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Mr. Ed Komarnicki

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

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): Good morning, everyone.

We have representatives here today from the March of Dimes Canada: Jerry Lucas, vice-president, and Judy Quillin, director, employment services. Also, we have with us Marilyn Gunn, chief executive officer and founder of Community Kitchen Program of Calgary. We look forward to hearing from you.

We are conducting a study of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, and we've heard from a number of witnesses. We're looking forward to hearing from you.

I understand the March of Dimes will start first. Mr. Lucas, go ahead.

Mr. Jerry Lucas (Vice-President, Programs, National Head Office, March of Dimes Canada): Thank you for this opportunity.

March of Dimes Canada was established in 1951 and is one of Canada's largest service providers and advocates for people with disabilities. Last year we delivered more than 2.25 million hours of service to over 60,000 Canadians with disabilities. March of Dimes has been providing employment services for over 50 years, predating the introduction of the Vocational Rehabilitation for Disabled Persons Act.

Over the past century, we have seen many improvements in the lives of people with disabilities as a result of legislation and programs that have enshrined rights, improved access to facilities and services, and promoted inclusion in education, employment and community life. Despite this, employment rates for people with disabilities remain unacceptably high, and incomes are unfortunately low. Last year, 77% of people served by March of Dimes had incomes below \$20,000 per year, and 30% were below \$10,000 per year. We are therefore encouraged that the federal government has recommitted to making employment for people with disabilities a priority in its current agenda.

I'll now turn it over to Judy to speak to the issues.

Ms. Judy Quillin (Director, Employment Services, National Head Office, March of Dimes Canada): One of the advantages of appearing at a later meeting of this committee is the opportunity to review the submissions of both HRSDC staff and my sector colleagues. The HRSDC staff provided a comprehensive overview

of the state of employment for persons with disabilities and the programs the department offers to respond to the current reality.

When it comes to many submissions, especially those by my disability-related agencies, by my colleagues, I am continually disheartened by our approach. Many submissions state the weak employment statistics, followed by the challenges and issues faced by their specific disability group. To truly move forward, the tone of this conversation needs to be about what persons with disabilities can do and urge the Government of Canada to fund programs that assist them to pursue the goal of gainful employment.

In the employment equation there are really only two parties: the employer and the job seeker. All of us in this room are really only involved in that equation because the equation is currently unbalanced. The job seekers, persons with disabilities, are not viewed as competitively employable. If they could compete, if the equation were balanced, they would not need all of us.

As a long-standing provider of vocational rehabilitation services, March of Dimes would like to provide the standing committee with three key issues and solutions on both the job seeker and employer sides of the equation that we believe will make a difference.

We need to maximize the capacity and labour market relevance of motivated individuals with disabilities by providing comprehensive services and supports.

Issue number one includes leveraging existing abilities, enhancing skills, and providing work experience.

For many reasons, some of the disability-related job seekers may lack experience and the skills to be relevant in today's labour market. Upon initial review, their resumé will not compare to those of other job seekers. In markets experiencing labour shortages, employers will view these resumé as not meeting even their minimum perceived job requirements. Lacking relevant skills and experience is not unique to persons with disabilities, but is a common reality for new grads, immigrants, and native Canadians.

The solution is one where employment agencies serving persons with disabilities must be able to provide continuous and comprehensive employment supports. Career exploration and a full assessment of the job seeker's transferable skills will establish where the job seeker's abilities lie today. Specialized assessments will establish if the job seeker has the learning capacity to suggest an investment in enhanced skill training. Work experiences geared to the abilities of the client and the needs of the employer will provide real world, on-the-job training. A work experience may also provide a low risk opportunity for the employer to become familiar with someone with a disability, maybe changing a misconception.

Issue number two includes the systemic barriers related to social assistance.

While looking for a job, the majority of job seekers with a disability have their income supported through provincial social assistance systems. We hear time and time again that many of our clients fear that getting work will have a negative consequence on this support. Fears include being found ineligible for social assistance if they lose their job and the loss of health benefits. In today's economy, work can be short-term or time-limited contracts. Even where safety nets are in place, they may not fully account for the changing realities of the labour market. These disincentives are either real or perceived. At March of Dimes we have a 30% attrition rate between intake and placement. While there are many reasons for attrition, a significant factor is the loss of benefits.

