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Chair

Ms. Candice Hoepfner

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

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC)): Good morning, everyone.

I would like to call to order meeting number 35 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Pursuant to Standing Order 108, we are commencing our study of the federal support measures to adoptive parents.

We're really happy to have officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration as well as the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development here with us today. Thank you very much for being here.

We've just begun our study. We know there are a lot of questions around the room on a lot of different areas, so we wanted to bring you folks in to get us started on the right foot. Thank you for being here.

We have your presentations in front of us. It looks like we'll have one presentation from each of the departments, and then we'll have a chance to ask you questions.

Maybe we will begin this morning with Mr. Griffith. Are you doing a presentation with Mr. Paquette?

Mr. Andrew Griffith (Director General, Citizenship and Multiculturalism, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): He's first, though.

The Chair: *Merci.*

All right. Please go ahead. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Paquette (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): Thank you, Madam Chair. I would like to thank you for inviting us and giving us this opportunity to speak to you about federal supports for adoptive parents.

With me today is Louis Beauséjour, Acting Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, who will be able to answer the committee's questions on employment insurance. I also have with me today, François Weldon, Acting Director General of Social Policy, who will be able to take any of the committee's

questions on federal supports available to families with children more generally.

[English]

The government recognizes that getting the best possible start in life is crucial to ensuring that children reach their full potential. That is why a broad range of initiatives has been put in place to support families with children, such as tax support for Canadian families and transfers to provinces and territories for programs and services. Families adopting children would be eligible to apply for benefits such as the Canada child tax benefit, including the national child benefit supplement, the universal child care benefit, and the child tax credit.

The Government of Canada currently has a number of support measures available to adoptive parents and their adopted children. These include recognition, through the adoption tax credit, that adoption expenses reduce the ability of adoptive parents to pay income taxes, and there's also the employment insurance parental benefit for 35 weeks.

My remarks will especially address the federal government's involvement in intercountry adoption and the complementary parental benefits available to adoptive parents through the employment insurance program.

I have to state at the outset that adoption in Canada is a provincial and territorial responsibility and that each province and territory has its own rules and regulations on all aspects of adoption, including the adoption of children into Canada. Provinces and territories or licensed adoption agencies are responsible for case management.

• (0850)

[Translation]

International or inter-country adoptions are probably the most complicated adoptions, as there are many layers involved—provincial/territorial adoption laws, federal immigration laws and the laws of the child's country of origin. Even the best prepared parents can find such a process fraught with unexpected financial, cultural, legal and other considerations. They need to know about adoption policies in a country they're dealing with. And they want reassurance that the child offered to them is legally adoptable; in other words, that he or she has not been a victim of exploitation or trafficking.

To help ensure that parents have access to the most current information at all times, HRSDC's Intercountry Adoption Services website provides an overview of the intercountry adoption process, as well as alerts about Canada-wide adoption suspensions.

[English]

The federal government plays an important role in ensuring that adoption into Canada is done in accordance with related federal laws and regulations and international treaties. For example, Canada is a signatory to both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. These international conventions are intended to protect children's fundamental rights, provide safeguards that ensure that intercountry adoption takes place in the best interests of the child, and establish a system of cooperation among states to prevent the abduction, sale, or trafficking of children.

Our departments facilitate communication and cooperation between adoption authorities in Canada at the federal, provincial, and territorial levels and foreign authorities. It also collects information and data on intercountry adoption, facilitates research, and disseminates information on legislation, policies, and current adoption practices in other countries. As well, it facilitates issue resolution and the development of a pan-Canadian response to matters such as unethical or irregular adoption practices.

While HRSDC is the lead federal agency under the Hague Convention, three other departments are involved and have specific roles. All four departments work very closely to ensure seamless support to the provinces and territories, which in turn, of course, work directly with adoptive parents to complete the adoption process. The Department of Justice is one of them. Foreign Affairs and International Trade and of course Citizenship and Immigration Canada also have specific roles in the process. We will have more information about this in a few seconds.

As stated earlier, the federal government provides access to parental benefits, through the employment insurance program, to Canadian parents who wish to adopt a child. In 2008-09, adoptive parents received almost \$24 million in EI benefits. Over the same period, according to the 2009 *Monitoring and Assessment Report*, adoptive parents used, on average, more than 26 of the 35 weeks of benefits available, without factoring in sharing. On average, they received a weekly benefit of \$408.

In recognition of the contributions to the Canadian economy of 2.6 million self-employed Canadians, the government introduced Bill C-56, which received royal assent last December. That legislation permits self-employed Canadians to opt in to a program that provides parental benefits as early as January 2011, if they want to adopt a child.

That concludes my remarks, Madam Chair. My colleagues and I will be pleased, of course, to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Griffith, you have comments as well.

Thank you.

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's a pleasure to be before you today to explain CIC's role. I'm accompanied today by Erica Usher, senior director, international region, who handles many of the operational aspects of helping to reunite or unite families.

[Translation]

I would like to lay out the role Citizenship and Immigration staff plays in the intercountry adoption process. I want to talk about the expediting of cases during the Haiti earthquake and its aftermath, and how those were truly extraordinary circumstances. I would also like to give you an idea of the type of support Citizenship and Immigration is offering for adoptive parents.

● (0855)

[English]

Let me begin by talking about CIC's role in intercountry adoptions.

As my colleague has mentioned, intercountry adoption is a three-pronged process involving the provinces and territories, given their responsibility for adoption, the country of origin of the child, and the Government of Canada.

The provinces and territories are responsible for things such as the home study, which ensures that conditions are right for bringing an adopted child into a new home. Then there is the country of adoption itself, which works to ensure that the adoption is done in accordance with its local laws. Then there is Citizenship and Immigration Canada's role in giving the adopted child permanent status to enter Canada, either as a permanent resident or as a citizen.

Throughout the approval process, CIC's first priority is to ensure that the best interests of the child are taken into account and are protected in accordance with our international obligations in adoption cases and our obligations under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and the Citizenship Act.

[Translation]

In some parts of the world, child trafficking is a serious concern, documentation is non-existent or unreliable, there is evidence of wrongdoing in the adoption system, or limited infrastructure exists to support the protection of children. In these cases, CIC works with the provinces to ensure the best interests of children being adopted by Canadians are respected.

[English]

As we know, international adoption is a complex process. Canadian families planning to adopt children in other countries should understand that even under ideal conditions it is a lengthy process.

We want to talk about how we were able to expedite things in Haiti after the earthquake and give some examples and some contrasts. Operation Stork resulted in the successful union of 203 Haitian children with their new families in Canada. It was a monumental task. In just a month and a half, the Government of Canada and the provinces and territories processed as many cases from Haiti as are normally done in about two years. But even during this expedited process there were protocols in place that we had to follow.

We must remember that the children who came to Canada in the aftermath of that disaster were children whose adoptions were advanced in the process. Where there was a record of an adoption being completed in Haiti prior to the January 12 earthquake, those children could move directly into the immigration or citizenship process to obtain permanent status in Canada. Children with adoptions in process were only brought to Canada for expedited processing if provincial authorities had no concerns about the integrity of the cases. Special permission was also granted by the Haitian government to remove the adoptive children from Haiti to bring them to Canada. Again, let me be clear that these were extraordinary circumstances.

The position of the Government of Canada is that during war or natural disasters, family tracing should be the first priority. That position is shared by UNICEF, UNHCR, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Inter-Country Adoption, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and International NGOs such as Save the Children Alliance.

In that situation, intercountry adoption should be envisaged for a child only as a last resort once all tracing efforts have been proved fruitless and if stable in-country solutions are not available. This normally takes many months, and could take many more in an unstable, post-disaster situation.

In closing, let me note briefly one of the things CIC is doing to help parents through the intercountry adoption process.

[*Translation*]

In the coming months, the department will be offering parents a step-by-step process on our website about how to best navigate through our role in the international adoption process.

This is something that is currently in development, and once it is complete, it will allow parents to make a more informed choice when applying for permanent residency or citizenship for their adopted child.

[*English*]

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak before you.

I'm happy to answer any questions, as is my colleague.

The Chair: Great.

We'll begin with questions.

Madam Folco and Madam Minna, which one is going to begin?

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): I think I gave my name to the clerk.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here.

Your statement was short, but it was very succinct and very precise.

You are probably aware of the fact that I worked with the Quebec government on relations with cultural communities, as they're called

in Quebec. In particular, I worked on international adoptions, an area where the Quebec government plays a critical role.

In relation to the work of this committee, I have on many occasions asked myself exactly what we were seeking to achieve by carrying out this study on adoption that we began this morning, with you as witnesses.

I will repeat what you already said—to be absolutely sure that I understood you. In terms of domestic adoptions—in other words, the adoption of a Canadian child by Canadian parents—I understood you to say that Canada's has responsibilities with respect to financial assistance for parents—in other words, the tax credit and parental benefit. So, that's the situation with respect to domestic adoptions.

Now, with respect to international adoptions, to those two elements can be added permanent resident status and, eventually, Canadian citizenship for the child. As I understand it, the federal government never deals with individual case management, even in cases from Haiti where the general policy is that the federal government works hand in hand with provincial governments, and particularly with the Quebec government, obviously.

Am I wrong? Mr. Griffith, can you answer that question, please?

● (0900)

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Thank you for your question.

