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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): We have quorum, so I call this meeting to order.

I'll start with the land acknowledgement. We have quite a few land acknowledgements as we go around the room, but in my case I am on the territory, the traditional lands, of the Anishinabe, Haudenosaunee and Chonnonton first nations.

The committee is continuing its study of support for indigenous communities through the second wave of COVID-19.

I have a couple of notes. First of all, I've had some real technical problems. I'm working off my Surface in my office because I just couldn't get anything to work on the PC. It was a bit cumbersome getting things started and material printed off, and I apologize for that.

Once again, today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. During the meeting the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee.

You'll hear a lot about our interpretation. We need to facilitate the work of the interpreters. One issue is the sound. If you have a headset microphone with earplugs, make sure you're speaking close to the microphone that's located on those. These headset mikes should be working fine.

The other thing you need to know about interpretation is that at the bottom centre of your screen is a globe that says, "Interpretation". You should move your cursor to the language you wish to hear or speak in. In my case, I will put English. That will facilitate the translation.

I'm going to first of all invite our guests to speak, with a reminder that each of the witnesses has been prepared to make their opening statement of up to six minutes. I'd like to welcome the first round of witnesses.

We have by video conference from Montreal, Éric Cardinal as an individual. From the First Peoples Wellness Circle, we have Dr. Brenda Restoule, chief executive officer, appearing from Nipissing First Nation in Ontario. From the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, we have Carol Hopkins, who is the executive director. She's with us by video conference from Bothwell, Ontario.

We'll begin our six-minute round of presentations.

Mr. Cardinal, please go ahead for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Éric Cardinal (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to all the members of the committee.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before the committee. I am appearing as an individual, but also as vice president of Acosys Consulting Services, a company that provides services to indigenous organizations, communities and businesses. By the way, I want to say hello to my friend and the firm's president, David Acco.

We have been supporting a number of first nations councils in their management of the COVID-19 crisis for a few months already. During the first wave, we saw a fairly extraordinary reaction from various communities, which took the gravity of the pandemic very seriously and which, at the same time, embraced their responsibilities like true local governments. We have seen a number of communities adopt measures different from those adopted by governments and municipalities. For example, most Quebec first nations closed their borders much earlier than it was done elsewhere. We have also seen first nations keep some services and activities closed, while the province was announcing their reopening.

Therefore, during the second wave, we can expect those communities to reimplement stricter measures. They will obviously have to be supported by the federal government, through things like financial assistance, in accordance with their needs.

When I visited the committee last June, I talked to you about the Mi'kmaq nation of Gespeg, which had received very little government assistance because it is not a reserve as defined in the Indian Act. However, even if the first nation has no community to manage, its council still has responsibilities toward its members, just as other first nations governments do.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the Gespeg council has, therefore, adopted measures necessary to reducing the impact of the crisis on its members. Gespeg, like many other communities in a similar situation, has effectively found itself in a blind spot of assistance programs. That situation has still not changed. Clearly, programs must be adapted to better meet all the community needs in a fair manner for all indigenous citizens.

Where this hurt the most was in terms of economic impact. As in the case of many indigenous communities, Gespeg's economy is based on fishing and tourism, two sectors that have been hard hit by the pandemic and the lockdown measures. However, assistance is not arriving as it should be. That is what I would like to stress today because, during this second wave, the government will have to be even more mindful of the impact on economies in indigenous communities. Subsidies and financial support programs are not the only things being talked about when it comes to helping their economies.

There is another very simple way to help the communities' economies without it costing the government any money or hardly any money. It is simply a matter of ensuring that indigenous communities and businesses can benefit from their fair share of public contracts.

Acosys has the privilege of supporting the Indigenous Business COVID-19 Taskforce, which brings together the leaders of a number of national indigenous organizations: the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers, better known under its acronym CANDO; Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada; the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada; and the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Businesses, known under its initialism CCAB. That team provides the Canadian government with advice and strategic input on two key topics.

First, it is a matter of identifying, engaging and....

[English]

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): I have a point of order, Chair.

I'm sorry to interrupt the witness. I understand there's no English translation on the phone line.

• (1110)

The Chair: Could we verify the translation, Mr. Clerk? Are we working?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Naaman Sugrue): It should be working fine in the room, so we're okay to continue, but I'll look into the phone lines.

The Chair: Pam, what was your issue?

Ms. Pam Damoff: I can hear it okay, although just now when he spoke in English, I had French translation. Apparently the phone line was not providing English.

The Clerk: We should be fine momentarily.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Apparently, it just came on.

I apologize to the witness.

The Chair: There's no apology required. We need to function completely bilingually. Otherwise, we have to suspend the proceedings, so that's fair.

Éric Cardinal, I should tell you that I've saved you about two minutes, so you have some time left. You can continue your presentation now, Mr. Cardinal.

Go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Éric Cardinal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I was saying, the taskforce provides strategic input on two topics. This is initially about identifying, engaging and mobilizing the indigenous supply chain to enable it to participate in and contribute to government calls for tenders for products and services related to COVID-19.

Second, the impact of the crisis on indigenous businesses and communities must be analyzed to ensure that the Government of Canada can provide adequate support measures equivalent to those provided to the rest of the Canadian economy.

That work began with a survey that shows that indigenous businesses are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 compared with the rest of businesses in Canada. We are seeing that the government makes little use of indigenous businesses for its purchase of goods and services, especially when it comes to needs related to COVID-19.

To remedy the situation, the taskforce decided to create, in partnership with Indigenous Services Canada and Public Services and Procurement Canada, a unique database of indigenous businesses that can fulfill various government contracts. To build that consolidated database, Acosys has partnered with Google and SADA Systems. Indigenous businesses have responded overwhelmingly. I'm happy to announce that the database has helped generate more than \$5 million in sales for indigenous businesses that are registered, and this is only the beginning. In addition to meeting the government's needs in terms of products and services closely or loosely related to COVID-19, this initiative gives Canada a path toward what we call "economic reconciliation".

In the second wave of COVID-19, the priority is of course to ensure the health and safety of individuals. That said, the Canadian government must also make sure to support the often fragile economy of indigenous communities. One of the best ways to do so is to support indigenous businesses by awarding them government contracts for the procurement of goods and services. It seems obvious that the Government of Canada must increase its efforts in that respect. I want to point out that the official target in terms of indigenous procurement is 5%, or the equivalent of the indigenous demographic weight in the country. We are currently at about 1%. So there is a lot of work to be done, work that will radically change things for indigenous businesses and communities. The impact of COVID-19 on the economy of communities is not just figures; it is also job losses, income losses, food insecurity, depression and many other dramatic consequences for families and communities.

Therefore, it is clear that higher priority must be given to their economies and their businesses in the efforts to support indigenous communities during this second wave.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation. That was well within time, so thanks so much.

Our next witness, for six minutes, is Dr. Brenda Restoule.

Dr. Restoule, please go ahead for six minutes.

Dr. Brenda Restoule (Chief Executive Officer, First Peoples Wellness Circle): Good morning.

[Witness spoke in Ojibwa as follows:]

Aanii boozhoo. Waabzhe kwens'dizhnikaaaz. Mgizi ndodem dokis ndo jibaa. Anishnaabe ndi yaaw.

[Ojibwa text translated as follows:]

Hello. My name is White-skinned woman. My clan is Eagle. I am from Dokis. I am Anishinabe.

[English]

First Peoples Wellness Circle is pleased to be a witness before the standing committee today.

As an indigenous-led organization dedicated to advocating for mental wellness in indigenous communities and supporting a segment of the mental wellness workforce, we would like to focus our comments around the first nations mental wellness continuum framework, where we get our mandate, to talk about mental wellness during COVID-19.

A recent workforce survey completed by the implementation team of the first nations mental wellness continuum framework found reports of noticeable or significant increase in rates of stress and anxiety related to COVID-19 and public health measures, including depression, substance use, violence, financial stress and stress in meeting basic needs. This matches the June 2020 Stats Canada report data on indigenous peoples mental health impacts during COVID-19, which saw fair or poor mental health, with stress and anxiety particularly noticeable for indigenous women.

Children and youth are experiencing higher rates of loneliness, stress and anxiety as a result of public health measures, and although there's a lack of indigenous-specific data, past evidence suggests that negative impacts are exacerbated by family and community challenges, such as intergenerational trauma; difficulty meeting basic needs related to housing, clean water and food security; financial insecurity and poverty; violence, substance misuse and mental illness; and inequitable access to health, community and social supports. Informal reports have also indicated that the public health measures have also retriggered memories of colonial trauma and are negatively affecting the well-being of families and communities.

This same workforce survey noted there was a noticeable decrease in access to health and social support services, although there is a noticeable increase in need for information around mental wellness and for better and more reliable connectivity and access to technology. This same survey highlighted how nimble the mental wellness workforce in our communities has been in meeting needs by increasing their partnerships to support families and communities; continuing to provide access to mental wellness services, including increased access through virtual care; being innovative in their approaches; and ensuring access to land-based activities and cultural events. However, there is concern around the capacity to meet the increased demand for services and supports for children,

youth, families, elders and populations at greater risk of mental health issues as this pandemic continues.

It's expected that the mental wellness pandemic will last far beyond this pandemic and requires a thoughtful and planned approach. We offer the following suggestions.

Number one is access to culturally relevant mental wellness supports and services across the lifespan. Mental wellness supports and services in indigenous communities have been consistently underfunded compared to Canadians, resulting in a patchwork of supports and services that vary across the country. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequities in mental wellness services, as noted by higher levels of crisis, violence and overdose deaths. Services have not been funded in ways that support the world view of indigenous people.

