not sure we actually received the full report that was mandated, but even if we have, I really think one of our meetings or part of one of our meetings should be dedicated to questioning the PBO on the report. I expect that we'll get a little more clarity on that when we have a report and are afforded the opportunity to ask questions about it.

I hope this has been of some assistance to the analysts for the project to work on over the next month. I remain at your disposal for any further questions if things aren't clear enough.

Is there any other business to come before the meeting?

To all of the House of Commons folks who support us, thank you. To all of my colleagues, thank you for your courtesy throughout. I wish you nothing but the very best in the upcoming season and look forward to working with you again in the new year. Like you, I look forward to seeing the end of 2020.

Thanks, colleagues. Have a good evening.

The meeting is adjourned.

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