Your summary of our responsibilities with respect to international adoption is correct. Our role is really limited to facilitating the child's entry, either as a permanent resident, or as a citizen, but it does not concern the other details.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I would also like Mr. Paquette to comment.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Your summary is absolutely correct. With respect to international adoptions, in addition to the responsibilities that you described—and there are probably others as well—our primary role is to coordinate efforts with the provinces. Mr. Griffith referred to that. That is particularly the case where there are questions regarding the practices in certain countries.

In a way, the United Nations convention creates a network that enables us to compare our information with other countries, carry out research and verify a certain number of things.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Is that the case with Roumania, for example? A number of years ago, there were scandals relating to the adoption of children from Roumanian orphanages. Is that what you are referring to, in particular?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, and in some countries, the conditions are such that we have no assurances about certain things. For example, we talked about fundamental principles. We have to begin by looking for a solution inside the country—in other words, with close family members. After that, we try to find another solution within the country and, subsequently, we look at the last resort. We also want to avoid any possible child trafficking.

If there are no assurances, in specific cases, we discuss the situation with the provinces. The provinces make the final decision, but we share information with them. Often the provinces will agree to impose a moratorium on a specific country. In that case, no adoptions from that country will be accepted because of the potential problems.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Since we're talking about information, I know that you are not elected members of Parliament and that you have to be careful of what you say in front of us, but I would still like to ask you one question.

In your opinion, are there gaps in terms of the work carried out by your department—and here I am referring to your two departments—with respect to information that could be helpful, either for domestic adoptions, or for international adoptions. Could the government provide a different kind of assistance?

Here I am talking about your department, Mr.—Paquette, and yours as well, Mr.—Griffith. I'm talking about gaps, and therefore of a need for more extensive federal government assistance. I'm not talking about interference.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: My view is that relations with the provinces are excellent and that things are working very well. Cooperation in that area is practically exemplary, because everyone wants to be sure to do the right thing. Ultimately, we all agree on the fact that the welfare of the child is at stake here.

In both of our cases, we have said that we have to make information even more available to adoptive parents. As I mentioned in my statement, the process is extremely complex. We also need access to information that is not always easy to obtain abroad.

• (0905)

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I'm going to interrupt you, Mr. Paquette; you know how it works.

If there were to be more extensive federal government support, what form could that take? Could it be greater tax relief over a longer period? How do you see this kind of support? What form could it take?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I was primarily referring to the fact that we must ensure that the parents are as well informed as possible, that they have all possible information when they make their decision, and that they have a better understanding of the complexity of this long and difficult process. We know just how hard it is for parents on an emotional level. The more information is available, the better their understanding in terms of their expectations of the process.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: So, as far as you're concerned, it's a question of information.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, to a large extent. In terms of the other aspect of this, a number of support programs are already in place.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Griffith.

Mr. Andrew Griffith: My sense is that the current system works quite well. There is effective cooperation between the departments, the provinces, international agencies, and other stakeholders. Sometimes there are problems in certain countries of origin. I think

it's important to consider the point I raised earlier: incomplete documentation or the fact that people want to take advantage of the system to enter the country.

However, we have received information and we are currently focussing a lot on that, because a lot of our information is written in a style that may be too bureaucratic. We're trying to write using the language of adoptive parents. We're trying to see if we can present information in the form of stories and avoid jargon.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: You try to avoid using jargon

Mr. Andrew Griffith: That's right. It's fairly complex. It's important wherever possible to simplify things and ensure that adoptive parents have a good idea of the process, of what to expect, and of our requirements.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Lessard is next, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here this morning to tell us more about adoption.

I understand there are two types of adoption. As a general rule, there are public adoptions and private adoptions. There are also international and interprovincial adoptions, and what are known as domestic adoptions. As I understand it, along the same lines as what Ms. Folco was asking, you are particularly involved in international adoptions.

Are you also involved in interprovincial and domestic adoptions, in relation to a province? If so, what is the nature of that involvement?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: The answer is no. Our mandate relates solely to international adoptions.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I'd like to address your testimony today. I'm sure you understand that the study we are currently engaged in, at the suggestion of Conservative members, has to do with federal support for adoptive parents. Overall, your involvement is primarily at the international level.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I would like to clarify one thing. Current programs aimed at supporting families, children or adoptive parents apply at both the domestic and international levels.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I understand. For example, with respect to employment insurance for—

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, exactly. There is a tax credit for expenses incurred by people who adopt a child, for instance. Those benefits apply in both cases.

Mr. Yves Lessard: In that connection, you were asked earlier whether there are improvements to be made. So that we can take full advantage of your presence here, we need to know how to frame our questions in relation to your responsibilities. To be a little more specific, we should really limit ourselves to the program that supports parents through benefits when they take adoption leave. That is my understanding. So, it's a fairly limited area of inquiry. We are wondering whether that program is adequate. I imagine that your answer will be that it's a policy issue and that it is up to us to debate this—unless I'm mistaken.

That eliminates three quarters of the questions relating to the adoption network that we might want to ask. So let's look at international adoptions, or your responsibilities at the international level. You, Mr. Paquette, and you as well, Mr. Griffith, I believe, have to see that international treaties are enforced with respect to child trafficking. Are there gaps in that area?

The purpose of this exercise is to see if we can make improvements. So, in terms of your responsibilities in relation to international treaties, are there currently any gaps or things that need to be fixed?

• (0910)

Mr. Jacques Paquette: In terms of international treaties, as I was saying, our biggest challenge—and it's the same for the international community—is to secure the necessary information to make the right decisions. Our role is to provide that information to the provinces and help the provinces make the best possible decisions, because it's their responsibility. Our job is to work through our own information networks and talk to our colleagues at the UN and in other countries in order to make the necessary inquiries. That is not always easy.

If you're asking me whether the system works perfectly, my answer is that in this area, at the international level and in certain countries, you can imagine that it's very difficult. I can't say that it's a perfect system. Could it be improved? It would be difficult, because that is one of the realities of working at the international level, in any case.

In my opinion, there must be appropriate efforts and good collaboration between federal departments and the provinces. If that collaboration were not adequate, there would be reason to be worried. On the contrary, the departments work very closely with the provinces. The same applies to discussions with the provinces and with our colleagues in diplomatic missions in other countries. Particularly in an area such as this, everyone wants to do their best. And based on the information available, we try to make the best possible decisions.

Mr. Yves Lessard: So, Canada is not the one directing these relations; we're talking about cooperation under international treaties.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, in this case, it is a group of countries working together.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I see. Mr. Griffith, do you have something to add?

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Just to add to Mr. Paquette's comment, I'd say there is the general administration, but our role is to review the applications on a case-by-case basis. In the different countries, our officers are reviewing the information to ensure that the adoption

papers are correct, that there is no fraud involved, and so on. So that process takes time. That is just the way it is, because of the local environment, and it's always difficult.

Our officers do their best to check that the papers are in order, to ensure that it is a legitimate adoption. We cooperate with other countries under certain agreements. We do occasionally have problems in the child's country of origin, but that is part of the reality. There are no easy solutions; we have to review every single case.

Mr. Yves Lessard: When a child is registered under the international adoption process, as I understand it—I want to be sure I have this right—once that child has joined his adoptive family, in a given province, the province and the parents take over responsibility. In other words, you no longer have to do any follow-up regarding that child.

Mr. Andrew Griffith: You are correct; that is the responsibility of the provinces. Our role is really to facilitate the child's entry into the country as a permanent resident or a citizen.

Mr. Yves Lessard: In terms of international adoptions, there is the entire situation of the children—I want to be sure I understand the jurisdictional framework. For example, if a child is outside the country and wants to return, but his rights as a Canadian citizen have not been respected, is that something that would fall within your purview?

• (0915)

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Once the child is in Canada, the laws of Canada apply. Normally the provinces are responsible for child welfare legislation. We do not carry out any active follow-up of such cases.

[English]

The Chair: That's all your time, Mr. Lessard. Thanks.

Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): I'd like to follow up a little on the questioning of Mr. Lessard.

I think you probably do as good a job as possible. We know what the parameters are. Some of us who work with people who come to us for help with international adoptions understand some of the complications and difficulties of trying to help them with that.

Do you think it is important for your ministry to do some tracking afterwards to make sure you're bringing children into circumstances that are healthier for them than where they came from—often circumstances such as Haiti or where children live in orphanages? Should we in Canada and the Canadian government have some responsibility to follow up on that to make sure they're doing well?

For example, we just had a report tabled this week from Campaign 2000. It indicated that in Canada, one in ten children and their families live in poverty. Should we be bringing people from difficult circumstances to a place where they may continue to experience challenges? Shouldn't we know about that and be doing something to track that?

The reason we've asked for a review of the whole issue of adoption, brought forward by Mr. Watson, was to see where we are today as opposed to 10 to 30 years ago. Are we doing the right things? Do we have the right framework in place to make sure that when we bring children into this country they are experiencing a better quality of life than the situation they left?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I would probably go back to one of the comments we were making at the beginning: that adoption is really a provincial responsibility. Even the preparation or the assessment of the family that is willing to adopt is being done at the provincial level. In fact, provincial authorities will determine whether the home where the child is going to be adopted is appropriate. That's really the responsibility. The assumption, from that point of view, is that any tracking or follow-up once the child is in the family remains the responsibility of the province.

Our role is really to facilitate the access to adoption at the International level and to make sure that the principles being established in the UN convention, which put the child's interest as the first priority, will be respected and that we are not contributing in any way to child trafficking, for example, and so on. But for the rest, the entire process within Canada is the responsibility of the province from the beginning to the end.