The first nations mental wellness continuum framework identifies the need to invest in community-defined and community-led programs and services across the lifespan that lead to collective outcomes for families and communities. They must be accessible in the home, schools, workplaces and community. Programs and services must be grounded in cultural practices, values and knowledge, including enhanced access and funding for cultural practitioners. We have seen many creative efforts by first nations to virtually share cultural teachings, engage in cultural practices, access land-based learning and activities, and access cultural practitioners to address negative impacts of COVID-19. These efforts support indigenous citizens to feel connected and give hope during these unprecedented times.

Number two is equitable access to virtual care for mental wellness. The public health measures required many mental wellness services to pivot to virtual care so that services could still be accessible to those in need. Wellness workers in indigenous communities have also pivoted to provide virtual care; however, there are challenges in accessibility and competency in using virtual care. Connectivity, access to reliable Internet services and the cost of services and technology are primary reasons that indigenous communities experience significant difficulty with shifting and accessing virtual care. These challenges are more pronounced in remote, isolated and northern communities. Canada has committed to digital health for first nations by 2030, but this is much too late.

• (1115)

Mental wellness teams and NNADAP treatment centres have already shifted services to virtual platforms, but the shift is hampered by poor connectivity and accessibility to technology as well as limitations in workforce capacity related to both reliable and culturally relevant information on ethics, privacy and liability, and access to supervision and IT support. Investments in connectivity, infrastructure, technology, sustained access to virtual care and human resources must happen more immediately. Otherwise, the gap in health inequity for indigenous people will continue to grow.

Number three is support for the mental wellness workforce. A needs assessment of mental wellness teams completed in 2019 identified that human resources did not match the need in communities to address the complex issues stemming from colonial traumas. Recommendations called for additional funding to meet the health human resource demand and to provide wellness services to the workforce to minimize effects of burnout, compassion fatigue and retention issues.

The heightened pressures on the workforce during COVID-19 to do more—to respond in creative and innovative ways, often with limited resources and tools; to provide advice to leadership; and to address the mounting crisis of violence, substance misuse, overdose deaths and mental health challenges occurring in communities—is taxing an already overburdened workforce. The workforce survey highlights the noticeable efforts by the workforce to respond, and initiatives spearheaded by indigenous health organizations have provided some level of support to the workforce, but it's not enough.

Investments to increase the mental wellness workforce are part of a solution to alleviate the pressures. However, investments should also consider strategies, such as debriefing, supervision and workforce wellness programs, including access to elders, healers and ceremonies, as being critical to maintaining and retaining the workforce.

Finally, investments to define evidence from an indigenous knowledge perspective on workplace mental wellness are required. Production of indigenous evidence-based materials on workplace mental wellness strategies, support for people to return to work, mental wellness training for supervisors and managers, and setting up—

• (1120)

The Chair: Sorry, Dr. Restoule, but you're well over six minutes. We want to ensure that the timing works so that we get all of the questions in.

Dr. Brenda Restoule: No problem.

The Chair: I'm sure the rest of your points will come up through the conversation.

Dr. Brenda Restoule: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thanks, Dr. Restoule.

Now from the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, we have Carol Hopkins.

Carol, please go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Carol Hopkins (Executive Director, Thunderbird Partnership Foundation): [*Witness spoke in Ojibwa as follows:*]

Weweni Boozhoo. Nozhem ndishnikaaz. Ma'yingan ndodem. Lenapii kwe ndi yaaw. Lenapii kiing ndo jibaa.

[*Ojibwa text translated as follows:*]

Hello, my name is Nozhem, or Mother wolf. I am from the Wolf clan. I am a Lenape woman. I am from Lenapi territory.

[*English*]

I'm Delaware, of the Delaware Nation at Moraviantown in southwestern Ontario, and the executive director of the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. Our mandate is to serve first nations across Canada in addressing addictions and mental health. I'm going to be talking to you, much like Dr. Brenda Restoule shared with you, about mental wellness and substance use.

I want to start by saying that in the context of the pandemic, culture continues to make the difference in supporting first nations people with their wellness.

We know that because we have a national information management system that supports and is used by adult and youth treatment centres across the country, and we have a culture-based assessment tool called the Native Wellness Assessment. We've adapted the information management system specifically to collect information from treatment centres that have adapted their services over the pandemic to collect information about wellness.

What we have found is that treatment centres have adapted services to outpatient services. Those outpatient services have been on-the-land services with appropriate public health measures. Through that outpatient service, we've seen at least a 5.5% to 8% increase in wellness.

Through a CIHR-funded study, we were able to determine that indigenous wellness outcomes are described as hope, belonging, meaning and purpose. There are 13 different indicators to measure those outcomes.

The 8% increase in wellness in outpatient services is in the quadrant of purpose. First nations people who are accessing those outpatient services on the land are improving in a sense of purpose. Having access to culture in relevant ways to support their mental wellness is significant.

In terms of virtual services, treatment centres have adapted their programming to virtual services, whether it's individual counselling, group counselling, live streaming, psycho-educational sessions or follow-up by telephone. We've seen as much as a 7.5% increase in wellness services.

The one quadrant where we see the greatest achievement is in the quadrant of hope. First nations people who are accessing treatment services virtually have a greater sense of hope.

Hope is having access to services that represent their identity and that are contextualized to reflect their community dynamics and what they're facing. We know that prior to COVID first nations people had a lot of inequity across the determinants of health: inadequate housing, lack of access to clean and safe water, and institutional racism. Those things have been exacerbated in the pandemic. There is greater stigmatization and negative experiences that are reported by first nations.

I'm talking about treatment centres, but community-based services have also quickly adapted their services to understand how to reach clients in addressing substance use. The things that have been exacerbated in the context of the pandemic have been increased substance use, increased suicide rates in some regions and community violence.

That is because communities don't have capacity to respond to the needs of first nations people. We heard youth say that mental wellness was not prioritized as an essential service. Youth were left on their own to figure out how to reach out to get support for addressing depression and anxiety.

As community programs, as well as treatment centres—the national native alcohol and drug abuse program and the national youth solvent abuse program—adapted and started offering virtual counselling and on-the-land services, or reducing their services with a modified number of people who would be residents of the treatment program with a reduced workforce, they all had a preference for culture.

• (1125)

That is also the greatest concern of communities: ensuring that they have access to culture. One of the things that we as an organization did was to create this community wellness hub where people would have continued access to peer support, resources and culture. We also heard from communities in which they are making elders and cultural practitioners available to deliver teachings and counselling over the Internet.

As Brenda said, we need greater capacity to sustain these innovations, and I provided a couple of examples in the presentation I sent. Communities that are suffering from addressing methamphetamines and opioid addictions have partnered with the local health authorities to ensure rapid access to addictions medicine and also to provide community-based outreach to ensure that people who are using drugs have the right, maintain the right and are supported in their right to health and are getting access to what might be happening for them to address methamphetamine and opioid addictions.

The Chair: Ms. Hopkins, we're well over time again.

Ms. Carol Hopkins: Okay.

The Chair: I apologize for that. We have a couple of issues. One is making sure we get all our questioning in. The other one is that there are other meetings after our meeting, which tend to get delayed if we delay.

Ms. Carol Hopkins: No problem.

The Chair: I have to be a bit tough on the time. This is for everybody.

With that, we're going to go to our first round of questioning. This is a six-minute round, and the first name up is Mr. Viersen.

Arnold, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I want to start with Ms. Hopkins. Thank you for your testimony.

• (1130)

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): On a point of order, Chair, I'm not hearing anything.

The Chair: What is your point of order?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I can't hear Arnold.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Can you hear me now?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I can't hear him. I see that he's speaking, but I can't hear him. Can anybody else hear him?

The Chair: I can hear him.

Let's ask the clerk to advise on this.

The Clerk: Ms. Blaney, you could try switching the interpretation language to English and back to floor or vice versa.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Carry on. I will ask them to deal with me.

Go ahead, Arnold.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: All right. Thanks, Rachel.

Thank you, Ms. Hopkins, for your testimony there.

I come from a riding in northern Alberta with 14 first nations. You can drive to all of them. They've put up blockades at the highways, and COVID has basically been kept out by doing that. I'm wondering about the schools. We've seen fairly broad strokes in school shutdowns in Alberta, which don't necessarily make sense in a community that has no COVID in it and that has a barricade at the end of the road. I'm just wondering what kinds of impacts there are on children and families when the schools get shut down.

Ms. Carol Hopkins: As you can imagine, there is an impact. Parents worry about the education of their children, but they're balancing many things in that environment. They're balancing their ability to work, if they are working from home, and their Internet connection. That's the first point: Do they have a digital connection if they're working from home?

Communities have been able to sustain an environment with no COVID cases. They have done that by asking people to stay home and to limit their contacts outside the community. That's why they're able to maintain zero COVID cases.

I'll give you an example. My community is a very small community of about 575 people. We've been COVID-free until just recently, and now, in the small population, we have three COVID cases. Our borders have opened up, our kids have gone back to school, we're back in our offices and now we have to shut down.

Across the country, where services have opened up, their concern is about maintaining that safe barrier from COVID-19. The stress on families around whether their children are participating in education virtually is their ability to work at home and have good connectivity, while managing their children's education and helping their kids stay connected to education.

Many schools on reserve are not staffed solely by the people in the community. They rely on people from outside the community coming in daily to provide that education. In the 14 communities you mentioned that are all accessible by road, I would imagine it's the same case. In order for that school to operate and function, they would rely on people from outside the community coming in. That doesn't ensure that barrier from contact with COVID-19 cases.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I am wondering if you could address some of the social impacts that come from the disruption of school and children being at home rather than going to school every day.

Ms. Carol Hopkins: One of the greatest impacts is for parents who are worrying about the education of their children. If there is virtual education available, do they have digital capacity? That causes a lot of stress on the families who are trying to keep their kids in front of an iPad or a computer or a laptop and connected to a classroom. They are used to being on those devices probably for gaming and other kinds of social reasons, but for parents who are trying to work and support their children in maintaining their wellness, it's a challenge.

