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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

The clerk has advised that we have a quorum and that all the witnesses who are appearing virtually have been sound-tested and are okay to go.

Welcome to meeting number 83 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is meeting on its study of the Canada summer jobs wage subsidy program.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room, and witnesses and members are appearing virtually.

Please wait until I recognize you before speaking. You have the option to choose whichever official language you wish to speak in. Those appearing virtually can use the "raise hand" icon to get my attention. Translation should be available by making a selection at the bottom of your Surface. I would remind members to speak slowly and to keep their earpiece away from the mike for the benefit and protection of the translators and interpretation services.

I want to introduce and welcome Sacha Vassiliev, who is filling in for the clerk in today's meeting.

Appearing in panel one, from the Corporation of the Township of Douro-Dummer, we have Paul Creamer, interim treasurer. From Kerry's Place, we have Kevin Spafford, vice-president; and Nicole Larocque, manager of human resources. From the Uptown Rutland Business Association, we have Karen Beaubier, executive director.

I will remind each presenter that they have five minutes or less to give their opening comments, which we will follow with questions from the committee members.

I will now invite Mr. Creamer to give an opening statement.

Mr. Creamer, you have the floor for five minutes or less.

Mr. Paul Creamer (Interim Treasurer, Corporation of the Township of Douro-Dummer): Good morning, everyone.

Thank you for inviting me as a witness this morning for the Canada summer jobs program.

I'm going to assume that I received an invitation to speak today based on the comments I provided to the Honourable Michelle Fer-

ri this past April when she contacted me to inform our township about our successful application and also our unsuccessful application.

I should note that I am the interim treasurer for the Township of Douro-Dummer. We are just east of Peterborough. It's a small township of about 7,000 people.

I have four points to make, the first one being really the most critical and the rest being probably more housekeeping items.

I think the biggest thing for us that would be a critical improvement to this program would be to have earlier decisions and to be notified earlier in the process about whether or not we have been successful.

The last few years, we have not been notified as to whether or not our application was successful until about mid-April. Since we are a small municipality, some of the summer student positions that we plan for are dependent on this funding, so this creates a significant challenge when it comes to recruitment. We already have recruitment challenges given our small application pool, and we're not going to recruit for a position that we aren't guaranteed to get funding for, so we are at a pretty big disadvantage of not being able to get the top talent and maximize the funds we're going to get from this program if we can't start recruiting until April. For example, this year we started to recruit for an office position at the beginning of April, and we didn't get one application.

I think my recommendation around this would be that if we knew by the middle or end of January whether or not we were going to be successful, that would set us up for much better success and allow us to recruit and plan going forward. It's not only about the recruitment. We have positions for running events in the township and various other things, including for parks and recreation. If we knew we were going to have those resources, versus not having them, that would allow us to plan accordingly.

The next three points, again, are less critical than the first one, but I think they're worth mentioning.

My next point is around selection criteria. I've noticed in the last few years that there's been an emphasis on diversity. I'm not disagreeing that that's important, but it just tends to put us rural townships at a disadvantage. The reality is that there's not necessarily a lot of diversity in our area, and it's hard for us to fulfill that need of the application.

Rural location is another point. We find that in addition to the small application pool, there are not a lot of people, not a lot of students, who have vehicles, and so without public transportation we have a hard time getting students who can even make it to our location. Therefore, it's even more critical that we can recruit and have every advantage possible throughout the process.

On one last note, in terms of the application process—this is a comment from my staff who complete the applications—we find that it can be a little tedious when we're submitting the application. What we find is that we go in and we start the application and then we can get timed out and we lose all progress in the actual application. This is just, again, on the administrative side of things, but it can make things take a little longer on our end and make it a little bit more tedious to actually submit the application.

Those are my opening comments. Thank you, again.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Creamer, for those very succinct, specific observations.

Now we'll go to Mr. Spafford for five minutes.

Mr. Kevin Spafford (Vice-President, Strategic Initiatives, Kerry's Place): Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to appear today.

My name is Kevin Spafford. I'm the vice-president of strategic initiatives at Kerry's Place Autism Services. I'm joined by my colleague Nicole Larocque, the manager of HR operations and total rewards.

We're headquartered in Newmarket, Ontario, and we primarily serve the greater Toronto area and Hastings County in eastern Ontario. We'd like to acknowledge and recognize that we are on the traditional territories of the Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Anishinabe peoples, and we are grateful for the opportunity to work on this land.

Since 1974, Kerry's Place has been providing evidence-based supports and services that enhance the quality of life for those with autism across Ontario. Our vision is that all people with autism are full and equal members of their communities. We are Canada's largest service provider to children, youth and adults with autism, serving more than 8,000 individuals each year. We provide services to children, youth and their families through the Ontario autism program, as well as many community services and supports. Our supported living and semi-independent living programs—the largest in Canada—support autistic adults at over 80 properties across Ontario.

We're very pleased to participate in the Canada summer jobs program to help employ young people and support our mission. In particular, I would like to thank our MP, Mr. Van Bynen, for his support and advocacy.

I'll turn over the rest of the time to my colleague Nicole Larocque.

Ms. Nicole Larocque (Manager, Human Resources Operations and Total Rewards, Kerry's Place): Thank you. I'm very pleased to be here.

We support the Canada summer jobs program's goal of creating quality summer work experiences for young people aged 15 to 30. As the prevalence rate of autism continues to rise, the need for services and supports continues to increase. In that regard, the Canada summer jobs program has been a benefit to Kerry's Place, enabling us to scale our capacity where needed to support individuals with autism and their families.

Overall, the program is functioning well and has allowed us the opportunity to bring in additional support at a minimal cost to the employer. Having utilized this program over the past 10 years, we recognize that welcome improvements have been introduced. We believe there is an opportunity to further enhance the program to meet the needs of candidates and organizations, and we have five observations that we would like to share today.

The first is the program's flexibility. The flexible parameters introduced during COVID—such as extended recruitment windows, longer placement durations and enabling part-time hours—were cancelled after COVID. The flexibility offered by these temporary parameters made the Canada summer jobs program more appealing to candidates and organizations, and made recruiting easier.

The second is the application process. The process to apply for funding is based on a constituency, making it a time-consuming process for community organizations with multiple locations, such as Kerry's Place, to apply.

The third is the job term lengths. Terms can be as long as 16 weeks, but Kerry's Place is typically approved for the eight- to 10-week program, even though we've requested 16 weeks and we meet all of the program application deadlines. The longer terms can benefit candidates, who often prefer to work longer, and organizations that require more support. The shorter terms make it a challenge to onboard individuals and gain momentum in the few short weeks they're employed with us.

The fourth is the timing of approvals. Frequently, the position approvals from Service Canada come with only a few days' notice, and opportunities are immediately added to the job bank—often without the necessary job information. This causes confusion among candidates and organizations that may not be instantly prepared. Given the time it takes to recruit, last-minute approvals mean that we miss the first one to two weeks of the term, potentially losing candidates as well as funding.

The last is wages and retaining youth. Funding covers minimum wage, and many agencies will use their own funds to top up the wages in an effort to provide more equitable opportunities for candidates. Due to Kerry's Place being a non-profit organization, we often don't have any additional budgeted funds to be able to offer attractive top-ups to the minimum wage.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: We've lost Ms. Larocque.

• (1115)

Mr. Kevin Spafford: I'm happy to—

The Chair: Would you conclude? You have only a few seconds, Mr. Spafford.

Mr. Kevin Spafford: Absolutely.

Just to finish the point about the minimum wage, we're often not in a position to offer top-ups and also to confirm whether a candidate will continue their employment after. Those are two factors we do think should be reconsidered.

Overall, we've had 13 approvals, but the issues that Ms. Larocque mentioned caused us to only be able to fill five positions. We do think that's a missed opportunity and worthy of consideration.

I'll close there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Spafford.

Now we go to Ms. Beaubier for five minutes, please.

Ms. Karen Beaubier (Executive Director, Uptown Rutland Business Association): Good morning, everyone, and thank you for inviting me to be here today.

The Uptown Rutland Business Association, or URBA, is a business improvement association that was established in 2007. It is located a 15-minute drive from the downtown core of Kelowna, British Columbia. It is an area defined and mandated under municipal legislation.

Rutland can be described as Kelowna's oldest, most established neighbourhood, with approximately 30,000 residents. Its business membership consists of 230 businesses and commercial building owners. These business owners can be described as hard-working, diverse, approachable and authentic. Our membership breakdown consists of about 25% retail businesses, with an almost equal breakdown among restaurants, professional services and services such as car repair.