So if I understand your question correctly, it wouldn't be our role to do this. It would be as though we were going to question, first of all, the first assessment done by the province concerning the home study and then the follow-up to it. I would make a clear distinction between our role in facilitating access to International adoption and the process that happens within Canada.

Mr. Tony Martin: Okay. You don't see your role, then, as being the gatekeeper. We deal with international affairs here at the federal level and have an important decision-making capacity, to make sure that in 2010, when we sign off an international adoption, we are in fact bringing children into a circumstance that's going to be better for them and not eventually become a difficulty for the Canadian system.

As I just said, we have a report this week that says one in ten children and their families live in poverty in Canada. We had a report last week that said we have almost 9,000 people accessing food banks in our country, and many of them are children or families that have children. Does this not become at all an issue for you—without becoming specific or challenging provinces in terms of their jurisdiction—as you look at the overall circumstance and at questions of our living up to the covenants and the spirit that often attends them, to ensure that we in Canada are in fact providing a good, healthy, and culturally appropriate place for these children to come to and prosper in?

• (0920)

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I'm not sure how I can answer this question, in the sense that what you're raising is the overall situation of children in Canada on one side and on the other side our role supporting the provinces or facilitating the decisions they have to make when they are allowing adoption from an international country.

As I said, the assessment of the family into which the child will be adopted is being done by the province, and they are asking several questions, as you can imagine, when they are doing that assessment.

The assessment is done in the same way, based on fundamental principles that we find in UN conventions, which is basically to ensure the interests of the child. I would say again that this part of the decision is really the provincial decision; our role here in that context is to provide the information and facilitate the provinces' delivering their own mandate in that case.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Martin. That's all of your time.

Mr. Casson.

Hon. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you all for being here this morning.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Griffith and Ms. Usher. I don't suppose we have to tell you that members of Parliament do get the odd immigration case in our offices, and every once in a while they're tied to an adoption from a foreign country. Certainly we've all been through that.

Mr. Griffith, I'm encouraged to see that you're going to put a comprehensive plan on your website for people to use. This will help not only adoptive parents but our offices as well. I suppose it will cut down on some of the phone calls.

It's a confusing issue. We just dealt with one in my riding. The people were able to work through it, and it came to a good conclusion, with a couple of young children coming out of Africa. There were lawyers involved. Sometimes they're domestic; sometimes they're foreign. We have officers and embassies around the world analyzing cases. It's critical to be careful that these children can be legally adopted, and I understand that aspect of it. The time involved, the emotions that are triggered as soon as Canadian parents find a child they want to adopt in another country—it all becomes very emotional.

I don't know how you pick these folks to work in our embassies, or how they're trained. But it seems to me that when a decision is made by one of your officers, you pretty much stick to it. Very little can be done after that to open the case or have it reviewed.

How do you see the process working when there's a question on a decision by one of your officers?

Ms. Erica Usher (Senior Director, Geographic Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you for the question.

Officers are trained. We have officers in 86 different points of service around the world. Officers, before they go out to adjudicate these files or look into them, are trained. They're trained in the act and regulations. They're trained in all of the different categories in how to process these files. They are given quite extensive training. As part of their training, they go to missions overseas with their supervisors, with their managers. They actively work on these types of cases.

Part of the act and regulations is that officers make their decisions based upon the information they have, based upon the information they've obtained in the application. So there's the whole question of fettering decisions. All of that is part of the regulations. They make their decisions based on the information that's available, in discussion with managers and other counterparts, wherever they go.

As Andrew mentioned, there are some places where there is a lot of fraud. There are some places where the trafficking in children is a real possibility, and you mentioned that. Our missions try to develop contacts within the local governments, so that they are familiar with senior officials in the local government. They try to understand what their laws are. They try to partner with them to ensure that the proper decisions have been made.

We try to facilitate as much as we can in those ways, but it's a challenge. It's very complex.

• (0925)

Hon. Rick Casson: Sometimes there's a question of the interpretation of the laws, whether it's the Hague convention or whatever. Sometimes we don't know how the local laws of the country apply to the situation. This is something we got into. I guess you can never get two lawyers to agree on anything, but they had different interpretations of the law. It seemed that they were at loggerheads and nobody would back up. One said it should be one way; the other said it should be another way. Who, in the end, has priority? Is it the country where the child is coming from?

Ms. Erica Usher: We can only process children where the process has been finished in that country, according to the laws of that country. If a country tells us that the adoption has been legally done there, then we will carry it forward.

Hon. Rick Casson: I have a couple of minutes left for you, Jeff.

The Chair: Mr. Watson.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): How much time do I have, Madam Chair?

The Chair: A minute and a half.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Oh, wow. Okay.

Hon. Rick Casson: I'm sorry, buddy.

Mr. Jeff Watson: That's all right.

Thank you to our witnesses.

As we study federal supports for adoption, I see that there are essentially three things. One is looking at what supports are available. Are they sufficient? Then, ultimately, what is not being done that can be done? Those are questions for us to look at here around the table.

I want to start with data collection by your agencies. What types of data do you collect with respect to adoption? What is the federal government's role with adoption? Do you know how many children are available for adoption in Canada? Do we know what the average cost of an adoption is? Do we have analysis from federal departments about whether that's sufficient, or is there a barrier? Do you do any research into areas that may affect the federal government? What are long-term trends in intercountry adoptions?

I only want to get a sense of whether you collect data on this and what you collect. Do you do any research? If so, what?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: At the international level we are tracking the situation in different countries, and we are also trying to see what the availabilities are, because some of the countries that have good systems in place—when I say “good systems”, I mean a system that respects the fundamental principles that have been established in the

UN convention. The question is to know exactly how many children might be available for adoption. That might also vary from one country to another.

• (0930)

Mr. Jeff Watson: Could you tell us, for example, how well aligned the demand would be for children in certain countries with the ease of adoption in a particular country, the integrity of their process? Is demand actually going to countries where they have internal systems in those countries that have a lot of integrity to their systems? Or is it non-aligned with that? Are we looking at demand being high in countries, for example, that don't have strong systems of integrity for adoption?

Can you tell me stuff like that?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Right. I cannot talk about the international system overall, because I don't have it with me. But I can say that if we look at where most of the children adopted in Canada are coming from, the number one source is China, and the second one is the U.S.A. I would say that depending on the countries, when the system is not necessarily the best, we then have to spend much more time to make sure that the—

Mr. Jeff Watson: Could you rank—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Watson. That's your minute and a half, plus.

Could I clarify something you said, Mr. Paquette? The majority of adoptions are from China and from the U.S.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: If we look at the top 10 sources, what I have here, and I think that is probably information that CIC is tracking as well, is China, the U.S., Ethiopia, Vietnam, Haiti, Russia—I don't know if Haiti is on a regular basis or if it's specific cases recently—the Philippines. We can provide that information.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I think we have time for a very short round, so we'll do a three-minute round. We have about 15 minutes left.

We'll begin with Madam Minna, please.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Very briefly, to Mr. Paquette, the EI parental leave right now is what? Is it a year?

Sorry, the witness is busy and I don't want to lose time for that.

Maybe you can answer that. Right now we say a year, but is that exact?

Mr. Louis Beauséjour (Acting Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): No. In fact, right now there are 35 weeks of parental benefits available for parents, both adoptive parents and biological parents—

Hon. Maria Minna: It works for both.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: That's 35 weeks of parental benefits.

Hon. Maria Minna: That's exactly the same. Okay.

My next question has to do with immigration, actually...well, actually both.

You obviously have specific information for different countries in terms of the in-country laws, if you like, for adoption. I'm thinking of a case that I dealt with from India. The gentleman who was adopting didn't take into consideration the Indian legal process, and somehow nobody connected it. A home assessment from Ontario was done.

Is there a connection? When a home assessment from the province is done, do they refer the client to you to try to really understand what the foreign country's adoption procedures are? In this case they made assumptions, which in the end delayed things for nearly ten years.

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Essentially, the process we follow is a two-step process. The first step, as you've mentioned, is really the provincial process, to ensure that the family is adequate. At that time, then, it basically is almost flipped to us by way of a request to facilitate the entry of the child into Canada. One of the challenges we find is that sometimes parents underestimate the country of origin of the adopted child and its rules and regulations and the time required. What we're trying to look at is how we can better—

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I don't have much time and I have another question.

It's not so much the time required; it's understanding what the foreign country's rules are for foreign adoptions and then following specifically those rules to get the right paperwork done. In this case, they misunderstood it completely and were doing the complete opposite of what they were supposed to be doing. That's one thing.

The other one, so that you can piggyback my questions, has to do with the fact that in some families in some countries adoption within family is not formalized. For instance, a family might have adopted into the family a nephew or a niece whom they are raising from a baby or whatever, but when they go to take that child out of the country, it becomes a real issue. How do you deal with those situations? That's question two.

One is, when a home assessment is done in the province, does the province at least tell that client to go to Immigration or to HRDC to get the information for the procedures to follow in the foreign country so that they don't do it wrong? In this case—

• (0935)

The Chair: I'm sorry, your time is.... Just finish your question so that they can answer it.

Hon. Maria Minna: Yes, okay.

In this case, the guy didn't have a lawyer and was just following customs in India, because he was from India. Is there a connection? And then there's the question about family adoption.