The solution is for governments at all levels to ensure that any disincentives to work, whether real or perceived, are eliminated. They must ensure that the safety net is secure and consistently re-evaluated as the labour market changes. The decision to work for a person with a disability must be based on their ability and motivation to do so, and not on systemic barriers.

Issue number three includes disability-related supports.

Where necessary, job seekers must receive assistance related both to the type and severity of their disability. The greatest need is in the placement or job retention supports. Job seekers need the support of an employment agency to assist them with on-the-job skill acquisition. Employers need to view the employment agency as a specialist or disability consultant with the knowledge to achieve the job outcomes perhaps using different approaches, techniques, or devices.

The solution is to create a successful job match. It is important that job seekers and employers be provided with the opportunity for post-placement assistance which could take many forms. These services should be provided by the same employment agency that provided pre-employment services, to ensure continuity.

● (1105)

I'll now turn to supporting employers.

The first issue is that employers need to understand the business case. Employers are not always aware of the benefits of employing persons with disabilities, and they state concerns that in reality rarely occur. These myths include high cost and the complex nature of disability-related accommodations, higher than usual sick time, safety issues, and low work output. Employers taking a risk-averse perspective, dwelling on the myths, and not recognizing the benefits

greatly diminishes the hiring opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Solutions include further developing and promoting the business case for hiring persons with disabilities through business and industry umbrella organizations or peer-to-peer discussion, and eliciting the support of business leaders with real experience that can support researched realities.

A second issue is that placement must be based on the needs of the position. Often, employers require qualifications, education, and experience that are higher than necessary for the position posted. This can be a deterrent for job seekers who feel their abilities will not meet the stated requirements, although they may be fully capable of performing the work.

There is no question that recruitment and hiring is a risky business. Hiring managers have all experienced candidates who look great on paper and may even do well in the interview but are gone within six months. It is a risky and expensive venture. What is the solution?

It is essential that employment agencies take a needs-based approach to placement, and that they fully understand the business needs of the hiring employers with whom they are working. They must facilitate needs-based discussion that explores the essential hard and soft skills required for the position. Employers should forgo posting for the perfect candidate and focus first on the immediate and then the longer term needs. They must understand what is required for the position on day one and what can be trained for over time.

Employment agencies for persons with disabilities can provide suitable candidates who match these essential skills and support further skill development. Employers need only look internally to their own brightest and best. They probably didn't start out the company with all of the requisite skills and experience, but gained these over time.

Issue number three is that employers must leverage resources available within the community. To keep business moving, an open job, be it replacement or expansion, needs to be filled as soon as possible. Companies are either unaware or unwilling to utilize the expertise of employment service providers to present suitable candidates for their hiring needs. Having to launch a recruitment effort slows the pace of business, affects efficiency, and limits the ability of employers to access underutilized segments of the labour market, including persons with disabilities.

At March of Dimes, we job prospect up to 3,000 employers a week. In Ontario, for example, our employer catalogue has more than 250,000 employers. Over the last three years we have worked with only 1,500, or less than 1% of those we have contacted. This demonstrates the hesitancy of employers to take advantage of the services we offer.

I'll turn to the solution. It is concerning that employers are unwilling or unaware of how to leverage existing resources, which are available to them at no charge. There must be a concerted effort by employment service providers, post-secondary institutions, and those that fund us to promote the advantages of our services and the job seekers we represent. We must adopt a professional business-to-business, value-added approach that fulfills the hiring needs of employers better than they can themselves.

In summary, March of Dimes makes the following recommendations to the Government of Canada. Ensure that all employment funding and resulting programs at both the federal and provincial levels facilitate the matching of work opportunities to motivated job seekers. Provide work experiences to gain real-world skills. Invest in individuals who have the capacity to acquire skills needed in the labour market. Remove systemic disincentives to work. Ensure that all employment funding and resulting programs at both the federal and provincial levels include post-placement support facilitated by the same agency that assessed and placed the client. Act upon the recommendations of the report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, which calls for a strategy to assist employers to understand the value proposition of bringing persons with disabilities to their companies. Continue to support and promote the essential skills project under HRSDC, so that employers can develop suitable and realistic job requirements. Promote to the business community the expertise and resources available to it, primarily employment agencies and post-secondary institutions, services the federal government funds.