Our vision statement is "Rutland Proud: to attract and expand development, business and prosperity with pride and purpose." Our mission statement is "Uptown, Down to Earth: To grow and strengthen Rutland's hard-working business community through authentic connections and strategic opportunities."

We are accomplishing our promotion goals by broadening our reach and sharing our stories. We are accomplishing our advocacy goals by building a cohesive vision through open dialogue with our members, and eventually plan to expand our BIA. We are building capacity by increasing our visibility and supporting our local businesses. We are increasing our connections by increasing our community contacts and shifting our approach with local and provincial governments to develop solutions.

By advocating for a vision of Rutland, URBA wants to engage members, developers and entrepreneurs. We conduct surveys and interviews to determine what types of support and resources our members want and need. URBA will continue to cultivate meaning-

ful relationships to motivate dialogue. We see a shift in approach with municipal and provincial ministries from merely asking for answers toward actively working together to develop solutions and communicating a clear understanding of the possibilities and limitations to membership. This way URBA can advocate for the possible.

URBA will continue to promote business to customers, investors and entrepreneurs. We want to celebrate and encourage the multiculturalism and diversity of Rutland by identifying opportunities to support multiculturalism and related key stakeholder events and sponsorships. URBA is working on identifying what types of businesses and missing amenities Rutland needs and then developing a plan to attract them. We want to continue to work with the city and the Ministry of Transportation to identify what URBA can and cannot do in terms of beautification. We want Rutland to be a visible, unique and attractive place to invest.

Our proudest accomplishment is our award-winning uptown mural project, consisting of 22 large-scale murals located on the walls of commercial buildings within Rutland. Each mural has been painted by a different artist coming from the Okanagan, throughout B.C., and as far away as Montreal and Toronto. The objectives of the uptown mural project consist of strengthening community engagement and involvement, boosting the local economy, reducing crime, beautifying the community, and educating and inspiring youth through the creation of public art.

URBA sees Rutland as a community where businesses flourish and are sustainable in more difficult economic times. We also see Rutland as a healthy community and want to be engaged with the city and key community stakeholders in the vision and planning for Rutland's future, as well as identifying infrastructure and transportation, especially when it comes to the flow of goods and people through Rutland.

We are acutely aware of the community's safety and security challenges, which many B.C. communities are currently facing. We are advocating for all levels of government to take action immediately and begin to work collaboratively on how best to tackle issues such as complex care, prolific offenders and attainable housing. We all know there are no easy answers.

As a small organization, URBA has utilized the Canada summer jobs program for many years. It's an important part of how we are able to work on new and ongoing community initiatives each summer. I share similar challenges and issues that my fellow witnesses have already mentioned, so I won't go into those.

In conclusion, I thank you for this opportunity to participate in this process.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Beaubier.

Thank you for your comments on this study.

We will now open the floor to questions, beginning with Mrs. Gray for six minutes, please.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

My first questions will be for Karen Beaubier of the Uptown Rutland Business Association.

As you mentioned, you are part of a business improvement area, a BIA. I heard from both you and the Downtown Kelowna Association, as well as from others across the country who are being told that their funding model is changing as the federal government is classifying them as a public government entity, which is new.

Could you tell this committee what you heard on this as well?

Ms. Karen Beaubier: Yes. I reached out to our Service Canada program, and I received an email from them on February 2, 2023, which said, “We have been instructed to mark your organization type for the purposes of processing your application as a ‘public’ organization”. I then emailed back, asking them to look into our history. We are not a public, or for a public, organization. I received an email back on March 2, 2023. It said:

Our instructions this year are to treat business associations and libraries that receive the majority of their funds from public budgets, as a public organization, for funding purposes only, in the Canada Summer Jobs program only. There are many organizations that have had to switch to this new organization status for this funded program only. I am sorry for the abrupt change and the inconvenience it may cause.

If you are approved for funding, the 50% of minimum wage will apply with no MERCs covered, unfortunately, how your organization was funded in the past does not apply.

I was very surprised and confused, as our funding has been approved for about the last 10 years. I became anxious that I wouldn't receive this funding, as it is integral to the success of our organization. I am a 1.5-person office that relies on the extra staffing during the summer months to assist me with enhancing our marketing initiatives, with running our social media, and with the mural project. I didn't understand why applicants weren't informed of this change before we submitted our application. The rules were changing mid-process. I found this to be very unfair.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much for this. It certainly must have been a shock to you.

Do you have any indication why the government thought you were a public, government-related organization?

Ms. Karen Beaubier: No, I didn't know why the government thought that URBA was a public, government-related organization. Our funding funnels through the city as it collects a levy that is part of commercial property taxes of those businesses located within our BIA boundary only. URBA does not get funding from other areas of the city. The money comes directly from our businesses, not the city. URBA is a not-for-profit entity registered through the B.C Societies Act.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Great. Thank you for that.

Back in March of this year, I myself reached out to the Minister of Women and Gender Equality and Youth directly—because of time I won't read the letter here—asking her to look into this urgent

matter. It appears that someone in the government might have misunderstood, or was reclassifying something that hadn't been indicated before.

On that note, can you explain what played out afterwards, after we had started this advocacy, and what you had seen occur?

Ms. Karen Beaubier: Once I received the email, I sent the whole email chain between myself and the program officer to you and your office. It was fantastic to have you react so quickly to this crucial issue for BIAs that this happens to all across Canada. You started making immediate inquiries to seek an explanation for the shift in classification. I was in ongoing contact with you and your office to give me updates. Both my board of directors and I were very pleased with your proactiveness on our file. It meant a lot to have our voice heard.

As a former small business owner, we know, MP Gray, that you understand how important this type of funding is to the success of our organization.

• (1125)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Great. Thank you.

Looking at our time here, I want to go on to another topic.

The government scores organizations' applications and gives each organization points. There are far more applications than there is the ability to fund them, so the government puts together these scoring points. It does allow an MP to provide input on local priorities; however, this is worth only 10% of the scoring criteria.

Do you believe that a 10% value for local priorities best serves the community?

Ms. Karen Beaubier: No, I don't think that small percentage for local priorities on the scoring criteria serves the community.

Local MPs are tapped into their community, as they understand the needs and challenges that are often unique to their communities. They know how to create success at the grassroots level. They know whom to engage and communicate with in their community. They are a community's biggest voice at the federal level of government, and they know how to amplify.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

Thank you, Ms. Beaubier.

Mr. Van Bynen, you have six minutes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions will be directed towards Kerry's Place.

First, I want to thank you for the invaluable support that you provide to our communities on a not-for-profit basis, and I certainly appreciate having spent the time at your office to get a better understanding of how the Canada summer jobs program is working for you.

In your presentation here, there's a section where it says, "Overall, the issues above affect the quantity and quality of candidates we are able to recruit. For example, this year we were approved for 13 positions but were only able to fill 5."

How does the timeline between the employer approval and the date for the latest job to end impact the ability to find youth to fill vacancies for the summer?

Mr. Kevin Spafford: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

Do you mind just repeating the last part of the question there?

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Sure. How does the timeline between the employer approval and the date of the latest job to end impact the ability to find youth to fill the vacancies for the summer?

Mr. Kevin Spafford: Thank you.

If she is able to, I'll ask my colleague to answer. I know she's been having some coughing issues, so I'll step in if she is not able to.

Ms. Nicole Larocque: I think I'm okay. Thank you, Kevin.

A lot of the challenges that we experience are, as I said, with the timing of when we receive that approval and then the length of time it takes us to go through the recruitment process here at Kerry's Place. Normally, most of the time, we'll get an approval on, say, a Friday afternoon, and the job's effective date is the following Monday. We then have to get on board with our own recruitment processes at that time, get the job posting up and do all that stuff on our end. Meanwhile, the job has already been posted on the job bank at that time, and we're already starting to receive inquiries from candidates for a position that we haven't even posted on our own internal sites at that point.

That's where we run into some challenges with the timelines.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Could you speak to any other challenges that you have in finding youth to fill the positions? Have you received sufficient applications? Are the skill sets that you're looking for reflected in the applications that you are seeking?

Ms. Nicole Larocque: Yes. For the most part, I would say that the candidate pool is small. I do believe that a lot of the things we have stated, such as our challenges with being able to offer a decent wage on top of the minimum wage, can pose a big challenge for us. Then, again, there are some of those timing issues.