Ms. Erica Usher: In terms of communications, I don't know what the provinces advise, but certainly all of our missions overseas have information on their local websites about the procedure that we, CIC, will require.

That's not a complete answer to your question, because it may not give an indication of the local process, but it does give an indication as to what we, CIC, will require to be able to process that adoption. So the documents—

Hon. Maria Minna: You have to connect those dots, though, for most people.

Ms. Erica Usher: Exactly.

The Chair: All right. Did you want to add anything else to that?

Hon. Maria Minna: On family adoption...anyone?

Ms. Erica Usher: For family adoption it's the same process. Whether it's a relative or not a relative, the adoption process must be complete before we can bring them to Canada, either as a permanent resident or—

The Chair: Maybe when we come back.... I know what Madam Minna is getting at: if they have to take the child out of the country.... Isn't that it?

Hon. Maria Minna: For instance, in Muslim families, if my sister passes away or she's too poor or whatever, I take her child, and it's understood in the religion that it's my child and it's adopted, but it's not a legal process that they go through.

How do you deal with those cases, is what I'm asking.

Ms. Erica Usher: They will look at those cases on a case-by-case basis, look at the best interests of the child, and deal with it accordingly. There's no “one size fits all” in those types of situations.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Vellacott.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): There are so many questions one could ask, with the repository of wisdom here among our good folk from the departments this morning.

Maybe it is CRA we should be asking this, or maybe you could undertake to acquire this information for us, but would you know the average cost of, say, a domestic adoption and/or an international adoption? How does it vary across the jurisdictions?

Do you have that, or is it purely something that CRA might know? I know \$10,900 is the maximum that you can...but do people customarily send in far more than what they know they can get a rebate on or refund on? Do you have any information on this? Can you acquire it for us? Could you undertake to contact the CRA?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: We can search. We don't have that information with us.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: I know it's a difficult one, because obviously they only get the \$10,900.

I'll just pass it over to my colleague. He has some follow-up questions on other issues.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you.

What time do I have?

The Chair: You have two good minutes.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I'll try to focus really quickly on some issues.

This will be “the best interests of the child” issue.

Under Citizenship and Immigration, a child can be adopted in a couple of ways: provincially, and then apply for permanent residency; or by way of citizenship, for which there's a special provision.

Are “the best interests of the child” issues different in those processes? Does the department involve itself in the best interests of the child in both cases or just in one?

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Thank you for your question.

Essentially, “the best interests of the child” issue is the same in both situations, whether the child comes by way of permanent residency or by way of citizenship. Usually the choice of which route to do really will depend on the parents' sense of the situation of the family and the likely—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Does the department concern itself in precisely the same way in both cases?

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Yes.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: The permanent residency, as I understand it, is a longer process than going directly through the citizenship route. Is that correct?

Mr. Andrew Griffith: Erica can probably comment more on that, but my understanding is that the processing time, given that we have essentially to ensure the same kind of evidence, such as having the provincial approval, having all the comfort in terms of the local environment, that it's not a case of child trafficking and the like, and that there's not fraud in documentation—all of those are independent, really, of whether the child comes from permanent resident or citizenship.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Does the province also look at the same issue, the best interests of the child, in both those cases?

Mr. Andrew Griffith: If you're talking about the provinces, I assume they do, in terms of looking at the home study and the issues related to whether—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Here's my question, what I want to get to.

When you're dealing with international adoptions, it's a kind of thing that transcends provincial boundaries, and your department, Immigration or HRSDC, would be concerned primarily with issues relating to the best interests of the child and to the foreign country in ensuring legitimacy.

Could the process not be sped up if the federal and provincial governments had an understanding that only one party dealt with what was in the best interests of the child in that adoption, rather than having two streams going, and perhaps at different times, elongating the process?

● (0940)

Mr. Andrew Griffith: I'm not sure it would make that much difference, because essentially we get the file when the province has basically approved the adoption, in terms of making sure that the family that is going to receive the child is an appropriate family for that—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: But here's the point—

The Chair: Mr. Komarnicki, I'm sorry; that is your time. You're really gone over.

Did anybody want to add anything, or was that basically the full answer?

Mr. Andrew Griffith: I think it is the full answer. It's essentially that we're doing this, and the route of permanent resident or citizen doesn't make much difference in terms of processing time; it doesn't matter.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: The whole point is that of course the province goes through the best interest issue before it comes to its conclusion, and I wondered whether you couldn't consolidate that.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Ms. Erica Usher: It is a sequence, and the province looks at one side of it: they look at the receiving family in Canada in terms of the best interests of the child based upon the receiving family. We don't look at that; we look at the best interests of the child overseas—whether they're being trafficked, whether.... We look at that side of things. So it really is a sequence.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I would like to remind members of the terms of reference we set for this study.

At the suggestion of the Conservatives, the terms of reference were framed as follows: “[...] examine current federal support measures that are available to adoptive parents [...]”. I repeat: “[...] federal support measures that are available to adoptive parents [...]”

So, our work this morning, I believe, was primarily to identify areas of jurisdiction and determine what support measures currently exist. I think our guests have provided valuable answers in that regard. The primary support measure with respect to adoption is a 35-week parental leave under the employment insurance system. According to your testimony, on average, 28 weeks are used.

I think that gives us a good overview of support measures. The other area is provincial jurisdiction.

In light of recent debates, where we attempted to flesh out the terms of reference the Conservatives had suggested for this study, we expected them to be asking questions this morning about aspects of the support measures we may not have been aware of.

I also wanted to let the committee know that the questions asked by Conservative members had to do with mechanics and the operation of the immigration system, as it relates to children, as well as its operation in other countries.

We are certainly a long way from talking about federal support measures as they currently exist or any that need to be added, if they need to be added.

That is what I wanted to raise, Madam Chair, because otherwise we are going to end up talking about every aspect of the mechanics of immigration. I could give you the example of the question asked earlier by Mr. Casson, in particular, with respect to the immigration process, and so on.

I don't know whether we can continue to work this way, because we will be stepping away from the initial terms of reference that we set for this study. That is what I wanted to raise. I don't have any other questions, because I believe we have covered the topic, unless the Conservatives can tell us that other measures were not discussed and those are the ones they would like to introduce. If they tell us that, we will go back to the terms of reference. I don't know whether I'm making myself clear. In that case, we'll go back to the initial terms of reference.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Lessard, you had three minutes to ask a question, and I don't think you indicated at this point that this was any kind of point of order or any kind of committee business. So at this point, that was your three minutes for questions. I think Mr. Martin had a very quick question, and then later on when we're doing committee business, if you want to bring that up...but at this point in our agenda we have these witnesses here, so we're going to complete that task.

• (0945)

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Chair, you have the ability to decide that everything is allowed in terms of the questioning. It's as you wish, since you are in charge. I simply wanted to point out that we run the risk of doing this work for nothing. In my case, I intend to keep the focus on the terms of reference that we set for ourselves. So far, I would say that we have covered the subject.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Martin, did you have a very quick question?

Mr. Tony Martin: It's the whole question around a lot of the work that goes into international adoptions now being handled by organizations and agencies and consultants. In some instances, that doesn't go well. We had one example not that long ago where an organization went bankrupt and left a whole lot of people twisting in the wind around what to do next and how they would get their money back, all that kind of thing. Have you done anything to deal with that or respond to that? How do you oversee or monitor or make sure that all these groups and consultants are legitimate and doing the job that we, as a country, would like them to be doing on behalf of both the children and the adoptive parents?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: The agencies are licensed by the provinces, so they are regulated by the provinces. If your specific question is how these agencies are being monitored, it's at the provincial level.

The Chair: Thanks so much.

That's all the time we have. We really appreciate your being here. We probably won't ask you back, although we did have a lot of questions, but I don't know at this point if we'll ask you to come back for this particular study. Anyway, thank you again.

We'll just suspend for a moment and bring in the new witnesses.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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• (0950)

The Chair: If everyone could please take your seats, we will begin with our next set of witnesses.

We have with us representatives from the Adoption Council of Canada, the Canadian Coalition of Adoptive Families, Destiny Adoption Services, and Parents Adoption Learning Support. We want to thank you for being here.

As you can tell, we are pretty limited in our time. I think we have a presentation from each group. We had said seven minutes, but if you could try to keep it below seven minutes, that would be great, and then we'll have a chance to ask you questions.

We will begin with the Adoption Council of Canada. Who would like to begin? Sandra Scarth. Thank you.

Ms. Sandra Scarth (President, Adoption Council of Canada): Thank you. I'm Sandra Scarth. I'm president of the Adoption Council of Canada. I actually have worked in child welfare for close to 50 years, primarily in adoption in three provinces, and I have a personal as well as a professional interest in being here. I'm also an adoptive parent. Two of our four children came from the child welfare system, a little boy at age five and a half and a little girl at age 10. They're both now in their early forties. Both are doing okay. Our little boy had probably undiagnosed fetal alcohol syndrome, so he has struggled, but he's doing okay.

I'd like to sort of take you a little bit back to why the Adoption Council came in the first place. We started as a group of adoptive parents and workers who felt there were not enough children being adopted in Canada and too many children leaving foster care and ending up on the streets homeless, in the federal justice system, and so forth. We're still concerned, after 20 years, that the same situation exists. We'd like you to think about the things the federal government could do in terms of finding more families for children in this country, not just those who come from other countries.