I've heard from many families that their children have said, "If I have to continue education virtually next year, then I want to take the year off." Parents are asking about home-schooling, because there's too much stress. We've heard this across the country in populations outside of first nations communities. It's about managing the wellness of children.

If you're on a screen like this and you have your hand up and you want to contribute and participate in the activity of the classroom and your teacher doesn't see you—or is responding to another person—then that youth, who might already have mental wellness challenges, goes to a place of feeling as if they're still not recognized, still not heard, and they withdraw. That child will then be less likely to engage in that virtual environment. Meanwhile, the teacher is doing all that is possible to manage a number of students, for kids who are participating and are required to check in with attendance being taken in the virtual environment.

For kids who are participating face to face in a school, it's the worry about how kids are being protected, the number of kids in the classroom and whether they are required to have personal protective equipment like face masks. Is that enforced? Are they able to have discussions in their classrooms with somebody who has the skills to respond to the worry and concerns? Smaller kids are having anxiety issues related to those concerns.

• (1135)

The Chair: I have the same anxiety, trying to look for hands and keep everything on time.

Thank you, Ms. Hopkins.

We go now for six minutes to Adam van Koeverden.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to the three witnesses today for their contributions and their testimonies. It's so important to hear directly from people who are working with the communities, and this is a really difficult time for everybody.

As we've been saying, COVID-19 has really exposed a lot of vulnerabilities, inequities and inequalities in our societies. I know that's front and centre for you guys. I just want to say thank you.

I'm joining you from Milton, which is on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, the Attawandaron, the Anishinabe, the Huron-Wendat and, more recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

My intervention today will focus on mental health. I would like to talk about mental health in the context of the \$82.5 million that Minister Marc Miller announced in August, but beyond that as well. I got to do a little bit of sport for development work in my previous life as an athlete ambassador for various charities. I know the impact that sport, physical activity, recreation and that connection to the land and the natural environment—which I think is even more relevant in indigenous communities than southern communities—can have on children but also on those teaching, coaching and mentoring youth and people.

I'm just thinking about long-term and sustainable strategies to mitigate mental health and addiction issues and problems that exist in every community in Canada, which are maybe harder to reach right now because of isolation and the need to be apart.

I want to talk about and hear about any interventions that you find have worked, whether you think the \$82.5 million will go far enough for the time being, and how we can really leverage the opportunities—or at least the potential—that sport, recreation and physical activity can have, not just for youth but for everybody in Inuit, first nations and Métis communities across the country.

Just so you guys don't have to choose, I'll go with Ms. Hopkins, Monsieur Cardinal and then Dr. Restoule, in that order.

Ms. Carol Hopkins: One of the solutions that we have provided to create access to virtual services is that we've purchased a number of tablets that have capacity to save—they have SD cards—and minimal capacity for data connection via the Internet. We've distributed those tablets to treatment centres, which then distribute the tablets to their clients, sharing those tablets with people who use drugs, who are in recovery for drug addiction or alcohol addiction, or who are just contemplating accessing more services to support their mental wellness. Those tablets are distributed to people so that they have access.

We plan to pilot that with 100 tablets, but we had a request for 120 tablets. Those tablets are out in first nations communities in the hands of adults, youth and families who are seeking some kind of support and access to culture and to elders and cultural practitioners who can provide guidance.

The increases I reported through the Native Wellness Assessment measure are a direct response to those people having access to those tablets. That is small pilot test, and we anticipate that as we go further into the second wave, there might be more need for those kinds of devices. We certainly heard in the workforce wellness survey, as well as in our survey that measures or looks at opioids and methamphetamines in first nations communities, that they need greater capacity for digital access, devices and data. That's one workaround solution that has been meaningful, and, no, the \$82.5 million is not enough.

Again, treatment centres and others have said that they need a way to sustain these innovations. Also, when their services get back to face-to-face, they're going to have to maintain both.

• (1140)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Ms. Hopkins.

Mr. Chair, if I have any remaining time, I'd ask the two witnesses to respond.

The Chair: You have a minute and a half. Go ahead.

Dr. Brenda Restoule: Thank you.

We've seen through our work with the mental wellness teams that there has been a lot of effort to give people access to cultural teachings and cultural activities.

We've seen a shift to being able to have people go on medicine walks. People can stay in their homes and watch somebody do a medicine walk, or they're able to organize and say, "We're going on a medicine walk today and we need you to go to this part of the community and look for these types of medicines." Everybody is given an opportunity to pick the medicines and to come home, harvest them and move them into a tea or something that can help with health and wellness.

We've also seen that mental wellness teams have gone out and picked the medicines, dropped them at people's doors and then helped them to harvest them. Getting people on the land to harvest and to look for things, and then helping them to learn some cultural teachings around that, has been really helpful.

We've also seen that mental wellness teams have encouraged people to go outside and do cultural practices. For example, one community talked about having people go out on their front steps at certain times of the day with their drums and sound the drums and, if they wanted to, to sing. They talked about how sounding the drums was really soothing and supportive to people. It made them feel safe and helped them to feel connected to other people in the community when they were feeling disconnected.

The Chair: We're out of time now. I'm sorry.

Dr. Brenda Restoule: Thanks.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Dr. Restoule.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Bérubé, you have the floor for six minutes. Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank all the witnesses in attendance today, November 17.

I am on the Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou territory, which includes 11 Anishinabe and Cree communities.

Mr. Cardinal, you mentioned in your presentation a survey that shows that indigenous businesses are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in comparison with the rest of businesses in Canada.

Can you give us more details on that survey and its findings?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: The taskforce carried out that survey of 900 indigenous businesses in the spring. The survey is available online, including on the website of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business.

At that point, it was the end of the first wave, and the survey found that COVID-19 had had negative repercussions on nearly all of the businesses surveyed. In fact, nine out of 10 businesses said they were affected: 56% of them said they suffered very negative repercussions, and 35% of them said they suffered fairly negative repercussions. That's huge. What's more, that was only in the spring. The survey also showed that one-third of indigenous businesses said they had closed offices or facilities and that nearly one indigenous business in five had already decided to close its operations.

This survey clearly shows the major impact of COVID-19. We will redo the survey to monitor the evolution of this second wave over time.

• (1145)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: You also told us about the Indigenous Business COVID-19 Response Taskforce and its database initiative.

How many businesses are registered, and how does the database work?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: The database currently consists of more than 250 businesses, and more continue to be added to it weekly. It is managed by CANDO with the assistance of Aboriginal Business Canada and Public Services and Procurement Canada.

This database is unique because it constitutes the largest database of indigenous suppliers of individual protection equipment and other products related to COVID-19, such as hand sanitizer, surgical gowns, masks, and so on. The database is public and is accessible at www.taskforce-covid19.ca. It consists of businesses that can provide their services to federal, provincial and municipal governments, and any other organization or business looking for suppliers.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: That's very interesting.

You also mentioned economic reconciliation. Can you explain to us what you mean and how this fits in the current context of the second wave?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: When we talk about reconciliation with indigenous peoples, we are talking about the healing of wounds related to colonialist policies. We are also talking about the recognition of aboriginal and treaty rights, as well as about repairing the education system, protecting childhood and justice. In that context, it's also a matter of working on rebuilding economies of indigenous peoples so as to reduce, even eliminate, the socioeconomic gap between aboriginals and non-aboriginal Canadians. That is what we mean by economic reconciliation.

I would like to add that, when we talk about the economic development of communities, it is important not only to talk about money or contracts, especially right now, during this second COVID-19 wave. Infrastructure is also important.

For example, in the Atikamekw community in Haute-Mauricie, Quebec, the government recently invested in the building of a fibre optic network that will give communities access to high-speed Internet. That is extremely important. This announcement has given wings to the Corporation de développement économique Nikanik, in Wemotaci. It has helped develop and start up a number of new local businesses in various activity sectors, including a gas station and a sawmill.

The Canadian economic recovery will generally rely a great deal on infrastructure. This is a golden opportunity to support indigenous communities.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Do you think the first wave taught us anything about indigenous communities, compared with the current second wave?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: One of the very good things we have learned is that we can trust first nations governments. As I said in my presentation, we have seen extraordinary things.

Despite their limited means, councils have taken care of their populations' safety. They have assumed their role of local government. What we must learn from this experience is that higher levels of government—federal and provincial—must recognize the role played by councils and chiefs in first nations governance, give them more autonomy and trust them in the implementation of certain policies and programs. They are close to their citizens and know what their needs are. Programs must be more flexible to adequately meet those communities' needs.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: You have spoken about the current situation, especially the procurement at 1%.

How do you think you can reach the 5%?

• (1150)

Mr. Éric Cardinal: There are many things that can be done.

The government should first finish modernizing the procurement strategy for indigenous businesses. Among the recommendations to reach 5% is a very simple idea of going from a wish to a standard. The 5% target should be set in every department and organization.

I think that 5% should be a minimum, and not a maximum.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Cardinal.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, I understand that IT has fixed things, so you have six minutes now.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I did the traditional log out and log back in, and it seems to have worked. Thank you for that.

I want to thank all the speakers so much for their very important testimony.

I would like to start off with Dr. Restoule. I really appreciated what you had to say and thank you so much for those very clear recommendations.

One of the things you spoke about during your testimony was the triggering of colonial trauma. I'm wondering if you could talk a little about that and how that's been brought up through our living through COVID-19.

Dr. Brenda Restoule: Sure. Thank you.