I think there is still this misconception that this program is for students, but it's for youth. Depending, again, on when we get those approvals, we're missing the window of when college or university graduates might be ending school and looking for that first "foot in the door" opportunity. When we get some of the older youth who are well out of school, I think a lot of the jobs are deemed a little bit more entry-level, and then we're not offering wages that are competitive enough to match the skill set that they are bringing to the job. I think that definitely poses a challenge for us.

• (1130)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: You mentioned that you would like to see a broader audience of job seekers and more flexible candidates for the organization. Could you expand on that?

Ms. Nicole Larocque: Yes. When we had the flexibilities in place during COVID—again, because it's not just a program for students—we were able to broaden the type of candidate we were bringing in. Even if it was more student-based, we were able to offer part-time opportunities to people who might have been doing courses over the summertime or people who were finishing up school in August. They were able to start in September, and we had those longer durations of placements available. We were approved for lengthier placement opportunities, which, again, was more appealing for some of those older youth in the higher twenties and up to the age of 30.

It is very challenging to find people who can come in just for an eight-week contract without it being specifically focused on a student population.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: You mentioned some concerns about constraints in terms of the timelines, etc.

Would you be able to work with a flexibility where you are approved for so many dollars or so many hours? That could be one student full time for 16 weeks, two students part time for eight weeks, or four students part time. Is that something you could manage inside your organization? Could you be within the overall parameters of the program, but with the flexibility to manage it more effectively to meet your own needs, as opposed to meeting the needs of the organization providing the funding?

Ms. Nicole Larocque: It's an interesting suggestion. I think it would depend. I think a lot of what you're suggesting would change the application process.

Right now, as I mentioned, we have locations across Ontario. I'm often gathering all the interested applicants and placing them into constituencies. It could be challenging, but I think it could work. It's so hard, because we usually have 10 to 12 constituencies that we're applying for at any given time.

We have some programs specific to summer—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[Translation]

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

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today and coming to tell us about their experience with the Canada Summer Jobs program.

Mr. Creamer, as I understand it, your organization operates primarily in rural areas, which poses certain challenges with respect to the program, given the reality of rural areas.

If you didn't have access to the Canada Summer Jobs program, would this affect your organization and the projects it puts forward?

[English]

Mr. Paul Creamer: I apologize. I'm trying to figure out how to get the interpretation working.

The Chair: If you go to the bottom of your Surface, there should be an interpretation icon. Click on it and choose the language of your choice. It's the symbol of the globe.

• (1135)

Mr. Paul Creamer: Now I have it.

The Chair: Okay.

Madame Chabot, do you want to repeat your question?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'll repeat it, Mr. Chair, but I'd like to keep my entire speaking time of six minutes, please.

Mr. Creamer, if you didn't have access to the Canada Summer Jobs program, what would be the consequences for your organization and for the projects you put forward, as well as for young people and your community?

[English]

Mr. Paul Creamer: Thank you for your question.

I think the impact would be that we wouldn't be able to give the younger people in our community some opportunities. I think there are benefits to this program for both parties involved—the organization and the participants. It benefits us, because we need additional support. We have a lot of responsibilities with limited resources. Any additional help we can get.... This program allows us to complete special projects and one-off things that we typically can't get to with our traditional, normal resources.

Then, on the other side, there aren't a lot of opportunities in our area, necessarily, for local employment for students. This program gives some opportunity to those individuals.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

To provide these opportunities in connection with your special projects, is Canada Summer Jobs funding sufficient? Is it sufficient to fill enough positions and allocate enough hours of work to young people? We know that demand is currently higher than ever.

[English]

Mr. Paul Creamer: The short answer is no. The longer answer is.... When you look at the number of applications received from organizations, not just us, they're going to far outweigh the resources available. That goes to show the demand. Granted, any time there's "free money" on the table, you're going to get lots of

applications, so I understand the scoring and criteria process to weed out, rank and evaluate to make sure the money is going where it needs to go.

The short answer is no. I don't believe there are enough resources, and we could always use more.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much.

My next question is for Ms. Larocque or Mr. Spafford.

I congratulate you on your commitment. Our communities are in dire need of organizations like yours that support people with autism spectrum disorders.

Ms. Larocque, you have made several recommendations regarding the flexibility of the plan and the time frames for approval. This is well noted, and I thank you for it.

You said that the duration of the program provides for a period of employment that can vary from 10 to 16 weeks. When your organization submitted applications, you were granted only eight weeks, whereas your projects required a greater number of weeks.

What impact does this have on projects and what are the consequences for service providers and young people?

[English]

Ms. Nicole Larocque: It definitely impacts our ability to recruit. Even if we could offer a bit more on top of the minimum wage, I don't think a lot of people are interested in eight-week contracts. As I mentioned, it doesn't give them the chance to really get involved with Kerry's Place at the level we would hope they would be able to in such a short period of time.

With some of the flexibilities, we were able to offer longer terms, which was a valuable opportunity not just for us but for the employee, as well. We were able to keep a few people during COVID, which gave us more time to work with those individuals and help them build their skills in that longer period of time. I do feel it impacts overall the quantity and quality of candidates we get when we're posting for an eight-week contract.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Ms. Larocque.

Last year's Canada Summer Jobs program, compared to the previous year's program in a pandemic context, was cut, for the majority of our ridings, by 30% of its budget. That's quite a lot, considering the increased number of requests. There are also demographic and inflation-related issues. Budget cuts have resulted in a reduction in the number of hours allocated to each of the positions.

In the current context, do you believe that funding for the Canada Summer Jobs program should be increased to reflect the increased number of applications?

[English]

Ms. Nicole Larocque: Yes, I do believe it should be increased. Again, if we can offer longer durations, we would have a better opportunity of getting people in the door.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next, we have Ms. Zarrillo, for six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you so much to the witnesses today.

I'm going to direct my questions first to Ms. Larocque.

Ms. Larocque, the Canada summer jobs program, which you talked about, does have a focus on youth who are being employed. It's so wonderful to hear how that engagement often carries on after the summer jobs. I believe that's one of the objectives. One of the objectives of a quality job from this program is for the employee to remain beyond the period of the Canada summer jobs agreement.

There are a couple of things I wanted to ask you about. You mentioned in your opening statement about having time to do onboarding. Could you tell us a bit about how important it is to have onboarding time? On the back end of the job, is there more education that could be done around taxes, for example, how to file taxes and what entitlements some of your employees would have in terms of tax deductions or tax credits?

Ms. Nicole Larocque: In terms of onboarding, I think we do have a pretty rigorous onboarding process here at Kerry's Place. We want to make sure that when people are coming in the door we have the opportunity to give them the proper training, not just about the job that they're employed for, but also about an overall understanding of Kerry's Place in general. That includes review of our policies and a lot of different mandatory training. We can spend a good week just onboarding someone and getting them introduced to the organization, which, again, plays into the.... When we're getting only eight weeks, we lose a bit of time up front with that person.

I'm sorry. Was the second question about taxes?

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Part of the objective of the summer jobs grants is to transition young people into the workforce, into the labour force. I'm aware of a number of young people who don't understand the entitlements they have on income tax. For example, with the disability tax credit, let's say, they don't know they're able to apply for it. I'm just wondering if you have any insight around tax filing for your employees when they've done their terms.

Ms. Nicole Larocque: I don't have any specific knowledge on that.

Kevin, I don't know if you do.

Mr. Kevin Spafford: I know that we do provide information around the filing of their initial tax forms, obviously, when they begin their employment.

I know, Ms. Zarrillo, that you've asked this question of previous witnesses, and we would certainly be happy to provide information flow-through from the government around taxes and entitlements. We would definitely see that as a value added for the employees, so we would be happy to pass that along. We don't currently provide that above and beyond the normal tax filings that they need to make to CRA in terms of their source deductions.

• (1145)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: That would be great.

Madame Larocque, coming back to you, you obviously see a lot of candidates who come through. What I noticed in the data that we got at the beginning of this study was that two-thirds—or the majority—of the placements are women and girls. I'm wondering if you could give us some insight into that. Do you see that same gender split playing out? Why do you think that happens?

Ms. Nicole Larocque: Honestly, it just seems to be a trend for the type of sector we're in. The developmental services sector in general just tends to be quite female-heavy. It just seems to be a trend. I'm not sure what else to say to that. It is quite female-heavy. I think it's just that caregiving side of things.