• (1110)

We believe these recommendations will balance the job seeker-employer equation and facilitate enhanced opportunities for persons with disabilities in the workforce by focusing on their assets, abilities, and potential.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that extensive report. We do thank the March of Dimes for all the great programs and services you provide, and certainly for your recommendations. I can understand that the post-placement support is as important at many times as the supports prior to the placement. Thank you for that.

We'll now hear from Ms. Gunn.

• (1115)

Ms. Marilyn Gunn (Chief Executive Officer and Founder, Community Kitchen Program of Calgary): Thank you.

First of all, I want to say it's an absolute honour to be here today. It's very unnerving also, so please bear with me.

The moving forward program started out of the Community Kitchen Program of Calgary. When the federal government allotted us money to build a building that would house different agencies, and also our agency, the Community Kitchen Program, there was a vow made that the entire building would be used to change lives within the city of Calgary and make a difference.

We address homelessness, basically, and low income, poverty and hunger. Those are our areas of expertise.

The Community Kitchen Program has a warehouse of 18,000 square feet on one side and 21,000 square feet on the opposite side of the building. This required workers. I sat down and wondered how could a not-for-profit possibly afford workers. Then it came to me. We were to address poverty and homelessness, and to change lives. That's when I decided that the best opportunity would be to work with the homeless population of the city of Calgary coming out of transitional housing and put them into real housing, but we had to give them the supports, the undergirding arms to retrain them and give them hope and skills. This is what the moving forward program does.

All of our clients have come out of homelessness, or are at risk of homelessness. All of them live below the poverty level. All of them have some type of mental illness. When you live on the street, you cannot escape having mental illness; it's just part of street life. First it starts, and then drugs, and then the first thing you know, there is the cause-and-effect action.

We linked arms with different agencies and said that we should form a program where we can give these people hope coming out of homelessness. Our mission statement is to prevent homelessness by supporting the most vulnerable members of our community. In providing the skills-based training and work program, individuals living with mental health issues are empowered—and that's the key word, ladies and gentlemen, “empowered”—to overcome their barriers to employment, succeed, and live a fruitful, normal, independent life.

That's what we really hang our hat on, to see these lives changed.

Our focus is on warehouse employment training, and courses on nine essential skills needed for work and life as recognized by Service Canada. The program provides opportunities for individuals who have been socially and vocationally disabled by their mental illness, and who are struggling to retain work or return to employment. When they go back to work, many of the people who have suffered homelessness do not retain a position for more than one or two weeks, and then you know what happens: they fall backwards because they haven't had the essential skills, the basic life skills, and the change that has to occur within their lives.

We partner with many agencies. Not one agency can do this alone; it is absolutely impossible. We partner with agencies for recruitment procedures. Where do we get these people from, the women and men? We get them from the shelters, from transitional housing, like Alpha House, which is a treatment centre for alcohol and drugs, in the second stage. We also get them from the remand centre, which is when they're just coming out of prison. We are now working in the prisons to turn them around, take them from there and bring them out into society.

We work with many agencies. I'm going to list them off to show you that not just one agency can be the answer. We work with Alpha House, which is a detoxification centre; Keys to Recovery; the Schizophrenia Society; the self-help association; the Canadian Mental Health Association; Alberta Health Services; Momentum, which teaches people budgeting and financial skills; the Alpha House Society; Workers' Compensation Board; youth and family services; NeighbourLink; and the John Howard Society. We also work with the Salvation Army, the Calgary Drop-In and Rehab Centre, the Mustard Seed, and the Dream Centre.

• (1120)

Those are all services that are there. The clients are now coming out of them and going back into society. That's where we have to be the bridge to get them in there.

Our clients suffer from mental illness, addictions, and are at a high risk of becoming homeless. They have several social and vocational disabilities and there are barriers to finding sustainable employment. When employers see that most of them have had prior offences with the law, some of them have done time in prison, or they have been homeless, most employers just back off and say, "No thank you, we'll look elsewhere."

Do you know what? We need the tools of change, and that's what it is. We have to take these young men and women and give them instruction.