One of the things we heard very clearly was that communities have worked to keep COVID out by looking at lockdowns and border controls, but what that has meant is that the community members themselves don't have the freedom of movement. They talked about how that was a triggering of a past system, where they needed permission to be able to leave the community to go out to do their shopping and things like that. Those border restrictions have had the same kind of impact, because people have had to put in a request to leave the community and state why they are leaving, how long they'll be gone and where they are going.

The other thing we heard was that, because there was restriction of movement, people were feeling that it was similar to residential school, where they were required to follow somebody else's directions and were put in a position of not being able to make decisions for themselves.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much for that.

Another thing I would like to come back to you and then go to Ms. Hopkins about is the capacity for services and, of course, the challenges that folks who are giving those services are feeling. I've heard from communities across my riding—I represent over 20 indigenous communities—that sometimes they're getting services in their own communities and they're great services, but when they go out and access provincial services they're often facing systemic racism and feeling that very strong pressure.

Knowing that, I would imagine that a lot of community members don't want to access outside resources, especially because of the racism they face, so that sort of builds an obligation for the people who are providing the services. Could you talk a bit about that and the impact it's having now, especially as we're going into the second wave and people are already tired?

Dr. Brenda Restoule: Yes. Many of our community members have found with the services outside of the community that they're likely to face racism, and that often the services are not culturally competent. The service providers are unaware of or not equipped to talk about those colonial traumas and don't recognize intergenerational trauma.

They often feel a sense of judgment or stigma when they bring up issues and they find that they're having to explain how that reminds them of residential schools, the sixties scoop and those other things. They find that these service providers don't really provide an adequate level of support, so they end up back in the communities and looking for those types of services.

As a practising psychologist, one of the things I have noticed is that over time we've seen far more complex needs of our members. They often come in talking about a simple issue like depression or anxiety, say, but once you start talking to them, they start bringing up substance misuse, violence, their own traumas and the traumas within their families. That complexity then requires a more wraparound approach to care.

I think that places a greater burden on our community services, which sometimes don't have enough people to do the work. Also, some of the people in the community sometimes don't have the requisite knowledge, let's say, from a wellness perspective, across education, employment, social services, housing and those other types of services, in order to help support people who need them to come with a trauma-informed care approach, I would say, recognizing that people need to be met where they're at and that they need the support in a way that helps them to move forward.

For example, they might be coming in and saying that they need housing, but we know that they have significant substance use issues, so departments will say they can't help with housing until they deal with their substance misuse. I think helping to get our workers on the same page, to come from that trauma-informed care approach, is one of the critical challenges, which I think overburdens us because we're seeing those inequities.

● (1155)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That's a great answer.

Ms. Hopkins, could you answer?

Ms. Carol Hopkins: Yes. I would add that from a systems level we know that mental health is a responsibility of provinces and ter-

ritories and, through health authorities, those mental wellness or mental health services reach the citizens of Canada. For first nations, who rely on that partnership with provincial or territorial health systems, we don't always see access to services.

There are two examples that I provide in my slide deck. One is talking about opioids and methamphetamines. That's a program that was initiated amongst the Independent First Nations Alliance of northern Ontario. They did create a good partnership with the local health authority, and they did create rapid access to addictions medicine. They ensured that there were community outreach workers.

However, they did that through time-limited funding, which now is available to first nations and was not in the past. That's from the substance use and addictions program, which is managed through Health Canada. That's time-limited funding, and in three years' time, they're not going to be able to solve the methamphetamine and opioid crisis. There has to be sustainable funding. These are virtual services at this moment in time, as well as on-the-land services.

Another example is the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Hope program. Again, it's a virtual services program, but they did not receive any support from the province to establish these virtual services. They had to look within, to their own resources, to establish enough to put together this program that was so vitally needed amongst the communities. They talk about the access to services, the preference for culturally based services. Again, building on what Brenda said, outside of first nation communities, there isn't always that cultural safety or cultural relevancy.

These are two examples of where communities have reached out to other sources of funding, but they're temporary and they need sustained stability.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thanks to all of you, our guests in the first round of our meeting today—Mr. Cardinal, Dr. Restoule and Ms. Hopkins—for your excellent testimony and for your participation today.

I'm going to suspend the meeting for just a couple of minutes while we set up our next panel. We should be able to get two rounds of questioning in beginning at 12 noon. We'll suspend now for just a couple of minutes.

● (1155)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order. We'll begin with the first two witnesses, and hopefully in the next 10 or 15 minutes Shannin's technical issue can be cleared up.

Our first witness in this hour is the representative of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business Tabatha Bull, president and chief executive officer.

Tabatha, please go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Tabatha Bull (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business): [*Witness spoke in Ojibwa as follows:*]

Aanii Tabatha n'dizhnikaaz. Nipising ndo njibaa. Migizi ndodem.

[*Ojibwa text translated as follows:*]

Hello, my name is Tabatha. I am from Nipissing. I am of the Eagle clan.

[*English*]

As president and CEO of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, I want to thank you, Mr. Chair and all distinguished members of the committee, for the opportunity to provide you with my statement and to answer any of your questions.

Speaking to you from my home office, I acknowledge the land as the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples.

As Chief Poitras shared with this committee on November 3, 2020, “This pandemic has highlighted the inequities in this country and exacerbated existing challenges.” This statement underlines how, more than any other time in history, indigenous issues need to be top of mind for the Government of Canada and the Canadian public.

Since 1982, CCAB has been committed to the full participation of indigenous peoples in the Canadian economy. Our work is backed by data-driven research, recognized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development as the gold standard for indigenous business data in Canada.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Government of Canada introduced efforts to build supports for businesses. A number of those supports were required to be remedied to include indigenous businesses, and while access is now available, CCAB has repeatedly highlighted the need for a navigator function specific to indigenous business to assist with the understanding and uptake of the various programs. Indigenous businesses have found navigating the bureaucracy, which often does not consider their unique legal and place-based circumstances, a significant barrier to accessing the supports necessary to keep their businesses alive and maintain the well-being of their communities.

The lack of targeted assistance for indigenous businesses to utilize these government supports further adds to the frustration and distrust that is the result of our history. This underlines the need for an indigenous economic recovery strategy that is indigenous-led, builds indigenous capacity and is well resourced to support indigenous prosperity and well-being. Access to external markets would be an important part of this work, including the need to back indigenous exporters as part of the recovery.

Such a strategy was not mentioned in the recent Speech from the Throne. Although we acknowledge the number of important renewed commitments made in the Speech from the Throne, I would be remiss if I did not express my disappointment that there was no mention of efforts to support the economic empowerment of in-

igenous peoples, businesses or communities. This was a missed opportunity for the government to signal to Canadians that indigenous prosperity and economic reconciliation matters.

As this committee is aware, in order to support sound federal policy development and effective interventions during the pandemic and in collaboration with leading national indigenous organizations, including my colleagues here today, CCAB undertook a COVID-19 indigenous business survey, as was discussed in the last session, as part of a COVID-19 indigenous response task force. The goal of the survey was to understand the unique impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on indigenous-owned businesses in Canada, and to encourage the Government of Canada to support indigenous businesses through purchasing PPE from them.

As we dug deeper into our research, we found that indigenous women disproportionately bore the brunt of the negative affects of COVID-19. More indigenous women-owned businesses reported very negative outcomes to their business—61% of women-owned, compared to 53% of men-owned. Women-owned businesses experienced higher revenue drops as a whole—50% or more—compared to 36% of men-owned. In addition, Inuit businesses are most likely to have experienced a revenue drop of 50% or more, compared with Metis-owned and first nation-owned businesses.

The CCAB appreciates the indication provided to us by Indigenous Services Canada that they will fund a second COVID-19 indigenous business survey this fall, and a further survey in the spring of 2021, to assess the impacts that the first and second waves of COVID-19 have had and are having on indigenous businesses.

It is our hope that the results of both surveys will inform effective policy and programmatic interventions to support indigenous business recovery and, in turn, support indigenous prosperity and well-being. We welcome an opportunity to provide that data to you in the future.

During my last appearance before this committee on May 29, I pointed out that the unique circumstances facing indigenous businesses were not initially taken into account when forming the eligibility of CEBA or Bill C-14. That initially left many large indigenous-owned businesses ineligible for the wage subsidy. We appreciate that these gaps were remedied. However, we must not forget the additional burden the close to a month-long gap had on many indigenous businesses.

Furthermore, with an understanding that there were on-reserve businesses that could not access the programs available due to unique taxation and ownership structures, the government announced the distribution of \$133 million to support those indigenous business. Analogous to the work currently being done to extend CEWS and CEBA and the remediation of the rent assistance program, investigation and consideration must be given to the extended needs of the same businesses that were not eligible for that funding.

I would like to underline that indigenous businesses have repeatedly told us that they are not in a position to take on any more debt.

- (1210)

I also mentioned in my last appearance that numerous indigenous businesses were prepared to readily provide supplies or equipment to meet Canada's medical needs and the capability to rapidly scale up or pivot production to PPE. CCAB and other organizations, as discussed earlier, have provided lists of such indigenous businesses to numerous federal departments and through the task force database, but only a small fraction of the over \$6 billion of federal procurement contracts for PPE have been awarded to indigenous businesses.

An announcement on September 21 noted a total contract of \$2.5 million to seven indigenous businesses. This represents only 0.04% of the federal spend on PPE, nowhere near the 5% commitment made last year in Minister Anand's mandate letter and the Speech from the Throne. The commitment is a target of at least 5% of federal contracts to be awarded to indigenous businesses, and in the throne speech, a support of supplier diversity. The frustration on the lack of progress on this 5% target has been evident in our discussions with our members and at our public Business Recovery Forum on September 16.

I would like to leave you with this point for consideration.