We do get a higher population of women applying for these positions, but the same consideration is given to all applicants through our recruitment processes. We obviously base our recruitment on skills, experience and meeting the qualifications of the job posting itself, so it's just the way that it seems to have panned out over the years.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

You spoke a bit about wages. In the not-for-profit sector in general, usually there are not a lot of extra opportunities to enhance or to pay above the minimum wage on these summer jobs grants. Do you have any insights for me on how we could correct that through the Canada summer jobs grants?

Ms. Nicole Larocque: I understand that the grants are, as I said, encompassing minimum wage, and I don't know if there's anything that can be done above that, but even just being able to offer a little more on top of minimum wage as a wage subsidy I think would help organizations like Kerry's Place. It's not something we budget for. We do try to pay a little more than minimum wage, but it still ends up being less than if we were to post a regular position. It still ends up being a little less than what we would pay someone else we've hired.

Again, I think that's an internal process we can work on, because I think we're still very stuck in a mindset that maybe we're hiring Canada summer jobs candidates and they're not doing 100% of the workload, but I think they are. There was this formula created on an internal perspective where we were offering 75% of the wages of a regular position. I think we can do better if it's something that we as an organization can start budgeting for, but in terms of the wage subsidy and whether there's any room to go above minimum wage, I think that's where we would be able to benefit a little more from the program.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

Now we'll go to Ms. Ferreri for five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today to testify on our study of the Canada summer jobs program.

Obviously, I want to send a big thank you to Paul.

I saw some of my colleagues chuckle a little bit when they heard the municipality name of Douro-Dummer, but I wear it proud. It's where I'm from. It is a unique name, but it's what we are.

Paul, you gave some very concrete suggestions and feedback in terms of Canada summer jobs. I want to go through them and ensure that they make it to the report stage of this to improve the program.

Number one, you talked about earlier decisions and being notified early. This is Business 101. We cannot plan or make decisions if we don't know what we're dealing with. Number two, you mentioned the selection criteria. A lot of the programs for Canada summer jobs are not reflective of the applicant. In particular, the Township of Douro-Dummer or rural areas don't necessarily have the diversity that is required for some of these applications. Number three, you said that it was quite tedious, meaning that it was challenging for your staff. It would time out and you'd lose spots in the application and have to start all over again.

As somebody who runs a municipality, and as a treasurer, as you said, you understand bureaucracy. A lot of this is the same problem that we see in programs across the board, in all government programs. It is a real bureaucratic problem. There's more bureaucracy being done than there are actual results.

One thing you said was that this program is not maximizing its funds. From a treasurer's perspective, that is one of the things we want to talk about. Giving somebody money doesn't always give a return on investment if it's not invested properly. Could you expand on what you think that means? How efficient is the system from your perspective of working in a municipality? How efficient is the Canada summer jobs program?

• (11:50)

Mr. Paul Creamer: Thank you for your question.

On a lot of my comments, I think we're on the same page in the sense that I was trying to make my comments around how I would approach it if I were to review the program, and what I would change in order to maximize those funds.

I think one thing is that even if I look at our use case, the positions for which we were approved were positions that we would probably need to hire for whether we got the funding or not. The positions that we did get funding for were for our parks and recreation. We need those positions no matter what. I think where the funding for us would probably be more advantageous, and where we'd get greater value, would be for some positions that we wouldn't be hiring for unless we got this funding. That's where we could get further ahead as a township. One of the office positions that we did apply for was going to be doing records retention and things that we don't have the ability to do on a day-to-day basis.

If the scoring could account for that, that would be one way to do it. As I said, the planning and the timing would be the other huge advantage.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you for that.

I think one of the big questions I have for you is about customer service standards. Did you have clear communication when you were doing this application? Did you have a sense of accountability and timely responses? As somebody, again, who works in a municipality, service standards are critical in being efficient for customers, which is what taxpayers are. As you said, there's no free money. It's taxpayers' money. We have to utilize it as efficiently as possible.

Did you find that the service standards in customer service were up to par when you were dealing with this program?

Mr. Paul Creamer: Yes. Any time I had a question, the responses were quick and good.

Again, the challenge was around my question in mid-March about when we were going to get a response and find out. The person I was able to speak to said it wouldn't be until mid-April. It wasn't that the response wasn't quick. It was just that the ultimate decision wasn't quick.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I think that would be something I'd push back on, and I would maybe challenge you on that, because to me, that isn't great customer service. If you have to keep following up, if they're not giving you the answers you need and you don't know how to manage what you're trying to manage, that could be improved. Do you agree?

Mr. Paul Creamer: I'm not sure how to respond to that.

It would be nice to get a decision sooner.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ferreri.

Ms. Hepfner, go ahead for five minutes.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank our witnesses for being here today.

One of my favourite parts of the Canada summer jobs program is the amount of real engagement MPs can have with the local organizations. During the summer, we get to visit and see some of the students working in those jobs. Ontario Sailing is in my riding, so this summer I got to visit it. Their Canada summer jobs student Rachel Green qualified for the Pan Am Games, so I'd like to give her a little shout-out as they start that competition in Chile. I hope she does well.

The other thing I noticed in that office was that several of their more advanced staff had been Canada summer jobs students in the past. I found the same thing at different employers I went to. They engaged Canada summer jobs students, but they also had people who had been Canada summer jobs students in the past and who were now some of their core employees. I think some of the witnesses talked about this, as well—the success of the program.

I'd like to ask each organization whether they think that should continue to be the goal of Canada summer jobs. Is it to provide these sorts of opportunities and learning experiences for students, or should we also look at the labour market and what local communities need, in terms of workforce?

Mr. Spafford or Ms. Larocque, either of you could start.

• (1155)

Mr. Kevin Spafford: Thank you for that question.

I would say it's the latter. Both are important, in terms of opportunities for youth, but it's also about looking at the local labour force and what's required.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Go ahead, Mr. Creamer.

Mr. Paul Creamer: I would agree it's important for the youth. I can look back at my individual experience. I'm where I am in my career today because I was offered a summer student position with the Town of Whitby, way back when.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Ms. Beaubier, I have to tell you that I know Rutland very well. My in-laws live there, so I'm a fan of your part of Kelowna.

Ms. Karen Beaubier: Well, come by for a mural tour any time.

I agree with my counterparts here today. It's both aspects of it. For example, here in Rutland and Kelowna, we're having an extreme construction boom. Looking at the labour issues here would definitely be helpful.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: My second question is for each of you.

We've heard a bunch of examples of how things aren't working quite as well as they possibly could. If we simplified the process so each organization had an amount awarded during the summer, would you then have more flexibility in terms of how many students you hire, how long they work, and when they start? If you had that flexibility, would that resolve a lot of these issues?

Let's start again with Mr. Spafford.

Mr. Kevin Spafford: As Nicole mentioned in response to a similar question earlier, it would certainly be a significant departure from the current process, where we're approved position by position. I think that would likely be similar to how flexibility was offered during COVID, when we were able to offer more flexible positions.

I think that is something we would need to work through, in terms of how exactly it would work. We would be able to offer, in that situation, more 16-week placements—for us, in particular, that's a big draw for candidates—and offer them throughout the year. That was another thing for us, as Nicole mentioned. Not being restricted to the summer was helpful during COVID.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Okay.

Mr. Creamer, you have 30 seconds. That leaves 30 seconds for Ms. Beaubier.

Mr. Paul Creamer: I second that. It would definitely provide additional flexibility.

We'd have to see how it would play out. Typically, we are looking at very specific positions, given the size of our organization, but I imagine it would benefit larger organizations to have much more flexibility.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Ms. Beaubier, what are your thoughts on that question?

Ms. Karen Beaubier: I'm the opposite. I'm a small organization, so I have that flexibility already. I could work within both parameters, quite frankly, but it would be helpful to have someone in the office on a year-round basis, or for a few months of the year. That would definitely help me out, too.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Okay. That's pretty much my time.

Thank you very much, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hepfner.

[*Translation*]

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

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

My question is for Mr. Creamer.

One of the recommendations made was that the program should offer greater flexibility. During the pandemic, this was indeed the case. I would also point out that there was more money. In my opinion, there are differences in terms of the flexibility offered. We have fewer positions, but more hours. I don't think these things even out.