Child welfare does a good job of taking care of children and bringing them into care but does not make a good parent. Our brief speaks to what happens to these young people when they leave care without supports. We're concerned that we're creating thousands of legal orphans, and we hope this committee will be a catalyst for action at the federal level for these highly vulnerable Canadian children and youth, many of whom are aboriginal. Over 50% in B. C., where I come from, are aboriginal children. And it's much higher in western provinces.

One of our major concerns is, as I mentioned in the previous instance, data. We have good data on intercountry adoption, but we have almost no data on domestic adoption in this country. Our information is pathetic. We collected data at one point in time in this country on domestic adoptions. The most recent is 2004. It was only released in 2007. We can't tell you how many there are right now in the foster care system or who are being placed for adoption. We have estimates.

We can't answer the simplest questions about children in care. We can't tell you how many there are. We can't tell you how many have an adoption plan. We can't tell you how many of them have been referred for adoption, how long they wait before being referred for adoption, how long did they wait for adoption placement, how many siblings do they have who are also free for adoption, how many are aboriginal, how many receive adoption subsidies, how many are exiting care without family support or a connection. We can't tell you any of that. We have no way to track trends. We don't know why the number of children in care is increasing in some provinces, such as Manitoba, and declining in British Columbia.

In contrast, the United States has a very rich data system. They collect every six months. They now have 2009 data, and draft reports are available almost immediately. Their preliminary estimates were available in July 2010 for 2009. Their database has given them three things: accountability for people who look after those kids; it has provided information on trends; and it has tested information beliefs so that we can target things at the real issues. For example, people thought for many years, both there and here, that children stopped being placed for adoption at about age 13, that they lose their ability to be adopted then. We now find it's probably at the age of seven. If they don't get placed by the age of seven, their chances for adoption drop dramatically.

We do have a very rich database about children and their well-being and education in Canada, called the national longitudinal survey on children and youth. It is looked after by StatsCan and HRSDC. That has collected, since 1994, information on children in this country from zero to age 25 on health, welfare, education. But unfortunately, foster children and aboriginal children on reserves are excluded from that rich database, so we don't have any information in that area. This is something I think the federal government should address. There is no reason why they shouldn't be over-sampled and put into that database. So this is something your committee could look into.

The second thing I think I won't repeat because of the shortness of time.

Our recommendation is that we look at some collection of data on domestic adoption statistics. This is a federal government responsibility, for Canadian kids, aboriginal children. We think this is something that your committee could also look into and do something about.

The last thing I want to do is just mention briefly the disparate numbers.

● (0955)

We're about one-tenth the size of the United States. If you look at their numbers, they have 423,773 children in care. We have 78,000. If we're one-tenth, we should only have about 45,000 kids in care.

So why is there this huge difference in the numbers? They place 57,500 children a year. We place about 2,000. We should be placing double the number of children in this country. So we'd like to answer questions about why there is the difference in this situation. A lot of it has to do with lack of public awareness, but there are other reasons.

I'm going to close here and let Laura have some time to talk about the other issues in our brief.

The Chair: Keep it to one minute, please.

Ms. Laura Eggertson (Board Member, Adoption Council of Canada): I guess you guys can ask me questions then.

My name is Laura Eggertson. I'm an adoptive parent. I'll just tell you briefly that I adopted two children from the child welfare system, both as older children and both aboriginal. If at some point you want to ask me about that, I'd be happy to talk about it.

We have a few recommendations. One is to amend the Employment Insurance Act so that adoptive parents can have 50 weeks of paid leave, just as biological parents do. There will be other speakers who will address that issue.

The second is to work with the Adoption Council of Canada to fund a national awareness campaign about adoption in this country, including the children who are available and what they have to offer parents.

The third is to amend the regulations of the Citizenship Act so that children who are adopted internationally and become Canadians can pass along their citizenship, even if their children are born abroad.

I just have two more.

We would also urge the federal government to convene a meeting of provincial ministers responsible for children and youth, to draft a memorandum of understanding so that it will be easier to adopt children across provincial borders in this country. Right now, it is harder to adopt interprovincially than it is to adopt internationally.

The fifth is to fund Canada's Waiting Children, the only national photo-listing service that connects waiting kids to waiting parents.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We will now go to the Canadian Coalition of Adoptive Families.

Paula Schuck, would you like to present?

Thanks.

Ms. Paula Schuck (Cofounder, Canadian Coalition of Adoptive Families): Sure.

My name is Paula Schuck. I'm an adoptive parent to two little girls, a parent support group leader in London, Ontario, and I'm also the co-founder of a group called the Canadian Coalition of Adoptive Families. We're a non-profit, national organization that supports families throughout the process and throughout the life span. We hear from families when they are struggling with adoption, when they are struggling financially, physically, and with a variety of issues.

We have two particular issues we want to address today. The first one is the Employment Insurance Act and the inequities there. We would like to see you amend the Employment Insurance Act to give all parents the maximum amount, 50 weeks, to bond with new children. We believe that's an initial barrier that sets adoptive parents, adoptive families, and their children on an unequal playing field, so to speak.

A family that adopts right now under the Employment Insurance Act will receive 35 weeks of paid parental leave as opposed to the 50 weeks for families formed through biology. The 15 weeks designated for the maternity benefit plan are not accessible to parents who become parents by adoption. The grounds for the inequity are often cited as the physical and psychological stress of the biological process of childbirth. But the process of adoption is also stressful for both families and children.

While there are a few employers in Canada that recognize the merits of supporting adoptive families, there are not nearly enough to alter our numbers. We're not arguing against biological parents. We refuse to be pitted against anyone. We want only to give the best start to all Canadian children, not simply those who were born into their family of origin and remain there.

While birth parents get nine months to bond and begin preparing for the addition to their family, adoptive parents do not. They're often given an overnight timeframe to adjust; the children, no different, sometimes arrive overnight. Sometimes they can be 10 years old, they've bounced through five different homes, and they're expected to instantly become family. It is a very difficult task for all involved. Children who come to their families through adoption have often experienced the opposite of a healthy attachment. It may take several years for them to bond properly with their adoptive family.

Adoption has changed dramatically over the last 30 years—2,122 children adopted through international channels by Canadians. I'm not going to get into the other numbers, but suffice it to say that children adopted through the public system come to us with several issues that we need to address—sometimes attachment issues, trauma, physical and sexual abuse, and prenatal alcohol and drug exposure.

In cases of domestic foster care adoption here in Canada, that means at some point the government has decided to become the legal parent to the children. We call them crown wards. Where that is the case, I would argue that we have a higher burden of care to those children. Adoptive parents will spend lifetimes trying to help a child bond, attach, and be safe in a new family. We believe the

government needs to step up and amend the Employment Insurance Act to benefit all children.

In Canada, all of our provinces are failing at placing older children and children with special needs in adoptive families. I want to tell you a bit about my experience. I have two children, both adopted as infants. My younger child has been diagnosed with SPD, sensory processing disorder, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I want to tell you that it took us months to figure out what her behaviours meant, what was going on with this child. She was very young when she came to us, but she would rage, she would scream, she would bite, and she would resist touch. It's very hard to bond with children who resist touch or hit you every time you are picking them up.

I want to tell you a bit more about FASD because that is something we need to address nationally, not just province by province. As a parent of a child with FASD living in Ontario, I have travelled to Saskatchewan, to B.C., and to Alberta to find out how to parent my child. That's not okay. Our parents are already struggling financially, physically, emotionally. We're barely holding on, but I have to go out of province to Saskatchewan to get strategies to be a parent to my child. That's not okay.

● (1000)

We are calling on you to develop a national FASD strategy. We need supports. FASD is a neurological disability caused by a birth mother's alcohol use while the child was in utero. It is estimated there are 300,000 Canadians affected by FASD. That means those are greater in number than all the people, combined, with Down's syndrome, muscular dystrophy, HIV, and spina bifida. FASD is now the leading cause of preventable developmental disability in the world.

I want to tell you about my youngest daughter. She is six. She is beautiful and smart and athletic, and she has a brain injury that will never go away. That's a fact. I can parent her. I like to say to some of our parents it's like this. They're like fish in a world full of cats. If you parent that fish and expect it to walk, it's never going to work. Imagine you are a fish and you're being raised in a world full of cats. People over the years wonder why you can't walk like a cat. You can't eat the same things. It's not your parents' fault; it's not your teachers' fault. They think you're a cat, so the consequences of you not walking.... They give you sticker charts, behaviour modification programs. They throw their hands up in the air, thinking you must just be a bad cat. That's how we are raising kids with FASD. It's not okay. We need a national policy to address all of this.

We parents of fish have been given our children through agencies. We're not the same as parents mobilized by autism or ADHD, learning disabilities. They've come to us through agencies, when we are foster or adoptive parents. Some are being raised in birth homes; others are being raised in kinship arrangements.

I want to tell you of a couple of personal experiences that friends of ours have had—

●(1005)

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Schuck, you just have a couple of seconds left. There will be a chance for questions and answers.

Ms. Paula Schuck: One way that you can address our needs is by amending the federal tax act, possibly, to include something akin to what they have in Saskatchewan. They have a cognitive disabilities strategy so that parents who need help can pull from that for funding to go to whatever conference they need, to get the strategies to parent very difficult children.

The Chair: Thank you. I just want to say how much we appreciate hearing your story and some of the challenges you're going through.