Too often, indigenous business concerns are an afterthought, resulting in indigenous organizations such as CCAB, NACCA and Cando working to prove to government that their responses have not met the needs of indigenous people. There is no better example of that than PPE, as 0.04% of federal spend on PPE is not a genuine effort to achieve economic reconciliation. A reasonable starting point to support indigenous economic recovery would include procurement and infrastructure set-asides for indigenous businesses and communities.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Bull, but we're way over time. I need to keep the timing so that we can get all of the statements and the question rounds in. Perhaps the rest of your remarks will occur throughout our talk.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: It was only to say thank you for your time. *Meegweich.*

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go now to the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers.

Raymond Wanuch, executive director, you are up now, for six minutes. Please go ahead, sir.

Mr. Raymond Wanuch (Executive Director, Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers): I'm trying to start my video, but it says that the host has stopped.

The Chair: We can hear you. Your sound is loud and clear.

Mr. Raymond Wanuch: Perfect.

Thank you for allowing me to present today.

I'm coming to you from *amiskwaciy-wâskahikan*. That's the Cree name for Edmonton.

My wife is currently a counsellor at Enoch Cree Nation. Her late mother was from Blood Tribe, one of the largest first nation communities in Canada. My late mother was from Ermineskin Cree Nation, and I am a board member of their economic development investment group.

Am I still good to go?

The Chair: You're sounding great and looking great. Carry on.

Mr. Raymond Wanuch: Thank you. Same to you.

Cando has been around since the early nineties. We average about 400 members annually. We work with a number of accredited educational institutions across the country to provide a certification. We think and believe that if you are going to take training, then you might as well get some university or college credit for it. That's what we have been doing. We do a lot of stuff now online. If you become certified through Cando, for every dollar invested you create \$4.40 in Canada's GDP.

We also hold a number of events. Of course, as we all know, with COVID we're doing that all virtually now. We're doing a lot of events and webinars with the office of small and medium enterprises across the country. With these events, in B.C., for example, we used to do what we called "B.C. Links to Learning". For every dollar invested in that event, \$6.70 was created back in the communities just by attending those events.

These are huge impacts that have to continue. The problem is that a lot of our EDOs are funded annually on a per-capita basis. Some communities will get \$7,500 a year while another community will get close to a million. We're trying to be strategic. We have looked at the analysis on trying to make a fair and equitable investment for that.

We have many partnerships. One of the partnerships we have is with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, where we do the community economic development initiative. That's where we pair a first nation with their surrounding municipality to work on joint economic development strategies. We have done that for the past seven years. We have had 15 pairings. One of note is Enoch Cree Nation and the City of Edmonton. Last year Enoch Cree Nation saw the creation of a new water treatment plant. For the first time ever in their history, water from the North Saskatchewan River is now being delivered at Enoch Cree Nation.

It's those kinds of relationships that are being built through the study program. It's a form of what my uncle regional chief Wilton Littlechild says is "reconciliation". That's what it is. We're actually boots on the ground and working with municipalities to make these partnerships produce some contribution to, of course, the GDP.

Speaking of the GDP, our population says we should be producing \$100 billion annually. A few of my colleagues have said it's anywhere from \$26 billion, what we're producing now, to a high of \$44 billion. Needless to say, there's a huge gap of almost \$50 billion to \$60 billion annually. For example, I mentioned the Blood Tribe, the Kainai first nation, in southern Alberta. They should be producing half a billion a year. They produce \$100 million. There's a gap of \$400 million that they have to make up. However, that corner of the country has high systemic racism. They know they have to get into the city of Lethbridge to start talking about creating new businesses or even taking over businesses, but there's no process for them to do that. Again, that's why we need the study program. It's to go in there and produce these results.

The study program in the upcoming year is cut back. COVID-19 is a big blame for that. Our budget is going to be status quo. We can only produce five pairings. When we initially ran the study program, there were close to 400 applications from throughout Canada. We have serviced 3% of that. Needless to say, we need other partners to step up and come to the party. I'm currently talking to the provincial government here in Alberta about coming in as a partner to do that.

• (1215)

The other thing I should mention—and it has been mentioned by your previous guest Éric, and Tabatha has mentioned it as well—is the indigenous task force for COVID-19. What we are trying to do now is to create that so that it becomes open to any kind of procurement across the country.

• (1220)

The Chair: I have to stop you there, Raymond. We're a bit over time on that, but we'll certainly come back to these points through our conversation.

I believe now Shannin Metatawabin's IT is okay.

Shannin, you have six minutes to speak on behalf of the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association. Go ahead.

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin (Chief Executive Officer, National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association): *Meegwetch. Waciye.*

Hi, my name is Shannin Metatawabin. I'm the CEO of the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association. I'm a member of the Fort Albany First Nation of the Mushkegowuk nation. Before I start, I wish to acknowledge that I am taking this call on the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq nation.

Thank you for the invitation to speak today.

I'd like to address what support our financial network has been able to provide indigenous businesses, what challenges we have faced and what our clients need moving forward.

You might recall that I presented to you back in [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] aboriginal financial institutions. Our members are indigenous-owned and led organizations that provide developmental loans to hundreds of first nations, Inuit and Métis businesses every year.

In April 2020, our network received \$306.8 million to support indigenous businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Of this total, \$204 million was to support emergency loans to indigenous businesses. Our members were grateful for this relief funding.

To date, and despite the inequitable terms and conditions of the indigenous-specific programming compared with other federal measures, 37 AFIs have distributed over \$60 million to 1,500 indigenous businesses across the country.

Our clients have told us that these loans, provided by the same indigenous institutions they have relied on in the past, are filling a gap. The loans fill this gap, but they do not provide what the network requested when the crisis first began. We had proposed a timely package tailored to indigenous businesses. To date, such a package has eluded us. We have met with obstacles in securing the indigenous-specific relief funding as equitable compared to non-indigenous ones.

These are my recommendations to address these issues.

The relief funding for indigenous businesses needs to come without delay. The federal government released the funding for the CE-BA in early April, only a few weeks after the crisis hit. Due to delays in negotiating contribution agreements with ISC, our network could not offer relief until mid-June. These funds simply came too late for some first nations, Métis and Inuit businesses.

The timing issues persist with the second wave. On October 9, Canada announced further relief funding of \$20,000 for businesses. By October 26, that funding was available to smaller businesses. Meanwhile, our network still awaits word on whether we can offer the same additional \$20,000. At this rate, it will again be two months before we can offer this lifeline to our clients.

The larger portion of the relief package available to indigenous businesses needs to be non-repayable. We're talking a lot about that task force survey; 40% of them indicated that they could not take on any more debt. This is a big reason why we need to provide more non-repayable relief to indigenous businesses. On top of all the barriers that they currently face, they're going to have to work twice as hard to ensure that they repay a loan, so providing something similar to the Ontario program, which is fifty-fifty, would be better.

The terms and conditions of our relief package need to be equitable to other federal measures. Our members have been making loans for several months now. Early on, they noted certain discrepancies between the conditions attached to the indigenous-specific loans and other federal measures, particularly for rural businesses delivered by some regional development agencies and community futures development corporations.

Despite repeated requests from NACCA, the indigenous-specific measures are burdened with lower stacking limits and more-onerous lending terms than emergency loans provided to the CFDCs. Some of the members have been forced to turn away their own clients and refer them instead to the non-indigenous RDA or CFDC. This situation is demoralizing.

We request this committee's support. The restrictions enhance the ability of our government agency to extend relief to our clients at the expense of their own indigenous institutions. This situation is more troubling considering the mandate of Indigenous Services Canada to promote indigenous capacity and evolution.

Aboriginal financial institutions work tirelessly to develop solutions for, and with, indigenous people. We live and work in the community. At a disadvantage before COVID hit, indigenous businesses will need to work twice as hard than the average Canadian business to repay their loans. AFIs will work twice as hard at helping them get through this crisis. We're calling for a second phase of support that comes without delay, is indigenous led and is tailored to the specific needs of our community.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Mr. Metatawabin.

IT folks, that was loud and clear. Thank you so much.

It's time for our six-minute round of questioning. My speakers will be Mr. Vidal, Ms. Damoff, Madam Bérubé and Ms. Blaney.

Please go ahead, Gary Vidal, for six minutes.

• (1225)

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Mr. Chair, I think our first speaker in the order will be Mr. Melillo.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Melillo, go ahead.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Gary, for offering that up to me.

Ms. Bull, obviously with the pandemic many businesses have been switching to online and e-commerce. They're trying to operate in that manner. In many northern and rural regions, access to Internet is a very big issue. It really doesn't exist for many people across my riding.

I'm wondering if you could speak about how Internet access in many rural areas is impacting the way in which indigenous businesses are able to adapt to this pandemic and provide some of their goods online.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: We definitely have heard from many members that access to Internet and stable Internet is an issue. It has been an issue for some time. It's not only communities that are quite rural. I'm from the same community as Dr. Restoule. I was quite impressed with her Internet today. When I work from Nipissing First Nation, it's difficult even to participate in virtual conversations like this. We were pleased to see the more recent announcements around broadband infrastructure made by Minister Bains recently, and by provinces as well. Ontario has stepped up to do some additional funding.

We know that a number of our businesses and a number of members have pivoted to e-commerce, with support from a number of corporations, but they often have to work in the evenings or work at night to ensure that they get their orders and payments through. It definitely is putting them at a disadvantage. We encourage the government to do what they can to move the innovation forward for broadband in rural and remote communities.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you very much.

Another issue in my riding is that we have a lot of seasonal operations. Tourism is the catalyst for most of our business in north-western Ontario. Many indigenous businesses—marinas, lodges, you name it—rely on a lot of tourists, who of course weren't able to come this year. Americans tourists, obviously, with the border closure weren't able to come, and many other people from Manitoba and from across Canada didn't feel comfortable crossing the border and coming out to my region around Kenora to spend their summer.