Mr. Creamer, what does greater flexibility in terms of Canada Summer Jobs projects and full-time employment mean to you in concrete terms?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Creamer: When we talk about flexibility, for our organization it would mean longer terms. We were approved for two positions at eight weeks each, but ultimately we needed those positions for 16 weeks. The full cost of the position, which we weren't funded for, ended up falling on the township.

Given our location and our limited number of applications sometimes, if we aren't successful in recruiting for one position, flexibility could be that we could pivot to another position more easily.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: What effect does this have on the projects you put forward? You have been granted two positions for 8 weeks when you needed these positions for 16 weeks.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Creamer: Again, I think it gets back to timing. If we had enough time and heads-up, we could plan and advertise accordingly. Without that notice and without that timing, if we're planning for 16 weeks and we only get approved for eight, we would probably be in a position where we need to continue with the 16-week plan and just fund the difference.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Ms. Zarrillo, you have two and a half minutes to conclude this round.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll direct my questions to Mr. Creamer this time.

In your opening presentation to us, you talked about wanting to recruit top talent and you didn't get any applications. I just wonder if you could expand a little bit on what attributes you're looking for when you say "top talent"? How do you recover from not being able to have applicants apply?

Mr. Paul Creamer: Thank you for the question.

I think every position is going to be different in terms of top talent. Any time I hire, I want to be able to go through multiple applicants to see who will be the best fit in terms of experience, who can contribute to our goals and meet the objectives of the position, and also be a good fit. Because I've been in this position, when I look at a good fit, I think it's someone who will get experience to help them towards a career as well.

When we don't get applicants or we get only one.... Last year we just cancelled the position.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: You cancelled the position because you didn't get what you were looking for.

I have one last question, then. You mentioned that you didn't get that many applicants. What do young people do for work in your town?

Mr. Paul Creamer: I've never done a study on it, necessarily. I would think many young people are staying, if they're going to school or university. I'm not sure we've gotten the true reflection of what the potential applicant pool is, because we are advertising so late in the game.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: You feel that the lateness of the advertising is impacting your quality of top talent.

Mr. Paul Creamer: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

I want to thank the panellists in the first round for appearing and providing detailed information on the subject matter.

We will now suspend for a couple of moments while we transition to the next panel of witnesses.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: We'll resume with the second panel.

From Sasamat Outdoor Centre, we have Ben Quinn. From STEM Camp, we have Kevin Cougler, founder and executive director; and Andrew Downing, director of operations. From the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario, we have Krista Gillespie, vice-president of youth engagement and employment.

Mr. Downing is appearing in the room with us. I welcome those appearing on screen, and I would remind them to please speak slowly in the official language of their choice. You have interpretation services available by using the icon at the bottom of your screen.

We will now begin with a five-minute opening statement by Mr. Quinn from Sasamat Outdoor Centre.

Mr. Ben Quinn (Operations Manager, Sasamat Outdoor Centre): Thank you very much, everybody, for the invitation to appear before this committee.

My name is Ben Quinn, and I am the operations manager at Sasamat Outdoor Centre.

Sasamat Outdoor Centre is an accredited member of the British Columbia Camps Association. We have been in operation since 1986, though we have had camping groups on Sasamat Lake going back to 1962 under our former camp name, Camp Wallace. We are also a member of the Association of Neighbourhood Houses of British Columbia, a non-profit, community-based organization and one of B.C.'s oldest registered charities. It was established in 1894.

Situated on beautiful Sasamat Lake, Sasamat Outdoor Centre is surrounded by enchanting natural forests that make the setting ideal for personal learning and growth. We offer a variety of day camp and overnight camp programs for children and youth ages four to 15. Our facilities and programs include high ropes challenge courses, canoeing, kayaking, rock climbing, archery, shelter building, and a number of traditional summer camp programs that you'd expect to see at an outdoor summer camp. Our staff are well trained and passionate about outdoor education and child development. We strive to make every camper feel valued and included.

Sasamat has been fortunate to be a recipient of the Canada summer jobs wage subsidy program for many years. As a summer camp, we naturally attract youth in their early years of high school or post-secondary to our staff team. On average, we employ between 40 and 50 youth per summer who meet the criteria of the Canada summer jobs program.

As a non-profit organization, we have been very grateful for this program. The funding we receive makes a huge impact in offsetting our overall costs of running these camps, and it's an essential piece of funding that helps keep our programs affordable and accessible to as many families as possible.

Like many camps across the country, in recent years Sasamat Outdoor Centre has been financially vulnerable from the impacts of COVID-19 and subsequent rising costs across all areas of our operations. This year, we were hit with another financial hurdle when we received our funding from the Canada summer jobs program: It was, unexpectedly, less than half of what we had received in the previous year and about half of what our average funding amount has been in the last five years.

We understand from follow-up conversations that there was less of a pool of funds to go around in our area this year. However, as a non-profit that has come to rely on this funding year over year, this is a difficult challenge for us to overcome.

Needless to say, we are very thankful that this program exists and we hope it will continue for many years to come.

I want to thank you for your time. I'm happy to take any questions that you have now.

- (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Quinn.

We will hear from our next two groups, and then we will go to questions.

Mr. Cougler, you have the floor for STEM Camp.

Mr. Kevin Cougler (Founder and Executive Director, STEM Camp): Thank you very much.

Greetings, everyone.

My name is Kevin Cougler, and I'm the founder and executive director of STEM Camp, which has been a registered Canadian not-for-profit since 2015. I'd like to introduce you to Andrew Downing, who is our director of operations and is with you in person today. Thank you for the invitation to testify before this committee.

STEM Camp has participated in the Canada summer jobs program since 2016. To my knowledge, we're one of the largest participants across Canada, having employed approximately 2,028 summer staff during this period.

STEM Camp is a summer day camp that provides programming in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In 2023, we operated in 54 locations with 12,416 enrolments. In total, 55,906 campers have benefited from attending STEM Camp, which is an opportunity that would not exist without this program.

The Canada summer jobs program has made significant improvements since STEM Camp first participated in 2016. These include, but are not limited to, the ability to duplicate and edit grant applications, receiving final project payments in a much more timely fashion and having only one project officer assigned to an organization, instead of one officer for each project, which is significant for an organization the size of STEM Camp.

While these improvements have been noteworthy and appreciated, I would like to respectfully submit some suggestions for program enhancement based upon our experience.

Number one, we recommend allowing an organization to refill a position after an employee quits or is terminated for cause without sacrificing the subsidy. Currently, if a worker quits after four weeks and a new employee is hired, the subsidy cannot be used for either worker because they have not achieved the six-week minimum employment requirement. This causes the organization undue financial hardship. It should also be noted that, unfortunately, there is an ever-increasing trend of youth not fulfilling their contractual employment obligations. I'm sure my colleagues Ben and Krista will attest to that fact as well.

Number two, declaration forms can't be submitted until the employment start date. For STEM Camp, this results in manually submitting over 400 forms on the very first day of camp. If you've ever been to camp, you'll know that camp is very busy the first day. It would be helpful to be able to submit these forms when the employee is hired, which would also result in receiving advances prior to the first pay period. Currently, by having to wait to submit declaration forms on the first day of employment, employers must wait sometimes for three pay periods before the advance is received. This places an organization the size of STEM Camp in a significant financial deficit for many weeks. Our recommendation is to allow the declaration forms to be submitted as soon as the employee is hired. If the forms could be submitted digitally instead of manually entering the information from each form, this would save us countless hours of typing.

Number three, we recommend re-establishing Service Canada checks and balances to ensure that the terms of the CSJ agreement are being followed by every organization that receives the subsidy. These used to take place in greater number prior to COVID. After the pandemic, I imagine resources were stretched, but we haven't seen an awful lot of checks and balances to ensure that the program dollars are being spent according to their intention and their contractual obligation.

Number four, it's increasingly difficult to find Canadian students to fill summer camp positions, and it would be helpful for employers to be able to hire people who are on visas, whether these are straight work visas or student visas, especially when Canadians cannot be found to fill those positions. We turn away dozens of qualified applicants each year who are here on student visas and would be fantastic workers.

In closing, the cost of operating a summer camp far exceeds what a parent is willing to pay to send their child to camp. This is not unique to STEM Camp. Most summer camps would not exist without the CSJ program, including STEM Camp. The program has provided us with the ability to create and deliver fun, educational summer programming that inspires children to learn about STEM, encourages them to pursue STEM education subjects and, more importantly, helps solve current and anticipated Canadian labour shortages.