On this study, we're really trying to focus on adoption. It is important that we hear your story, but I just want to remind everybody to try to stay to the topic of adoption and the supports the federal government could provide. I appreciate your talking about possibly extending EI and the challenges that parents face who are adoptive parents, not just birth parents. But I just want to remind everyone of that.

I also just want to take a moment and acknowledge Jessica, who is I think probably the youngest witness. There are some around the table who have been here longer than I have, but I don't know if we've ever had a very young lady here as a witness. Thank you very much for being here. I'd like to say your last name for the record. It is Jessica van der Veer.

Welcome.

All right. We'll quickly go then to Destiny Adoption Services. If you could stick to around five, six minutes, that would be great. Thank you.

Rev. Kimberly Sabourin (Destiny Adoption Services): Thank you for the honour of being here today to advocate on behalf of all Canadian adoptive families and future adoptive families.

My name is Reverend Kimberly Sabourin and I am the proud mother of two stepchildren, two biological children, and one adopted child. I am also the owner of Destiny Adoption Services, a business that provides counselling and support services to people affected by adoption.

I have a dream of seeing every single one of the 30,000 adoptable children in Canada finding their "forever" family. The government is their guardian right now, and foster parents really are the heroes in our world. But each child, no matter their unique medical, emotional, or physical needs, deserves permanency, no matter their age. There are obstacles and myths surrounding adoption, and Destiny Adoption Services works on the front lines in education and awareness.

My background is also in teaching. I was both an elementary school teacher for 10 years and a vice-principal for two years, until we adopted our daughter in 2003. Then I knew my career path had to change. My motto is this: "It is better to prepare children than repair adults." I believe that education of this generation is critical in fighting against the prejudices facing adoptive children.

My new book, *Our Chosen Child*, is a resource to educate children on adoption. It is a tool for adoptive families, and it is also reading material for birth mothers who are considering the option before them as they are facing an unplanned pregnancy. Giving honour and respect to birth parents is critical in the process.

In Canada, less than 2% of women facing an unplanned pregnancy will place their children for adoption. They are misinformed as well and need support and education.

I had the privilege on Sunday, November 7, of hosting an adoption Sunday at the church where I'm on staff, the Lifecentre, as the generations pastor. Our congregation of over 1,000 heard the statistics and understood the critical need, and I have received over 300 e-mails from people who had no idea of the crisis facing Canada's precious children. Adoption-friendly terminology is also important in ensuring that an adoptive family feels validated and not like a lesser type of family.

Teachers and administrators must be educated on adoption to assist the families they are working with on a daily basis. Education and awareness is the key.

I am asking the committee to help finance and launch a national public awareness campaign through public service announcements, literature, and broadcasts to promote adoption in Canada.

We've already touched on the EI, so I won't talk about that. The burden, of course, to adopt in Canada is a significant one. I will skip over that and talk about our training.

Those of us who work in the adoption field are faced with the enormous task of providing support to families who are facing a myriad of issues: fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, grief, anger, attachment, the effects of bullying, and the effects of prejudice. We need support in order to support Canada's kids.

Our current adoption system, if you've had the privilege of being a part of it, is disjointed, and that's the word I will use. We need to work toward standardizing adoption and bringing consistency to the requirements and to the process.

We all know there are three types of adoption: public, private, and international. Each one is operating independently of one another and often against one another. I speak from personal experience as well as from a consultant's experience in working with clients over the years.

We must, for the sake of this generation of children, put them first, from the timeline of becoming a crown ward to the placement in their forever family. We must focus on the best interests of Canada's kids and not the best interests of our systems. Each of their futures is directly related to the committee's action or inaction.

I look at my children, and especially my beautiful seven-year-old daughter—for those of you who do have my brief, you will see her sweet little picture. But I dream of the world I want to hand down to her, a world where Canada leads the way in its value of our children.

In summary, I would like to thank you all for the opportunity to discuss these critical needs, and I trust that God will give you the wisdom as we work toward the solutions to the issues being proposed today. I want you to know that I will be a part of the solution. I am committed to serving Canada's children.

•(1010)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation. That was great. You were right under the time limit, so thanks for that.

Our last presenter is from Parents Adoption Learning Support. Carol van der Veer is a member.

You have a presentation for us.

Ms. Carol van der Veer (Member, Support Group, Parents Adoption Learning Support): Yes. Thank you.

Well, the presentation is Jessica.

The Chair: Oh, good.

Miss Jessica van der Veer: Hi.

Ms. Carol van der Veer: I'm going to let her speak. It is based on the EI issues and support groups.

Miss Jessica van der Veer: Thanks for inviting me to this committee hearing. I'm here representing PALS. My name is Jessica van der Veer. I'm 11 years old. I was born on December 7, 1998.

My tummy mommy was really young when she had me. We didn't really have a real home, so we couch-surfed everywhere. I was three and a half when I was left on a street corner for Durham CAS to pick me up. I have a brother, and he was left with me. I was always left alone, up until I was three, with my three younger brothers. Then I met my forever family.

In one week, I learned what adopted meant. I was told I was being adopted, and I was adopted.

It took more than a year to get used to the transition and to my forever family. I had a horrible first year of school. I was teased and left out of everything. I had three teachers, two schools, and a bunch of kids asking me questions I didn't want to answer. When I did, I was teased again.

I may not have been born in my mom's tummy, but I was born in her heart.

So why are we treated differently? By going to PALS, it has helped me understand my life more, and it's boosted my self-esteem and shown me I'm not alone.

Ms. Carol van der Veer: I'll add onto that, once I compose myself.

I'm very proud of you for coming here.

The reason I'm here is I want to show Jessica that Canada is a place where children have a voice.

Going through this process, as scary as it might be...this is where we can voice our concerns regarding the EI benefits. Had I given birth to my lovely daughter, I would have had 50 full weeks—35 parental and 15 top-up. I had 35 weeks. When the children went to

school, and especially my son, we had several months of challenges. The schools wanted him out. He was incontinent, quite often peeing his pants. I needed to be there. I was called from work constantly to go home to deal with the issues Justin was having.

As Jessica said, the first year was challenging in school. There wasn't always a lot of support. She was told to stop talking about adoption, that we're her forever family. They weren't keen on the words or the acronyms that were being used. Our family, and I think some other families, feel it's a human right to be treated equally.

Really, fairness is not that everyone gets the same; fairness is that everyone gets what they need to succeed. To succeed as a family, I needed to be home a lot longer with my children. The transition was quite challenging.

CAS was our friend. I liked them being in my home. It was a normal thing for us. Our neighbours were mortified. They saw the CAS van coming again, thinking there were issues. There weren't. There were constant visits to see if we were struggling, which we were at times. There were attachment issues. There were a lot of other issues. So as not to embarrass Jessica, I won't go into those details. We're just coming out of them after six years, and it's been a challenge.

I've been teaching my children to advocate. Because you're adopted doesn't mean you don't have a voice or you can't say what you want. You can come to the highest level of government to give your voice and state that the EI benefits need to be longer, especially for adoptive families. I may not be physically recovering from giving birth; we're emotionally recovering.

Jessica had some physical recoveries to go through, and we needed the time to bond as a family. I feel that as adoptive support groups and families we can make a difference. We ask the government to change the EI benefits to equal that of birth families. That would mean the world for upcoming new adoptees.

I have to lead by example, so that's why we're here. If I talk about it, I need to pull through and also come to speak, and allow my daughter to voice her opinion too.

Thank you, and thanks for inviting us.

•(1015)

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you for being here.

Jessica, you did a really good job with your presentation. Thank you.

Ms. Carol van der Veer: She has something for you.

Madam Chair, this is a picture of what a family looks like, and it's no different from any other family.

The Chair: Oh, that's great. Thank you. That's very nice. I'm going to pass it around. Isn't that nice? It's beautiful.

Miss Jessica van der Veer: That's what the family looks like, and it's no different from any other family. It looks normal.

The Chair: It's very nice.

All right. We have a very short time for questions; we have about 30 minutes. We'll do seven-minute rounds and then I would suggest that you share your time, if you have someone to share with.

Madam Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thanks to all of you. Jessica, welcome to the world of adults.

One of the things I found useful this morning was the information that we don't collect data across the country on children awaiting adoption—who they are, where they are, their age, and all the other things. I think the collection of data is extremely important, and that was an interesting piece for me this morning. Ms. Scarth, I think you were clear on that.

The other thing that is the lack of an MOU between the provinces and our country. It never ceases to surprise me how we fight so hard for free trade, but we have no free trade in our own country. Our economic strength as a nation would be much stronger if we had freer interprovincial trade and collaboration. But we seem to ignore that and don't fight for it. It permeates other levels, and it goes to things like skills development. If you're a masseuse in Ontario and you go to B.C., you have to train all over again or get recertified. Even on the professional level, we don't have MOUs.

I'm not trying to...this is just as important. I'm just saying that we have a really strange federation. Our federation is much too decentralized for the good of the country sometimes, in that we don't work together. I agree with you that this is an area we should be looking at.

With respect to the EI for 50 weeks, I'm not speaking for my party here; I'm speaking only as a member of this committee. I agree that we ought to give the same attention to adopted children as we do to birth children, for all of the reasons you have said and others have stated many times before.

I agree with those things. My only question has to do with changes to the federal tax act. I forget who mentioned it. It might have been Ms. Eggertson. Was it you, Ms. Shuck?

• (1020)

Ms. Paula Schuck: Yes, it was.