I've been hearing from a lot of tourism operators and a lot indigenous-owned operations that they knew this year was going to be tough. They said they were holding out, really, for the 2021 season: We recognize that the border needs to be closed, we recognize that these regulations need to be in place, and if it works and we can get through to 2021, we'll be okay.

It's now late in the season, and it's not really certain what that operation will look like next year. I'm wondering if you have a sense of how some of the seasonal operations are preparing for the possibility of losing most, or potentially all, of their season again.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: We've definitely heard concern from our members in the tourism sector. That is one of the largest-growing industries in indigenous business. A lot of those businesses are young. We need to ensure that we're sustaining them in business through this period.

I participated in the finance standing committee recently, where we talked quite a bit about tourism and the new changes to CEWS to help those businesses be able to sustain and continue in operations and be there next year when people are able travel. We've seen some good investment from provinces again. An example is Indigenous Tourism Ontario. There are some really interesting and innovative ways of doing virtual tourism through some indigenous business members. Origin is a good example, out of Thunder Bay, not far from your riding.

I think we need to look at investment into how we can ensure that those tourism operators are able to continue to operate and continue to be sustained so that they're there when people are ready and able to travel again.

• (1230)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Your last comment was going into what I was going to ask next.

How can the government really help a lot of those people and businesses prepare for next season? Could you provide a bit more clarity on what that season might look like?

Ms. Tabatha Bull: It's very important across all provinces. We're seeing this everywhere—the provinces, the municipalities and the federal government—on consistent messaging on restrictions and consistent messaging on business shutdowns and closures, and the requirements for them.

We really need to look at how we're messaging that across all provinces and for all industries, but also ensuring that we are looking at a regional base as well. We should be looking specifically at certain tourism areas and certain areas of the country that may be able to open, and asking how we can better support the businesses that aren't from the perspective of innovation and marketing campaigns.

The Chair: That brings us to our next round of questioning.

Ms. Damoff, you have six minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for your testimony.

I'm going to start with Ms. Bull and go back to procurement. The numbers you gave us on PPE are really quite awful. I spoke to a business here in my riding that was able to apply, but didn't get a contract. The owner was extremely frustrated with the process.

You mentioned a navigator function. Do you have any other recommendations on how we can improve the number of indigenous businesses able to take advantage of government contracts?

Ms. Tabatha Bull: We have seen the set-aside procurement opportunities. The \$2.5 million did come from a specific procurement call for indigenous businesses for masks, but there were 233 organizations that bid on that, and there were seven contracts. We definitely know there is opportunity there from indigenous businesses, and we know the government has more needs on purchasing masks. That's an immediate opportunity for us to go it again with another RFP.

There is definitely a lot of frustration—

Ms. Pam Damoff: Can I ask you something about that though?

You said 233 and seven were awarded contracts.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: Yes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Are those 233 considered again, or are they just lost? That's a huge discrepancy.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: My understanding is that there would have to be another call, because they did meet what the requirement was for the number of masks.

The other thing we've really seen as a helpful function, and we've been doing this with our partners at OSME, is to help businesses understand what happened with their initial bid.

Initially, they may have been disqualified because they just filled something out wrong, but there needs to be an opportunity and a better way for PSPC and OSME to meet with indigenous businesses and help them understand what might have gone wrong in the process so that next time they can apply again.

We've heard businesses say they have submitted numerous RFPs over the course of years and have never been successful with government procurement. We need to close the loop on those opportunities. That would be a great help for businesses.

Ms. Pam Damoff: That was what the gentleman from my riding indicated as well. He just didn't know what he had done wrong. He was not able to get any feedback on his application.

You mentioned women-owned businesses. Obviously, they've been impacted much more than other businesses. Do you have any recommendations on how we can support those women-owned businesses? Is it funding? Is it even Internet access?

I know, in Six Nations, there are a number of women who have businesses that are more craft-oriented. Even at Six Nations, they don't have reliable Internet. Could you speak a bit about what we could do to support those women-owned indigenous businesses?

Ms. Tabatha Bull: It's definitely broadband. I sit on a call every Sunday with about 60 women-owned businesses. Many of them are retail businesses, so they have a craft or a product and have pivoted to e-commerce. They've done really well, some of them, in pivoting and bringing their products together and curating indigenous gifts.

However, their biggest need is access to financing. We see more women-owned businesses that are financed privately or from their own savings. There is still a bias about women-owned businesses accessing funding through traditional banks. As Shannin noted, those businesses cannot take on more debt. Loan programs are not something they are.... It's too risky for them to go in that directions.

The other thing, which I know we're all talking about across the country, is affordable child care and access to affordable child care. That burden—not the burden of children—that extra responsibility definitely does fall more on women, as we all know, and if you're trying to operate your own business, there needs to be a real focus on affordable child care.

• (1235)

Ms. Pam Damoff: I love that answer. Thank you.

The second wave is hitting right across the country this time. It's not just isolated to certain provinces, except that Atlantic Canada is maybe a little bit better.

What specific federal programs would you like to see? Are you being consulted as we're moving into the second wave to ensure that you're part of the discussions at the beginning and not an afterthought?

Ms. Tabatha Bull: I would say that I don't feel we're being consulted as much now as we were at the beginning of COVID.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: As organizations—and I'll let my colleagues speak to this as well—we're definitely reaching out and continuing to have discussions with Indigenous Services Canada.

However, as I have been saying throughout this whole pandemic, these issues need to be across all of government and not only through discussions with Indigenous Services Canada and CIRNA. ISED needs to be thinking about how to support indigenous economic recovery, as does NRCan, Finance and the Treasury Board. Too often we see that those conversations only happen with ISC and CIRNA. They need to be considered across government.

Ms. Pam Damoff: If we're looking at programs for small business, those aren't actually the departments you want to be talking to.

I think I'm out of time, Chair.

The Chair: Yes. I know that you keep track too.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I do.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Next, we have Madam Bérubé for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, you talked about the recovery strategy, but it is clear that, over the course of the first and second waves of the pandemic, you have experienced problematic situations. Bankruptcies have perhaps been avoided.

Do you think federal government measures have helped avoid those bankruptcies?

My question is for the three witnesses. I would like each of them to answer.

[*English*]

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: I can start. This is Shannin Metatawabin from NACCA.

We are delivering the emergency response program for indigenous businesses. The program was a full two and a half months later than that for regular businesses, so we definitely have lost businesses.

The current increase in \$20,000 to that emergency response has still not... I have still not received word that our indigenous businesses are going to be receiving the same support. As far as timing and responding in a timely fashion, we're already behind. When we're starting to talk about recovery, I don't want to be behind. You have to engage the indigenous institutions on your panel today to ensure that the needs of our community are being met in time to ensure we all rebound at the same level. Otherwise, indigenous communities are going to be rebounding more slowly and it will take a lot longer.

One of the members talked about funding. Funding is so important, because our indigenous businesses have been suffering from a 70% decline in government equity support to start businesses over the past 20 years. We need to support indigenous businesses at the level that enables them to be truly successful and to recover from this emergency.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: When we did our survey in May and asked businesses how long they could operate without further supports, at that time, 2% of the close to 900 we surveyed had already closed, and 10% of businesses predicted they couldn't continue operation for more than a month without support. Knowing that there was a gap in the support that was provided, we have significant concerns over that 10%. Also, over half of the businesses indicated that they were likely to fail within the next six months.

That is why this further survey we will be doing in the fall is so important for us to get an understanding of where indigenous businesses are in the economy and how many we may have unfortunately lost.

• (1240)

Mr. Raymond Wanuch: On the COVID-19 indigenous task force, I think we're going to make our database public facing, so that any procurement opportunity that can help our indigenous suppliers across the country is going to be offered up, and not based solely on COVID-19. That's one of the areas we're hoping will make an impact going forward.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: My other question is also for you three.

There is talk of other actions. What other actions do you think the federal government could take to ensure the sustainability of the indigenous economy during the pandemic and in its aftermath?

[English]

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: When I first presented in June, I outlined a couple of areas that would be positive. Those were to improve the conditions to the current emergency program; undertake an assessment of what we need to get back to business, so engage our community; return AFI funding to historical levels, or at minimum, meet the needs of our businesses because of that 70% decline; ensure that the growth fund that was announced by the government in 2019 continues because that's the source of access to capital for indigenous businesses into the future, so we want to make sure that happens; and ensure the 5% procurement. After a 35-year failure to ensure that indigenous businesses are part of the government business stream, I think now is the time to ensure that the government changes its culture internally to select more indigenous businesses and give us the supports to ensure we're successful this time.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: I agree with Shannin's points. I would just add looking at innovation dollars and set-asides or carve-outs for indigenous businesses that are able to pivot through the ISED innovation funding.

Additionally, I would add a consideration for infrastructure projects as prioritized for those projects that have indigenous businesses as partners or owners of those projects or equity participation, so that we can continue to support, outside of procurement, any project we're putting forward with support for infrastructure or shovel-ready funding that we consider as having indigenous equity.

Mr. Raymond Wanuch: I mentioned earlier the partnership with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and Cando and the community economic development initiative. Again, for this third iteration coming up in the spring of next year, our funding's been cut in half and there are still a lot of applicants that would love to go through the process. I mentioned the largest indigenous community in Canada, that being Blood Tribe. That was ground zero of the opioid crisis. Dr. Esther Tailfeathers, a really good friend of mine, was front and centre there. I was on their health board for a while—

The Chair: We're out of time right there, Raymond.

Mr. Raymond Wanuch: Okay.

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt. We're trying to get everybody in before one o'clock.

Ms. Blaney, you have six minutes now.

Please, go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank all the witnesses for your testimony today.

Mr. Metatawabin, it's nice to see you again. I don't know if you remember me, but Andrew Leach introduced me to you last year, so it's good to have you here.