Supporting and increasing investment in the CSJ program means supporting Canadian youth in their quest to become the innovators of tomorrow.

• (1215)

That concludes my testimony. Thank you for this opportunity.

I do have some other recommendations that, due to time constraints, I'm not able to include, but I would be—

The Chair: Mr. Cougler, you could probably capture those during questioning.

Thank you for your testimony.

Now we will go to Ms. Gillespie for five minutes.

Ms. Krista Gillespie (Vice-President, Youth Engagement and Employment, YMCA of Southwestern Ontario): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am joining you today from outside London, Ontario, on the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, Haudenosaunee and Attiwandaron peoples.

Thank you to the members of the committee for inviting the YMCA to share our experience and recommendations.

My name is Krista Gillespie. My pronouns are she/her. I'm the vice-president of youth engagement and employment programs at the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario.

I am here to speak to the impact of the Canada summer jobs program on youth who participate through our local YMCA, as well as 36 other YMCAs across Canada. The YMCA is a leading Canadian charity with a focus on health and well-being. As an employer, we understand that work is an important aspect of health and wellness, and can provide focus and meaning. At the YMCA, through the Canada summer jobs program, young people are engaged in high-quality, high-value and meaningful work experiences.

We're encouraged by the committee's commitment to undertake this study, as we believe it provides an excellent opportunity to explore and, hopefully, build on the strengths of this remarkable program. We have several ideas on how to build on those strengths, but let me start by sharing that the charitable sector is where a great career can begin for young people, as we support civic engagement and a sense of belonging.

Youth are at a greater risk of unemployment than the general population is. Many young people are entering the labour market for the first time and lack work experience.

At the YMCA, Canada summer jobs youth are often employed as camp counsellors. Other positions may include membership services staff, facilities and maintenance, lifeguards and ECEs. This year, we were able to hire a digital coordinator. Young employees in these fields gain important skills, such as leadership, conflict resolution, communication and problem-solving. These are foundational roles that get youth started and support them throughout their entire career trajectory. This entry point facilitates a transition to longer-term careers. In my own experience, we often hire people through Canada summer jobs and see them return for a second year, when they grow in leadership and level of responsibility.

We have five recommendations to build on the strengths of the Canada summer jobs program.

One, evolve the Canada summer jobs program to a year-round youth jobs program, with flexibility for part-time positions. This would facilitate access to the labour market, especially given that the pursuit of education is departing from the traditional "semester one, semester two, break" model. This would allow employers to offer a more comprehensive and diverse mix of roles that would be appealing to a larger and more diverse number of young people.

Two, introduce predictable, multi-year funding that would enable employers to better plan and to have meaningfully engaged youth employees. The earlier the funding is announced, the earlier we can begin recruitment for Canada summer jobs positions. This allows young people to plan accordingly.

Three, enhance the administrative efficiencies of the program. I certainly agree with many of the things that Mr. Cougler already identified. A few points we have include removing the requirement of detailed reporting of short absences, allowing for a start date window without requiring additional paperwork if there is a change to the start date in the original application, and consolidating reporting to not need an individual report for each staff member, especially when hiring multiple staff for the same role.

Four, include funding for paid mental health or sick days. At the YMCA, our goal is to support our youngest workers and ensure they have healthy and productive work experiences. Including a mental health or sick day allocation in the program would benefit young people who encounter and experience a variety of health-related challenges.

Five, expand hiring to include not just Canadian residents but also those who have a work permit, including international students.

As an organization that employs thousands of young people annually, the YMCA is continuously striving to provide young employees with great job experiences. We believe the Canada summer jobs program offers an impactful experience to young people in our communities, and we look forward to building on that program's success.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gillespie.

We will now begin the first round of questions with Mr. Aitchison, for six minutes.

Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start with Ms. Gillespie.

I want to clarify something. You mentioned that your organization does employ young people. Does the YMCA of Southwestern Ontario also engage in employment placement practices, like helping young people find work with different companies?

Ms. Krista Gillespie: The short answer is yes. We do have separate employment programs that do help support youth and people with identified barriers into work. Essentially, they are pre-employment training programs.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: That's great.

As part of that program, do you...? Where I'm going with this is that the YMCA of Simcoe/Muskoka actually engages with employers of the region and tries to address the existing needs, that kind of stuff.

Is that something that your YMCA does, as well?

Ms. Krista Gillespie: Yes, we do.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: That's fine. Where I want to go with this... I have asked this question once before. There is a huge housing shortage. There is a crisis in this country. One of the primary reasons we're struggling to get enough units built is the lack of skilled trades and labour in that sector.

Is that something that you have heard from the industry in the communities you serve?

• (1225)

Ms. Krista Gillespie: I can't speak to anything specific that I have heard directly. Certainly, I understand that this is a challenge. With the ability to make the program more flexible, outside of the summer, I think there would be opportunities. Not specifically speaking of housing, but if we were to offer Canada summer jobs positions outside of the summer, it would open up opportunities for us to provide positions in other areas of the work we do.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: You're suggesting that the program should be more permissive in terms of letting local agencies decide what they need to do.

Do you think the program could be used to help encourage young people, for example, to get into fields that people need in different regions, whether it's particular industries or more national needs? Do you think it's a program that could be used to help guide young people?

Ms. Krista Gillespie: Absolutely. The program excels at providing opportunities that youth wouldn't otherwise have to open the doors for anything they might be interested in.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thanks for that.

I don't know how much time I have, perhaps two minutes. I will quickly ask both camps.... I have a bit of experience with camps. My riding is Parry Sound—Muskoka. I think we probably have more camps in my riding than any other riding in the country. During COVID, camps were one of the organizations that seemed to get missed in all the different programs that existed. I remember working with the government at the time to try to come up with ways to help camps.

Do you think the Canada summer jobs program, the way it works, is really the best vehicle for summer camps? Is there a better way to support summer camps?

You don't have a lot of time, but I'd ask the question of both camps that are represented, starting with Mr. Quinn.

Mr. Ben Quinn: The thing about summer camps is that.... The Canada summer jobs program is a really wonderful grant that helps summer camps fund their wage costs—one of the highest costs an outdoor centre has—through their main operating season, which is July and August for most summer camps.

Where the Canada summer jobs program does not help a summer camp is during the rest of the year. Many camps operate in shoulder seasons and off-seasons in areas like outdoor education. Currently, the Canada summer jobs program does not apply to that operating season, which is often just as expensive as running a summer camp. If this grant were expanded, or a new program came in that offered funding outside the eight weeks of summer camp, that would be incredible for camps across this entire country.

Mr. Kevin Cougler: I agree with Mr. Quinn's comments on that.

We have 50-odd locations across Canada. It's a challenge just to be able to find employment for the summertime. For example, we interview over 1,000 candidates, starting in December and January every year, to be able to land on 400 who actually show up during the summer. That has a very taxing implication on our staff at head office, who are not many. We have seven or eight full-time staff. You can imagine just the sheer volume of interviewing those 1,000 candidates. There's not a lot of other work that can be done when you're trying to interview and attract top talent.

If there was a mechanism to increase some funding for positions throughout the course of the year for some of those important entry-level jobs, it could give some experience, just in terms of being able to teach them interviewing skills and how to interview a vast volume of potential candidates. I think that would be incredibly useful for the youth of today and a skill that would serve them well in the future.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aitchison.

We'll go to Mr. Collins for six minutes.

• (1230)

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for their appearances today.

I'll go to Mr. Cugler, who mentioned that he had other recommendations to provide to the committee but, because of the five-minute time limit on his opening, couldn't provide them.

Mr. Cugler, could you provide us with the other recommendations that you referenced earlier?

Mr. Kevin Cugler: Yes. Thank you for that opportunity.

This one will come as no surprise. I think the largest recommendation on the list of everybody who's involved in the Canada summer jobs program is to not backdate the timelines.

I'll give you an example. When we interview our 1,000 candidates, one of the reasons we have to continue to interview is that we are not able to offer full-time employment until the announcement that we are successful in getting Canada summer jobs funding, which comes out in late April. If we're interviewing somebody for that position in January, the best we can do is say that we think we'll be able to hire them once we hear about this position. Of course, that's not a lot of confidence for students who are in college or university. They want to know what their job is for that summer. We then lose them to another organization that can give them a firm offer.

Often, we'll be hiring two or three times for the exact same position, so if we could back that up and be able to hear about funding sooner, I think the program would see a huge uptick in success in being able to attract and retain that quality talent come summertime.