Hon. Maria Minna: Could you explain to me exactly what that would be? What do you mean by that? I think I missed what the change would be to the federal tax act.

Ms. Paula Schuck: I'm no accountant, but—

Hon. Maria Minna: You should be able to get, if you like, tax credits for travel.

Ms. Paula Schuck: Sure. Where FASD is considered a disability, which it is, I would like to see our families supported a lot more—for research, travel to conferences, education, respite treatment. There are many different ways we could draw from that.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: We had thought that perhaps the national child tax credit could be expanded to include invisible disabilities. We'd like the committee to do some research on that. We're looking for a way to support families with children with disabilities, many of whom start out in the foster care system and then are adopted without further supports. In many cases, they lose their supports when they get adopted. The money doesn't follow the child.

Hon. Maria Minna: I see.

We were talking about children, and I think someone mentioned that seven years of age is considered to be unadoptable in our country. I wonder if any of you would have this information. I was doing some cross-country consultations for a social security review around 1994-95, and we met with youth 16 and up. They told us that as of 16 years of age they were no longer wards of the crown—they were on their own. Most kids 16 years of age in a family would not be kicked out of their home and told, "Thank you very much."

Have any of you looked to see what that disconnect is, with respect to older children? I know it's provincial to a degree, but I guess it's something we need to be looking at. What happens to these young people? They're literally said goodbye to by the system at that point. Have you any experience with that, or any data on what happens to them?

Ms. Sandra Scarth: Yes. In our brief, we have quite a lot of data of what happens to them. There are no national studies done, but there are provincial studies. One in B.C. showed that 41% of the children, within five years of leaving care, were in the criminal justice system, compared to 6% in the general population.

We know that about 70% of these kids have disabilities of some sort, so when they go out, they become jobless, homeless. They end up on the street. The young women often have children, and then they lose their children to welfare. They really are at a huge disadvantage compared to kids who can come home. They even have no place to go for Christmas. That kind of thing is really bad.

Then they fall into poverty, so they are a burden on the criminal justice system, on the social welfare system. Mostly the burden is themselves. They really are in a terrible situation. They have no support of any kind, so they end up being in poverty, and they repeat the process. They end up becoming another welfare statistic; their children come into care, and it goes on and on, whereas for the children who are adopted here, the cycle is broken. My kids are in their 40s now; they're both doing fine. One is doing extremely well, and she came from a family of two alcoholics. As for her chances of getting out of the system at age 16, she would probably have ended up in the same situation as her parents. She is a wonderful mother of two little kids, and she's doing really well.

Adoption really is a huge benefit to these kids. There shouldn't be 30,000 out there who are waiting for adoption. A lot of families are waiting for these kids. They just don't know about them, and the system hasn't made it easy for them to do it.

Hon. Maria Minna: A national registry—

The Chair: I'm sorry, that's all. We're really tight on time.

Madame Beaudin.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank our witnesses for being here and welcome them to the committee.

Thank you for coming, Jessica, and I want to commend you on your comments.

My first question is for Ms. Scarth. You said earlier—

• (1025)

[English]

Ms. Sandra Scarth: Sorry, I didn't get the question.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: You said earlier you were having a lot of trouble finding reliable data on children, First Nations and foster children. In your opinion, how can we secure that information?

[English]

Ms. Sandra Scarth: I think it would be very easy for the federal government to support a national data collection system. Currently, the data is collected occasionally by the provinces and territories who work with HRSDC. HRSDC, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, then publishes the data, but it's very late and is only one time.

There needs to be some kind of better system, and one way of starting it—a simple way of starting it—would be to call a small meeting of people from StatsCan, from provincial directors of child welfare, adoption coordinators, other people who collect justice statistics, and so on, and pull them together and ask how we could collect this data. It's a feasibility study.

This was done a number of years ago for child abuse statistics when there weren't any. It was a child welfare league, and I was there at the time. We pulled together a small group like this. It cost maybe \$15,000, \$20,000, and the group decided how to collect it. We now have national statistics on child abuse. This could be done for children in care and adoption as well. A feasibility study would be a start.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

I'd like to put a question to some of you who have adopted a child.

In Quebec, adoptive parents are considered to be the biological parents and are covered under the same provisions in terms of employment insurance, services and parental leave. Furthermore, Quebec has an excellent post-adoption follow-up process. Organizations like CLSCs and youth centres, in particular, offer support and follow-up services. I would like to know what post-adoption follow-up was offered to you and, if it wasn't comprehensive enough, what you would like in the way of services.

In Quebec, a refundable tax credit is available to adoptive parents. Is it refundable in your case? I don't think so. In any case, please tell me more about the kind of post-adoption follow-up that you would like to receive.

[English]

Ms. Lee-Ann Slegers (Secretary, Canadian Coalition of Adoptive Families): For the post-adoption supports, I can really only speak for Ontario. A lot of the time, it depends on your agency. A lot of your smaller agencies don't have post-adoption support groups. We have the larger agencies, because the confidentiality and what have you aren't exactly welcoming to families from other

jurisdictions, from other agencies. Once you go to court and get the document that says the child is yours, the social workers are gone. They don't want to hear from you. Unless something goes horribly wrong, they're gone.

The support is really friends, other people who have been there. That's in a public scenario. In a private scenario, there is really nothing that I'm aware of. I have friends who have done it. I have family who have done the private route, and once you sign the documents, there is nothing. If something does develop, you then hope you can connect with somebody who has gone public and can access some of those supports in terms of groups and put friends in touch with friends.

That's where the disparity is. There is no follow-up once you sign those documents in court.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: It depends on your agency. In many jurisdictions, in the larger agencies, they may have some small budget that they cobble together to give parents some support. I got very good post-adoption support from the Ottawa Children's Aid Society, but it is entirely up to the agencies. In most provinces there is no provincial budget for post-adoption support, and Quebec is a very big exception to that, which we would like to see happening in other places.

Ms. Carol van der Veer: Just a quick personal note about the post-adoption support. It was two years before PALS was established, and it was through the Durham Children's Aid Society. It's interesting. Two or three staff were really keen to have the support group, because you could help each other, rather than constantly calling your social worker. When it was started, the other 25 staff were not keen. And we weren't picking the agency apart. It was just a room we were using, because it was free, because there isn't any funding. If there were drinks or snacks, it was because we brought them. They will sometimes fund children's programs.

The biggest thing is that Jessica has a support group. She learned maybe three years ago that she wasn't one of two or three children in Newcastle who was adopted. There were 35 adoptive children there. She was in heaven. She found her universe. She found her planet. So it's been a huge help for us, this post-adoption support.

Would you like to say something?

• (1030)

Miss Jessica van der Veer: With the support group, we go there once a month. All the parents will sit in there, and then my adoption worker, Robert, who doesn't like the meetings, will take all the kids and we'll make muffins or we'll do crafts, and we'll all be supporting something. This month was Adoption Awareness Month, and we made a poster; we watched movies. It's great because all the kids there were adopted, so it's not just like, "Do I talk about it? Do I not?" I can talk about it and nobody cares.

Thanks.

Ms. Sandra Scarth: I'd like to respond very briefly. Two years ago the Adoption Council did get some funding from Human Resources Development Canada and did spend two years trying to set up adoption groups across the country, but the funding ended, so we were not able to do it anymore. There is a possibility of that kind of funding being available, to help set up those self-help groups, because that is one of the best ways to support families.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much for coming this morning. I would suggest—contrary to perhaps what the chair has suggested—that adoption fits into a wider context that needs to be addressed if we're going to fix some of the challenges that the system faces and that people face. And certainly changes to EI, as you suggested, would give you more time; that would be a good start.

The whole question of poverty is top of mind for me these days because we just tabled a report here that is actually quite exceptional in its scope and breadth and in the recommendations it made. I think it would go a long way to helping adoptive families look after their children, particularly those who are challenged with things like FASD.

We just had a report this morning by Campaign 2000 that suggests that one in ten children lives in poverty in Canada, and in fact one in four if you're aboriginal. We've been talking about this for quite some time now, but we really haven't got our heads around what we might do. Poverty is also a determinant of health. If you live in poverty, chances are you won't be well and chances are you won't be able to get the resources you need outside of the system. And even in the system it's difficult, particularly for such diseases as FASD.

Maybe you could talk to us a bit this morning about what you think we might be able to do on that front of making sure we're supporting families in a way that allows them to be healthy and be that forever family they want to be. Oftentimes it falls apart because of money, resources, finances, and that kind of thing.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: I can speak to that if you'd like, Mr. Martin.

We believe that lack of permanency for children in care is a public health issue. I co-authored an editorial about that in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. We have the stats to prove it, because we know that children who age out of the system end up homeless, end up on the streets, end up in the justice system. On every measure of determinants of health, they rank at or near the bottom.

We believe there are creative ways for the federal government to act in areas of its own jurisdiction. One of them would be to look at this as a public health issue and to put strategies in place to support finding homes for the children who are in care. It's not going to solve all the problems, but when the child then maybe still gets into trouble, as biological children do, that kid will have a family standing with them. If that child gets into drug and alcohol issues, that child will have a family advocating for them.

The biggest thing we can do for at least that population of people is find them permanent families, so that they will stand with them, advocate for them, and help them, the same way you help your

biological children. Most of us know, as parents, our kids' needs do not end at age 16 or 18.