I was really shocked to hear that some of these organizations are having to forward some of the folks to Community Futures and regional economic branches because there is a difference in how they access the loans through those programs. Can you be a little more specific about what those are, what the challenges are and what the differences are?

You talked very clearly about how the second phase has to happen without delay. I've heard from some folks that even if it was retroactive, it would be helpful, but it's not always about being retroactive because often that's too late. I'm wondering if you could speak a little about that.

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: When our program was launched, we found it was two and a half months after the Canadian response, right around the same time that the Community Futures network launched their programs. The RDAs were not all aligned on how they delivered it, so we had some discrepancies. Some RDAs are stacking CERB on top of their RRRF, as they're calling their relief program. They're able to go above the \$40,000.

In that survey we did, 40% of them needed more than \$40,000, and 25% of them needed more than \$100,000. We needed to be more flexible. We didn't have that flexibility. All we had was \$40,000. With larger loans and stacking, the CFDC network is going to be able to retain that capital to build up their loan portfolios after the loans are repaid. NACCA and our AFI network are not afforded that ability, and we've been asking for new capital for the network for 20 years now. That needs to be improved. Ontario has a program where it's fifty-fifty, non-repayable and repayable. I think that would make more sense, considering all the barriers that indigenous people face within their communities.

• (1245)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I asked about the retroactive part, so I hope you will mention that, but the other thing I wanted to question is around start-up indigenous businesses. I'll start with you and then maybe go to Ms. Bull.

We know that across the board brand new businesses that were just starting up in Canada not too long before COVID-19 are really struggling. I'm wondering if you're hearing anything about start-up indigenous businesses. I think it's really important that we talk about this, because not only is this about supporting business, but there's the economic justice part of this and understanding that legislation, provincially and federally, has silenced and stifled indigenous businesses forever. If we're going to actually deal with that economic justice, we need to support them.

If you could talk about the retroactive pay for start-up businesses, Mr. Metatawabin, then I could move on to you, Ms. Bull.

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: Thank you very much for the question.

Businesses are still planning. They're all readjusting to this new world that we're living in. A lot of them are going online. They're definitely marketing and providing more website and online services. Businesses are creating online types of businesses, but the hardest hit are the tourism-type businesses, which have lost an entire season. We really have to think about supporting them.

This retroactive idea that you have about going back to when the government first announced it would be great. We were initially told that we would, at minimum, mirror the Canadian emergency program, but we're not even afforded that right now with the delay in having those businesses being eligible for the \$60,000. We really need to catch up and provide the support necessary to support our community.

Ms. Tabatha Bull: You're quite right. Thank you for acknowledging that with respect to indigenous businesses.

We definitely do see that a number of businesses in the indigenous economy are very young—less than five years old—and with a number of these supports in particular, we had a number of members who had not yet filed a tax return and couldn't apply for a number of the wage subsidies. They were so young that they didn't have revenue to be able to compare to as a gauge for the wage subsidy as well, and also for CEBA. Those have been some of the barriers. I know that there has been some work to fix some of those barriers, but that is a concern.

We need to look into that a little more to see about those young businesses and their survival rate through this period. Perhaps there is a recommendation or a potential program, so that as a priority we could support those businesses that have failed, or that were new businesses, in order for them to recover, innovate and return to the economy.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I really appreciate the discussion around tourism businesses, because I'm hearing that as well. Tourism businesses—both indigenous and non-indigenous—are really struggling in my riding. Tourism-based businesses are really challenged at this time.

Could you speak to that as well, in terms of those businesses and what kinds of supports they would require to help facilitate them through this time so that we're still seeing them in their communities after COVID ends at some point?

Ms. Tabatha Bull: I know that Keith Henry at ITAC has developed a tourism economic recovery strategy for indigenous businesses. I won't speak too much to that because he is definitely the expert in that case. He has research on the requirement for additional funds.

I would just say that if we look at the recent report of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business on business survival rates, in their second group of business survivors are professional services or health care services as the businesses that are of most concern in terms of not being able to survive. If we look at Stats Canada, we can see that's a very high number of businesses in the indigenous community as well, so we also need to be putting some supports toward professional, health care and social assistance services.

• (1250)

The Chair: Ms. Bull, I understand that you're going to be leaving us shortly. I want to thank you for your participation with the committee today.

For the committee, we have about a 25-minute round of questioning and 10 minutes left on the clock. I've checked with the clerk

and we're not bumping into a subsequent committee, so with unanimous consent, we'll do the next full round of questioning.

Are there any thumbs down? I'm looking at the members and I don't see any thumbs down, so I'll take that as unanimous consent to carry on. We'll go to our final and second round of questioning.

For the Conservative Party, do I have Mr. Vidal or Ms. McLeod?

Mr. Gary Vidal: It's Ms. McLeod, Mr. Chair. With all due respect, we sent our speaking order to the clerk, so I'm not sure where the breakdown in communication is, but Ms. McLeod is next.

The Chair: The breakdown is that we didn't do the second round of questioning. All of the names were cycled through that round, so when I went to the second hour it was a new list. You just carried on with it, which is fine—whatever you wish. That was the issue, Mr. Vidal.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thanks. I appreciate that.

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. McLeod, please go ahead.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you.

If I understand correctly, Ms. Bull has to leave shortly. Maybe I can start with her unless she is down to minutes only.

You talked about an indigenous economic recovery plan. Can you talk to me about where that is at in terms of the process? Who would be involved in developing it? Can you give a bit more thinking around what you see happening with that?

Ms. Tabatha Bull: We've definitely done some thinking around this. We're working really closely with our other colleagues at the other national indigenous organizations who are here, in addition to NIEDB.

We really need to look at what we need to do from a perspective of across indigenous economies. That includes things like procurement, infrastructure spending and how we are supporting partnerships and infrastructure, similar to the announcement that was just made on indigenous natural resource partnerships. It also includes how we support that across the whole country, as well as innovation, as I mentioned.

Really, we are looking across all of government—provincially as well—and corporate Canada, so that we can continue to support indigenous economy through the recovery period and in the future. We are working on this national indigenous economic strategy. In the near term, we really need to be looking at where we need to be supporting for a recovery across all industries, as I mentioned earlier.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: We've heard some pretty bleak figures about business failure from CFIB.

You had talked about having done some work. Are you perceiving the same or worse within indigenous businesses? Do you have any clear idea or do you need the results of the next survey before you can better articulate survival through a second wave?

Ms. Tabatha Bull: When we looked at our initial survey in terms of the StatsCan survey that was done through the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, we did see the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] difficulty, so I expect we'll see something similar.

Then of course if we look at [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the high areas in social services. We know that indigenous businesses are younger, that they have less access to financing and that the access to financing has been delayed. In a lot of cases they're in more regional or remote, rural areas, so I expect we'll see more of an impact exacerbated for our indigenous businesses.

Our plan is to do that comparison as well, so that we have the data to inform everyone here as to where we really see the additional impact.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

I'll now go to Mr. Metatawabin.

You have said that you proposed a tailored package. I know the government made modifications as it went along. We understand they were slow modifications.

Can you tell me what might have been in your tailored package that you still see as missing, on top of the structure of the loan programs? Is there anything more about this package you could talk about?

• (1255)

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: One of the important things to know is that the AFIs have been delivering support to indigenous businesses for 35 years now. They know what their businesses need, but they need the flexibility. When they are put into this little box of \$40,000 and \$10,000 non-repayable, it doesn't give them too much flexibility to support a business that might need \$80,000 or might need other support services. It makes it very difficult.

They need business support services. We have to work with each individual business to ensure that they are responding to this crisis in a meaningful way, so that they can survive through this. The support that has been announced to date is going to take us to March 31, 2021. What are we going to do after that? We really have to come up with another strategy to ensure that, in this uncertain time, we're going to last longer.

These businesses are hanging on. Our network has been suffering from reduced funding levels for over 20 years now. If we return business support, flexibility for larger loans, more non-repayables so that the indigenous business is not going to be strapped with all that debt, and a more timely response.... We should not be responding to the indigenous community two months after all the other Canadian responses are there.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I certainly agree about the gap.

Mr. Wanuch, as much as it pains me to look at this, I think it's reasonable that some businesses are going to fail. It takes some work, I know from talking to other folks, and people need the opportunity and the skills and expertise not only to scale up businesses but also to scale down businesses if they aren't going to make it. Is there any training being done? I know your goal is to increase business, but are you doing anything in terms of supporting people

who are going to have the challenges of dealing with the loss of their business?

The Chair: I'm afraid it's yes or no. We're way over time. I apologize for that.

Can you hold on to that thought, Ray?

I explained that Madam Bérubé has to leave. As the chair, I'm going to move her two and a half minute question up to now.

Lenore, you'll be next after that in your normal rotation.

Madam Bérubé, please, go ahead for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for the two remaining witnesses.

It was mentioned that, in the spring, the government announced \$306.8 million in interest-free short-term loans and in non-repayable financial contributions to help indigenous SMEs and financial institutions.

Do you think the list of eligible activities and costs covered by the Indigenous Community Business Fund is adequate?

[*English*]

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: We've been actively delivering the money that was announced by the government since June. It was two and a half months after COVID hit. It's going to take us to March 31, 2021. As far as adequacy goes, we can use that money to put it out to the community. If we can improve the flexibility and use this as an opportunity to capitalize the networks, to retain the capital as the CF network is going to be doing to be more flexible, to allow stacking and to allow AFIs to do their work to ensure they're supporting those businesses, then that money is going to go to work in a good spot.

I want to make a note to the committee that the money that was initially given to this network more than 30 years ago has been recycled 15 times. That money has been retained and has been doing this work.

Mr. Raymond Wanuch: I agree with Shannin.