I think that's the biggest one on our list.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks, Mr. Cugler.

I'll turn now to Mr. Quinn.

In terms of the flexibility of the program, do you have any recommendations? There is a common theme, as Mr. Cugler mentioned earlier, of opening up the program earlier to provide a greater pool of students for program participants to choose from. We've also heard from others, and we heard Ms. Gillespie's recommendation today about some of the flexibility that she's seeking from the program.

What are your thoughts on that? I didn't hear recommendations as part of your opening submission to the committee. Do you feel that multi-year funding or a year-round program with greater flexibility for part-time status would benefit your organization, understanding you're a camp?

Mr. Ben Quinn: Thank you for that question.

I think there are huge opportunities for flexibility along those same veins. Most notably, I just want to echo that if we were able to hear about funding sooner in the year, that would greatly expedite things and help to retain staff by getting those offers out, instead of making conditional offers in January and February, which is the hiring timeline for most summer camps.

There are other flexibilities I might recommend. I think somebody else mentioned earlier in their presentation the ability to use funding when a staffer resigns or is unable to continue their employment, for whatever reason, partway through their Canada summer jobs contract. Being able to utilize the funding that was allocated to that position somewhere else, for another position in the camp—because currently you're not able to do that—would be a really good flexibility that I might recommend.

I would also echo that being able to apply this funding outside of summer into the spring and shoulder seasons, as well as to part-time employees, would be really good—at least for our camp and, I'm sure, many camps across the country.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks, Mr. Quinn.

Ms. Gillespie, we heard from a StatsCan representative at a previous meeting that as much as the Canada summer jobs program has a strong EDI component, there are still a number of equity-seeking groups in the youth workforce that are falling behind. There are still gaps.

Can I ask what inroads your organization has made in providing employment to equity-seeking groups, and whether there's room for improvement with the program application or the program as a whole?

Ms. Krista Gillespie: Thank you for the question.

Certainly we see a recurring theme with these answers. In terms of timelines, if we are able to find out earlier, it allows us to reach out to our community with more time. At the YMCA, we are building partnerships. We are building relationships with equity-deserving groups to make sure we are getting job postings throughout our community and in other community agencies in order to have a fair and equitable recruitment process across our communities.

We are making inroads. Certainly we have a way to go, but having the ability to know earlier would allow us more time to reach out to our communities further.

• (1235)

Mr. Chad Collins: Mr. Cugler, I have about 30 seconds left. Do you want to answer that same question?

Mr. Kevin Cugler: I'd echo those comments by Ms. Gillespie as well.

One of our strategies is to reach out to friendship centres and provide them with postings for summer employment, but working with friendship centres and the FNMI space—first nations, Métis and Inuit—requires time. It requires the ability to go and make friends and talk to people and establish relationships, and you can't do that within a few weeks.

We were lucky this summer. We were able to do a camp with Six Nations, but it took us a few months to be able to pull that off, so I would echo backing the time up and giving us more time to give us the opportunity to make those connections.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Collins.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I would like to thank the witnesses for their very informative testimonies. They provide us with interesting food for thought and recommendations.

My first question is for Mr. Quinn, whose organization offers day camps and overnight camps for young people in a natural environment. What a great experience for our young people and for the young people who work at these camps!

Mr. Quinn, you've said that you've had a hard time coping with the nearly 50% cuts the program has reportedly suffered. Can you tell us about the impact these cuts have had on the camps in terms of the number of positions and weeks? How does this compare to the previous year?

[English]

Mr. Ben Quinn: Thank you for that question.

Typically, we employ between 40 and 50 youth who would meet the criteria for Canada summer jobs in any given summer, and on average we receive from Canada summer jobs approved funding for roughly 25 to 30 of those. This year we received, in terms of real dollars, about half of the funding that we received in the previous year. On average, based on our five-year average, it was a little less than half of what we would normally expect to receive.

The impacts on the summer camp are not seen by most, because we're going to run the summer camp and we're going to employ those youth regardless. Especially when we received notice of the funding so close to the start of summer camp, we don't have time to make big operational changes on such short notice.

Where the real impact is seen is in the overall financial budget of our non-profit. In terms of dollars this year, the funding cut equated to approximately \$75,000 that we were expecting to receive. In an entire fiscal year, now we have to find a way to absorb that cost. Because we're a non-profit, it means finding other funding or finding ways to raise fees for service, which of course directly impacts the users of our camp.

That's the impact, I would say.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Would you say, Mr. Quinn, that the camps you offer as part of your mission are essential to the organization's journey?

[English]

Mr. Ben Quinn: Absolutely, yes. Our mission is enriching lives through learning and playing in the outdoors, and our summer camps are an absolutely essential function of what we do. Part of that, at least half of our operation, revolves around summer camp; the rest of it comes from shoulder season operations.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: So you would be in favour of restoring or increasing funding to better support the program.

Is that correct?

[English]

Mr. Ben Quinn: Yes, and I think there are obviously lots of factors that go into how much funding a certain organization receives. I think my feedback there might be, if an organization is going to be receiving less funding because there's less funding to go around in a certain area, to have communication in advance to let them know that they might not receive what they have been receiving, so that they may have some time to plan around that.

• (1240)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: With regard to the eight-week employment period, one witness told us last week that it was important to obtain funding for a greater number of weeks. In the case of specialized camps, it is often necessary to train young people for the work they will be doing there. However, projects can be jeopardized by the number of weeks currently granted. For example, if a project requires two positions and we get just one for eight weeks, that changes everything, and there are things that may have to be abandoned.

For your camps, is eight weeks enough? Would you like to have more weeks?

[English]

Mr. Ben Quinn: Thank you for that question.

I would say that for most camps in B.C., an eight-week contract is not long enough for a standard position. Many camps offer one- or two-week training programs that are full 35-hour or 40-hour training programs, which are often not included in a grant for these positions. If you multiply that payroll cost by 30, 40, 50 youth you're employing, that's just a cost that the camp has to absorb in order to train the staff adequately to run these camps. I would love to see contracts of nine or 10 weeks specifically for summer camps programs, instead of the eight weeks.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Quinn, for your testimony today. I was the member of Parliament who had to make the phone call to say that your funding had been cut by 50%. I maintained the share of the funding—right around 10% is the Sasamat funding—but it wasn't a nice conversation and it wasn't nice news I had to deliver on such short notice. As you said, we didn't even know as members of Parliament until days before that this was happening. I share the concerns that one of my other colleagues mentioned. We get news on a Friday, and I tried to get a hold of you on the Friday, because I didn't want you to go into the weekend and then on Monday you'd get an email from the central office.

Anyway, I just wanted to give you the time to share any additional recommendations you have for us, because I think we've heard loud and clear that eight weeks isn't enough. We know for sure that the 50% cut in funding really impacted communities and not-for-profits like yours, as well as charities. I just wanted to give you this opportunity to see if there are any other recommendations you would make at this time, so it's on the record, because this is our opportunity to make the Canada summer jobs program better.

Mr. Ben Quinn: Thank you so much.

Yes, there are lots of opportunities for other flexibilities. I think one of the big ones that we've hit home today, especially from the other witnesses, is the opportunity for flexible funding for positions that are not full-time. Lots of camps employ many youth full time throughout the summer, but there are also youth who work part time, 10 to 20 hours a week, and those are not eligible positions. I think flexibility to do that as well outside the summer...although I recognize it's a summer jobs program.

Those are the two flexibilities that I would really want to stress here. As well, I did mention earlier that when an employee is unable to continue their Canada summer jobs contract for whatever reason—maybe they're resigning or being dismissed—offering flexibility to utilize that funding in another position at the camp that maybe wasn't in the included list of funded positions or applying it to another person would be another one.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

I'm going to move to Mr. Cougler, but I want to thank you for all the work you do. I know that you've recently stepped up into a new position, and I want everybody on the screen who might be watching or listening to this to know how important Sasamat is to our community and how many generations of kids go there as campers and then end up working there, so I appreciate all that.

Mr. Cougler, it's nice to see you again. I hope that you will be coming out west at some point soon.

I also want to give you this opportunity. Is there anything else on the recommendation list that you want to get on the record?

• (1245)

Mr. Kevin Cougler: Thank you for that, and it's nice to see you as well, Ms. Zarrillo.