That's what we can do. That's what the federal government can do. It's not only a matter of EI. There are many broader strategies that this committee could recommend and look at, in federal supports in areas of your own jurisdiction that you could do. We have a list of recommendations. You're hearing some of them today. We've submitted a brief with others.

Mr. Tony Martin: Okay.

Out of my office, in some of the work that we've done over the years to try to support children as they move through the system, we find, as has been suggested here this morning, that the money doesn't follow the child. I attend the big banquet every year in the Soo. They bring foster families in, and those foster families...even though they struggle, at least they're supported. They're supplied with money and training and opportunities to get together and so on. But once the child is adopted, by either the foster family or somebody else, there's no more support. Adoptive parents often come and say, "Give us some training. Give us some access to the same supports the foster parents have." That would be a start. That would be a beginning.

Maybe somebody might want to talk about recommendations there.

• (1035)

Rev. Kimberly Sabourin: Well, I want us to consider where the money is being spent. It's being spent in keeping children in foster care and not in the prospective adoptive family. If we want permanency for Canada's children, it's going to cost us something. So we have to look at the money that we are pouring into our foster care system, which is doing the best it can, but then we have to see where can the money follow the child once it has been placed, with all the issues they are going to face. We have to really take a hard look at where our money is being spent.

Mr. Tony Martin: The other reality that I find rather sad is there are also family members who would love to adopt or even take a child into foster care, a grandparent perhaps, but there are roadblocks there too, because the money doesn't follow them either. If a child is moved into a family member's home, or a grandparent's home, again it's usually followed by some pretty difficult financial challenges because the money doesn't follow.

Ms. Sandra Scarth: There are small amounts of money through social welfare for grandparents who are grandparenting children, but it's very, very small. It's extremely low. It doesn't nearly cover the cost of a child. Very often, when these grandparents take in their children, if they haven't come through the child welfare system, they don't even have access to that. This is a huge issue. There are hundreds and thousands of children being raised by grandparents in this country with very little support, and they do fall into poverty. This is a whole area that does need addressing as well.

Mr. Tony Martin: One more, if I could.

The Chair: You have just under a minute.

Mr. Tony Martin: Okay.

At a gathering a couple of weeks ago, Cindy Blackstock spoke and said that in Canada today there are more aboriginal children in care than there ever were in the residential schools, and she tied it to neglect. Neglect is again because of poverty. Living in poverty, neglect happens. So kids get taken and put into foster care.

You mentioned aboriginal children and adoption being a particular challenge. Maybe you could—

The Chair: Very, very briefly.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: You probably need a whole other session on this, and I would suggest—

Mr. Tony Martin: We are going to have one, I think.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: —that you get Cindy here.

The Chair: We are; we're going to have one.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: I hope you will speak to Cindy. What we really hope you will also do is hear from youth themselves who have been in care, aboriginal youth and non-aboriginal youth—

The Chair: We want to do that, yes.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: —and talk to them about it. It's a huge issue.

Supports to birth families are very important to keep those kids from coming into care. But I think we have to be realistic and look at the fact that the challenges that many of the families face are such that the kids may have to come into care for a time, and that we may need to look for more families. You should talk to some of the aboriginal and non-aboriginal child welfare agencies about this, I think.

The Chair: Thank you. That's what we want to do as we move ahead.

Actually, I was just going to mention, Madam Folco, that I think I know what you want to ask, so I'll ask.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Go ahead.

The Chair: Well, I'm the chair. Normally you do it through the chair.

What we were wondering was whether you have more than the five recommendations you provided in your brief.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: Those are the major ones we would like you to look at. There are some more specific things, if you like, that follow from those.

The Chair: What we will do is translate that, and then we can pass it out to the whole committee. Madam Folco wanted to ask, if you had more recommendations, if you would also provide those. I think that was a good suggestion.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

All right. We can have one more round.

Mr. Watson.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, of course, to our witnesses as well for appearing, and for your testimony and your recommendations today.

There are some, perhaps even at this table, who would suggest that there's not much of a role for the federal government to play at all. The process of adoption and some of the services around adoption are either privately delivered or provincially or territorially delivered. Therefore, as a consequence, I might even suggest that we narrow the scope of the study and the number of meetings that are held on that. I want to address that in just a moment by pursuing a certain line of questioning. I hope to come back and address this.

Currently we have 13 separate jurisdictions for adoption in Canada—10 provinces and three territories. Do we know if the number of children in foster care is trending upward? Has it been reasonably stable over time? Is it going down?

• (1040)

Ms. Laura Eggertson: We don't know. We don't track the numbers well enough to know.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Okay, so we don't know.

We have a high number of children in foster care across Canada. That much we do know, at least as a snapshot in time.

On the availability of pre- and post-adoption supports across Canada, how similar are they? Is there a great disparity among provinces? I see heads nodding, but I'd like to get something specific or somebody to weigh in on that.

Ms. Sandra Scarth: There is tremendous disparity across the country. There are some provinces that provide more. Alberta, for example, provides the best adoption subsidy supports to families. B. C. has reasonably good support. In Ontario, what support they get depends on the children's aid societies. Some places, such as Manitoba, have very poor support. It varies tremendously.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I believe, Ms. Scarth, you described the system, if you can call it a system, or the 13 systems, as disjointed. I believe that was the word you used.

Ms. Sandra Scarth: Extremely.

Mr. Jeff Watson: We also have 13 separate health care systems in this country. If they were allowed to operate in the same way, blind from each other, without a sense of cooperation with the federal government, how do you presume health care delivery or outcomes would look in this country?

Ms. Sandra Scarth: I understand what you're getting at.

Mr. Jeff Watson: This committee has looked at a national housing strategy, for example. Notwithstanding what the provinces themselves choose to deliver, we do see that there's an important role for the federal government in terms of bringing players to the table to look at the range of issues that are dealt with and whether we can support the provinces and cooperate with them in ways that are important. We do that, for example, through the Canada health and social transfer.

I think we can take a broad look. Would you agree with me, in terms of adoption, that the study this committee undertakes can have some broad scope and yet ultimately find the sweet spot where the federal government can do this better?

Ms. Laura Eggertson: We think that's not only possible but is really incumbent on the committee to do. This is a national responsibility. These are our kids, regardless of whether they were born in one province or another, and they are ending up on our streets and in our jails, in many cases, when they age out. And they're not getting the care they need.

Mr. Jeff Watson: In fact, it can be considered with respect to the prevention of crime in Canada.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: And it can be considered with respect to the prevention of homelessness.

Mr. Jeff Watson: And it deals with mental health issues.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: We, in fact, will have someone, we hope, address the issue of mental health care.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I think there's been considerable talk about the federal government participating in some sort of mental health strategy. We do see that there's a valuable role. This can be looked at.

I want to get to the issue of EI benefits. There is jurisprudence around this. It's the Tomasson case, I believe in 2007, that said that maternity has unique aspects to it. Therefore, beyond parental leave, there's consideration for additional time. There are differences, I think, if I hear it correctly, and maybe I'm playing semantics here, but I believe that the Adoption Council of Canada's presentation suggested that it should be 50 weeks for adoptive parents. I believe that it was the Canadian Coalition of Adoptive Families that said that all parents should receive 50 weeks of parental benefits. There's a difference between the two, if you follow me on that.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: Yes, we actually are trying not to prescribe the terms. What we're trying to say is 50 weeks for both sets of parents. I think we're in conjunction on that.

Mr. Jeff Watson: So presumably, to go to 50 weeks of parental is to have enough flexibility to deal with both the unique biological aspects and the unique adoption aspects.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: We're not asking you to add weeks for both groups; we're just asking you to add weeks for adoptive parents.

Mr. Jeff Watson: You would also be asking for the elimination of the maternity benefit and a complete parental.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: No, we don't think we need to.

Mr. Jeff Watson: So you're asking for 50 weeks, and then for biological parents they would still get the additional 15 weeks of maternity.

• (1045)

Ms. Laura Eggertson: No.

Mr. Jeff Watson: So you are asking for the replacement of that—

Ms. Laura Eggertson: We don't want to replace it, though, per se. We don't want to start a fight with—

Mr. Jeff Watson: Well, it would have to be eliminated in order to get the same 50 weeks. Do you understand the difference here? I know it's a technical issue, but if you give 50 weeks of parental, you can't give it only to adoptive parents; it would have to be to biological parents as well.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: Okay, so find a name and call it another 15 weeks of adopted parental leave then.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Well, a transition leave, perhaps, or something like that.

Ms. Laura Eggertson: Whatever, yes.

Mr. Jeff Watson: There are unique aspects to adoptive parenting that aren't present for biological parenting. For one, adoptive parenting doesn't always involve an infant. Are there others? Can you talk about that and the need for an additional benefit that would be the same number of weeks as maternity, perhaps, but would have to be called something different, like transition leave?

Ms. Sandra Scarth: I like your idea of transition leave, something like that. I think people have made the case here that there is a reason for needing this extra time, similar to biological reasons.

Mr. Jeff Watson: How much time do I still have?

The Chair: No, really, that's about it. Yes, we're past our time.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

The Chair: Great.

Again, I just want to thank all of you for being here and for the information you've provided.

And thank you so much to Jessica. Jessica, I'm going to ask, you before you go, if you wouldn't mind coming to sign your picture, because then I'll have your signature.

All right. Thank you very much. Yes, we actually have someone with a camera, so maybe we can get a photo.

Thank you very much. Our meeting is now adjourned.

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