I sit on the board of Settlement Investment Corporation. They are the small business lender for the Métis settlements businesses. I'm very thankful for that first tranche of \$40,000 loans, of which \$10,000 is a grant. Most of the feedback we've had has been about wishing that all of it was a grant. I think we've heard throughout the presentation here that we're just compounding the fact that there's more debt. Because a lot of our clientele are high risk anyway and a lot of them aren't bankable, they can't go to the big five for loans and mortgages, so we offer the only solution but we're only compounding the issue by lending them more money.

• (1300)

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I have to interrupt there.

Ms. Zann, you're up next. You have five minutes. After that will be Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Zann, go ahead, please.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I come to you today from the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia, the people of the dawn.

It's been very interesting to hear what all the witnesses have had to say about mental health and health and businesses in indigenous communities.

I really wish you all the very best, because I know it's a very difficult time right now. It's a very difficult time for all businesses. I'm sure most businesses that I've talked to would have loved to have grants instead of loans, but such is business, in a way. It's all about trying to become successful and then being able to maintain that. It's a very difficult time right now to do that.

Mr. Metatawabin, when you spoke in the spring, you also mentioned that you'd just signed the contribution agreement with Indigenous Services Canada with respect to the \$306.8-million fund for indigenous SMEs. At the time, you were expecting the funding to start flowing by mid-June.

Chief Perry Bellegarde of the Assembly of First Nations noted that only 6,000 businesses would be able to benefit from that funding, leaving most of the 40,000 indigenous businesses in Canada without support.

How many indigenous businesses have actually received funding to date? Is there any funding left? If so, how many more businesses will receive funding?

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: The funding has experienced some competition from other measures of delivery, namely the CF network, which has some better conditions than the AFI network. Half of our members are CFs and aboriginal capital corporations, so it's inequitable already. Some of them can access the CF network. What we are seeing is that they are actually recommending that their clients go to that measure, because at the end of the day, they are going to be able to retain that capital. The support for the AFI network is the last choice, I suppose you could say. That made it difficult.

We have supported 1,500 businesses to date. Right now \$60 million is in their hands. As well, 100 million dollars' worth of contracts have been signed with 37 AFIs, and they are busy at work putting it out there. I have been reluctant to.... This was initially set up for current and former clients of the AFI network, and we have supported 48,000 loans over the past 35 years.

It's time to open it up, improve the flexibility and ensure that we're planning to March 31, 2021, because that's what all our AFIs are doing. They are supporting principal payments, operational expenses and interest payments for these businesses, so that they can survive and get some certainty as to what's happening with the pandemic.

We're going to be undertaking a survey as well to understand what other services are going to be required, but I do know that the

AFIs need business support services because they have to sit down with all the clients. They have been reduced in funding over the past 20 years by 70%. Where you had four people working in the business area, now you have one, so it's time to return to that level again.

Ms. Lenore Zann: I noticed that the AFI is also included when we're talking about the latest new announcement made by Chief Terry Paul in Membertou with reference to the Clearwater deal. Were you involved with that at all? This seems to be a very exciting announcement that our first nations people are going to be seven different communities now involved in one of the biggest seafood operations in Canada.

Could you expand on how that is going to work for first nations in the future?

• (1305)

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: It's an example of where the indigenous community is going. This is a \$1-billion transaction where the indigenous community is now part of their traditional harvesting livelihood, so they will maintain ownership of that livelihood.

In Canada right now, you now have the AFI network that has capital. They are lending to small and microbusinesses, because 85% of them have less than five people working for them. As we grow, and as we become more complex, we need more capital, so the growth fund has been created. We have the First Nations Finance Authority putting bonds on the market, raising capital and lending it out to communities.

There are different levers of capital attraction, but the private sector is becoming more involved in this growing economy. We welcome that, and we want to work with them.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thanks very much. *Wela'in.*

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, you have two and a half minutes. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to come back to you, Mr. Metatawabin. You talked about and you said repeatedly that there has been a 70% decrease in funding over the last two decades, if I remember correctly.

Could you speak to that? Would bridging that gap really provide the immediate relief that is so necessary across the country?

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: The important thing to know is that to enable capital to be deployed, you need to enable it with something. The same thing happened with the Business Development Bank of Canada. When it was first launched, it had tax incentives, it had equity and it had different levers to ensure that capital went out to the community. It had lots of support services, and it had access to an unlimited amount of capital whenever it needed it, because it was the Government of Canada.

We haven't been afforded that same ability to access capital to have business support services meet the needs of what our clients need. To have the levers of enabling that capital to go to the community, the equity program needs to be restored to what it was. Back in the nineties, it was an \$80-million program. We're at around \$30 million now, so it has been reduced. The value of that money is a lot less than what it used to be, so we have really lost a lot.

We need to return to that level, so we can deploy that capital out to the community and get businesses started, so that indigenous people are part of the prosperity of Canada. Canada wants to get back to being prosperous, and we have to be part of it this time.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think that's interesting, because you're talking about how it was before. Now we're dealing with the added burden of COVID-19. Even if that was returned, it would still not address that bigger barrier.

What do you think we need to do? This is a committee that will provide recommendations to the government. Will that increase be the changing factor, or do we need even more because of COVID-19?

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: Supporting our institutions fully, so that Ray, Tabatha and I through our organizations can support our community, is a good start, as is dealing with the Indian Act. It prevented us from starting a business, from buying machinery and farming and all these things so that we're in this position where we're starting from way behind. Enable us to have the right business support services so that we can engage every community member who wants to start a business. Close the gap so that someone has a house with a pipeline so that they can flush the toilet.

These are all minimum requirements of human rights that our communities still do not have. These are important things we need in place to ensure that we can think about starting a business rather than trying to survive each and every day.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Gary Vidal, I finally got to you. In future, I will use the list consecutively, as you presented it, so that we don't have that problem.

You have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I wasn't trying to be obstinate. I was just trying to figure out how to keep track and keep these things straight.

I want to thank our witnesses. It's unfortunate that we lost Ms. Bull, but that's fine. My first question will be for Mr. Metatawabin.

You spoke about the delayed experience of many indigenous businesses in terms of accessing some of the supports for business over the last several months and feeling, to use Ms. Bull's word, a bit like an "afterthought". We have heard that from other organizations at different times. Could you maybe take a minute and expand a little further on the impact these delays have had? What are you hearing from the many AFIs you communicate with and work with every day on the impact on their business partners on the ground? We're not talking about the big level but about the stories right on the ground of these businesses and what impact the delays have had on them.

• (1310)

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: This is an important subject. Our AFIs had a survey done right after the pandemic hit, within the first week, and 95% said our businesses were going to be impacted. We were actively trying to plan with government to ensure that we had supports in place for them. Fortunately, for the businesses that identified that they wouldn't last more than six months, with some support we've gone beyond that timeline. I'm glad we're getting support out to the indigenous businesses. Early on, I think all of the indigenous businesses that were eligible for the Canada response were able to access it. When they needed more money, they weren't permitted to access our program, because you can't stack it.

All of these mechanisms should be removed to ensure flexibility, so that we can respond to the business needs of today and take us to at least until the end of the government fiscal year. By that time we will have a new survey. We'll know what additional supports will take us to the summer or into next fall. We still don't have certainty on the vaccine or when we're going to get back to business, but we still need to be part of that conversation so that the government knows, step in step with timing, what is required in our community.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that.

I will really shift gears for a minute and ask both witnesses to take a shot at answering this question.

Drinking water advisories have been a really big topic and have created many headlines during the pandemic. I know that all of my colleagues will agree that it's unacceptable that any Canadian would be without safe and reliable drinking water during a pandemic. As an example, in my riding this morning a state of emergency was declared in a first nation that lost its drinking water in the midst of the outbreak that's starting to happen in their communities.

From a business perspective, which is where I want you to plug in here, I believe there's a huge opportunity for the indigenous economy, for indigenous businesses, to be part of the solution to this across the country. I'm curious to know whether either of you are aware of or could share some stories or experiences of where consultation has happened between the government and indigenous businesses that might have been an attempt or could be part of contributing to the solution on the drinking water advisories.

Mr. Shannin Metatawabin: Drinking water is integral to human life. The government has responded to this emergency, this pandemic, with billions and billions of support for Canadians all across the country, but that same support is not afforded to indigenous people when we can't even get drinking water. This has been a problem for decades.

The example of what the Prime Minister has done for the pandemic should be the example of what he does for boiled water. This is the starting point of a community that needs drinking water to ensure that they have the right infrastructure. Then they can start thinking about the future and contributing to the economy.

Mr. Raymond Wanuch: I used to be on the Alberta Water Advisory Committee, and Premier Lougheed was on there. He used to talk about interbasin water transfer. It was specific to Alberta because 90% of the population lived south of Calgary, and most of the indigenous population lived north of Edmonton. Where was that fresh water going to come from? Well, it was going to come from northern Alberta. There were a lot of people who weren't very happy with that suggestion.

I think it is about trying to be innovative. It's like I said with Edmonton and Enoch Cree Nation. Although their traditional territory was adjacent to the North Saskatchewan River, last year Enoch Cree Nation finally had water into their community from the North Saskatchewan River—after all these years.

Yes, it's a huge requirement. I referenced Blood Tribe. They're looking at getting into business, but the glacier that feeds the Old-

man River may be gone in 30 years. It doesn't only impact non-indigenous farmers down in that country. It impacts the Blood Tribe that has a big irrigation project. They want their percentages as well. All the—

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're really over time on that. It's a great topic [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

• (1315)

Ms. Pam Damoff: I think our chair is frozen. It's the quietest he's been forever.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Is this where I take over the chair now?

Ms. Pam Damoff: Yes, you do, Gary.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Cathy McLeod): Actually, I think as vice-chair, I can adjourn.

Thank you to the witnesses. It was excellent.

The meeting is adjourned.

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