I'd like Andrew to talk about this a little bit. Madame Chabot talked about what happens, what the implications are, when full funding or close to full funding is not received. From a training perspective, for STEM Camp, it means the difference between being able to train staff adequately for five days, perhaps in person, and switching to virtual, which is a lot cheaper. There's a real implication with that in terms of what we see in customer service calls and supporting staff once we get into the summer.

Andrew is our director of operations, and he can speak to that a little more coherently and with more expertise than I can.

Andrew, would you mind commenting on what you see?

Mr. Andrew Downing (Director of Operations, STEM Camp): Sure, Kevin, and thanks to the committee for allowing me to appear here today.

Absolutely, it's very impactful, the amount of time that we have to train our staff. Last year, we were able to do five days in person. That was really a test for our company to see what the impact would be for the experience of campers and the experience of staff. It was a five-day in-person training session. It was very expensive, but it was a great test. During the first two weeks, I was waiting for the shoe to drop and thinking, "Why am I not getting calls about things falling apart across the province?" It was very impactful, and there really is something to be said about in-person training, hands-on with all your staff across the province.

This year, because of some budget constraints with fewer CSJ dollars received, we moved to more of a hybrid model, so we had online modules that we created and some in-person training, but certainly the first two weeks of camp were a lot more hectic, both for customer service staff and for our staff at camps. A lot of that came down as well to the staffing levels of camp, because where we had eight to 10 positions covered in previous years, we were working with five or six.

It's a real challenge. Having more dollars available for training would be very impactful for our business, for sure, certainly for the experience of kids at camp and for the staff who are there to take care of those kids.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I wonder if you could comment on the number of applicants this year. Did you see a change in the applicants, now that we're post-COVID or kind of post-COVID?

Mr. Andrew Downing: I would say there's a slight uptick, yes. Certainly in 2021, even a bit in 2022, there were fewer applicants. I would say for this past season, the 2023 season, that we did see a slight uptick, but we still find it very challenging, starting in January, to start camps in July with 400 staff. There are some challenges there.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

We have Mrs. Falk for five minutes.

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

I'd like to thank each of our witnesses for taking the time to be here and for sharing your testimony, because your first-hand experience with the Canada summer jobs program is very valued as we undertake this study.

Mr. Cougler, you made a comment in your opening remarks regarding re-establishing Service Canada checks. I was just wondering if you could explain what that looked like. Have they not come back at all post-COVID?

Mr. Kevin Cougler: As mentioned, we've been doing this since 2016, so I'll go all the way back to that year. There used to be a series of checks where Service Canada would call our office and request for me to go out to sites across the province, as well as the staff, and to meet with one of their representatives, and they would have one-on-one meetings with me or with the staff. Over time, I would request that I didn't have to go out to 50 different locations during the course of the summer, because it was a little time-consuming and the costs were prohibitive.

The other thing that Service Canada used to do was call our office and ask for copies of pay slips and proof that the recipients of the program were getting paid according to the terms of the contract. This adds a certain amount of extra work for my staff, of course, but I think it's important from a taxpayers' perspective to know that those dollars are being adequately and properly disseminated for the intention of the wage subsidy.

In the last couple of years, my staff are telling me that these visits are not really happening, and there aren't a lot of checks by Service Canada anymore. I have the sneaky suspicion that it's just because, after the pandemic, it takes some time to build up some resources at Service Canada to be able to do that, and it takes a long time for my office to be able to follow through.

That's been our experience, and we'd like to see some measure of increased controls for the program.

• (1250)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

Because you have been accessing this program since 2016, I want to ask you if you have noticed that the application process has stayed the same or if it has gotten easier. Is it in plain language? Have you noticed a difference at all in the application process?

Mr. Kevin Cougler: My experience will be based on the size of our organization. Perhaps Ms. Gillespie might concur with me here.

It used to be that I would spend four weeks in December, over my Christmas holidays, writing individual applications across 50-odd constituencies in order to meet the deadline. When the copy and edit function came into the GCOS system—to be able to copy one application and edit it for another constituency, modifying it slightly—that probably saved me about 75% of the time it used to take.

I think there have been some improvements. Certainly the introduction of the GCOS system has been a godsend in terms of being able to adequately file and track applications. That's been fantastic.

I think there's been marked improvement over the years, in my experience.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Would you say that when the launch of the application process happens, enough time is provided to complete that, given the copy-and-paste and that type of thing? Is that still adequate time to apply?

Mr. Kevin Cougler: Yes, absolutely it is.

We prepare ahead of time. We do our homework with all of the information, so we're ready ahead of time. By the time the application period opens, we seem to be able to get it done within a week.

In my opinion, I think there's more than enough time to write those applications.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Mr. Quinn, what about you, given that you may be a smaller organization, as opposed to STEM Camp?

Mr. Ben Quinn: Yes, comparatively in terms of size, we can often write that grant application within one day. It's a one-day event for us over here. We do spend a few days beforehand preparing the application in writing separately, and then we're often able to go in and just get it done. It hasn't ever really been a huge issue for us.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay, thanks.

How about you, Ms. Gillespie?

Ms. Krista Gillespie: There's not much to add. Certainly we have seen those improvements that have already been noted, which were more than welcome. It certainly streamlined the process significantly. We have ample time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

We have Mr. Coteau for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses for joining us today. Thank you for the work you do to help young people get the experience they need to transition into the workforce with experience and a bit more knowledge about a specific career they may choose.

Ms. Gillespie, when you talked at the beginning, I really appreciated the fact that a lot of your emphasis was on the development of young people by going through the program. Your testimony seemed to focus on young people and how the program could respond to them. The five recommendations you made, like everyone else, spoke to how to improve the program in the administration and pieces like that, but they did really position it around young people.

You mentioned mental health and sick days. Do you have any statistics or numbers with regard to what that looks like for an organization like yours? How many would be required?

For the second part of that question, during the COVID pandemic, there were a lot of challenges for young people. If this program was in operation during the summer, during that time period, did you see that it actually contributed even more so to the well-being of young people, in your experience?

• (1255)

Ms. Krista Gillespie: Thank you very much for the question.

I'll start with apologies, because I don't have specific statistics. Certainly it is something that we track through our HR, so I could provide something at a further date in terms of the number of absences.

We have seen marked changes in our staff and in our youth as they come back to work, both through the pandemic and then post-pandemic. We are seeing a change in the needs of our younger staff. We're seeing that working five days a week and 40 hours is sometimes too much for them. It's too much of a challenge. At the YMCA, we do have two paid emergency days for employees when they need to take a day off or have an appointment or just need a mental health wellness day. I think it's important that we start recognizing the need for a work environment that supports them taking care of themselves.

Although I don't have specific statistics, I think we have seen not only a move for a reduction in wanting to work the full 40 hours a week, but also a move for staff wanting to work part time or on call. Because the program doesn't allow us to go below 30 hours, it really reduces the number of employees we can have with a more flexible work schedule.

Have I answered your question?

Mr. Michael Coteau: Yes. That was a great answer. Thank you so much.

I do appreciate the recommendations you've made. Thank you again.

Actually, I'm going to ask you one other question, if I can get a quick answer so that I can go on to STEM Camp. You mentioned international students. Can you talk a bit more about why you picked that as a recommendation? What are you seeing out there that actually speaks to that and feeds into that recommendation?

Ms. Krista Gillespie: At the YMCA, we have newcomer service programs. We support adults who come in, just through community connections as well as language. We also have a number of programs that help support newcomer youth, and we see the limita-

tions of their opportunities to become involved in their community through employment, depending on what their status is. That's why we recommend having a broader opportunity for all.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you so much.

Mr. Cougler, you mentioned that over the course of the whole winter break you were filling out these applications. How many positions do you actually get? How many did you get for 2023?

Mr. Kevin Cougler: I might ask Andrew to answer that.

Across 50 locations, I think we had 406 positions filled.

Andrew, does that sound right?

Mr. Andrew Downing: We requested 490 positions. We received funding for 386, and we were able to fill 340 of those positions.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Is your organization for-profit?

Mr. Andrew Downing: It's not-for-profit.

Mr. Michael Coteau: So over three—

The Chair: We just ran out of time.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Coteau, it's been a fascinating discussion.

It is one o'clock. That's our allotted time.

Before we adjourn, I want to remind members that four o'clock today is the deadline for the witness lists for our study on AI.

To the witnesses appearing online and in the room, thank you for your dedication to your organizations and for appearing here with good testimony. Thank you so much.

With that, committee members, the meeting is adjourned.

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