The Canadian government has identified nine essential skills needed for the workplace in the 21st century. We incorporate these elements into our training: reading, document use, numeracy, writing, communication skills—many of them do not know how to communicate properly—and how to work with others. Most of them are loners and do not get along well with others. Most of them have been in for assault and all kinds of things like that. They are just not social. We also incorporate computer use and continuous learning.

We teach basic life skills. You can't go through life without them. We started cooking with them and it is amazing. Most of them have never cooked; they have never been in an apartment where they have been able to cook their own meals. We have started to train them, and they are learning very well.

Time management to a homeless person is non-existent. It doesn't exist. We teach them time management. They have to be there on time and there are certain breaks. What they do on the weekends and what they do on their time off is very well managed.

They don't have healthy boundaries either. It's goal setting, because to a homeless person there is no goal setting. To work with goal setting is quite a challenge. It is very challenging for us to turn

them around and say that without a goal, they will never become anything. The old saying is, without a vision the people perish.

We help with career searches, resumé writing, money management. Etiquette: you may think that is a very silly thing to teach but most of them have absolutely no etiquette or manners whatsoever. Even their language we have to curtail at times.

Healthy relationships, health, and wellness, it's hands-on teaching. For cooking we actually are in the kitchen and we teach them how to read recipes, cook, peel, cut, and all of those things. We as women really know what that's all about, don't we?

For jobs in the warehouse, they learn such things as sweeping, swamping, picking, packing, palette loading, and forklift operating. They spend hours learning these skills. They also learn emergency first aid, CPR, WHMIS, food handling. They get their permit for forklift classes II, III and IV, with 160 practical hours in the course.

This program has been running for four years and we have had seven cohorts of between eight and eighteen students. Our success rate for employment has been 72%, which we are very proud of. We have a graduation ceremony. This is where the graduates from the school invite relatives or people who are close to them. Quite often we see parents who had given up on these young people. When they come they are so proud that their son or daughter has finally made it, finally has a certificate in his or her hands. Most of them have not even finished secondary school, but to have a certificate saying that they are equipped and able to work is amazing for them.

The highest form of ignorance is when we reject something we don't know anything about. Please take time to consider that we are all responsible for our mental health and those around us. Mental health can affect every one of us. It does not matter who we are, where we came from, or where we're going, the effects of mental health can change our lives. That is the moving forward program.

•(1125)

I wish I could have presented you the video I have of a young man who graduated. He was 24 years old and had been on the streets since he was 13 years old. He was completely addicted to drugs and alcohol. He hadn't slept in a proper bed since he was 14 and had couchsurfing for over one year. Many of his friends abandoned him, so he was completely on the streets, totally and completely. Not until he was 21 did a police officer bring him to Alpha House for detoxification. There, he realized that he had reached his low point and he couldn't get any lower.

At that point, Jason decided he needed help, and through the work of Alpha House, which we partner with, they contacted us and asked us if we would take him. He had had many offences, had been in and out of jail, and he had given up hope. There was no light in his eyes anymore. He came in, they brought him up to my office, and he said, "Would you give me a chance? I just need someone to care." We said we would. Today he has graduated and has a full-time job, Monday to Friday, five days a week. He is completely clean, no drugs, and has been reunited with his family who had thrown him out when he was 13 years old.

This man's life has turned around. It is such an honour to be able to say that with the help of the finances we got from the government, we were able to change one life. I ask you, how much is one life worth? It's worth a lot in today's society. At this point, we have 18 whose lives we are changing.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to come here. It has been amazing. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I can certainly see how very gratifying it is when you can see a life change. Providing some of the basic skills they need to empower them to be and become who they can be, being part of that is certainly very gratifying I'm sure. We appreciate hearing from you.

We'll open it up to questioning, and we'll start with Madame Perreault.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will first go to Mr. Lucas and Ms. Quillin, and then Mrs. Gunn.

Your organization is known for its success in placement. Earlier, you talked about the key obstacles. There are many organizations similar to yours. How could those organizations increase their support to help people get back to work?

You also talked about systemic barriers related to social assistance. What kind of assistance do you expect from the federal government?

Finally, you talked about support and training. Are some training programs more important than others and, if so, which one of your programs is currently the most successful at helping disabled individuals?

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Lucas.

Ms. Judy Quillin: I'll start with the question on the training.

I think what comes first is an assessment of the individual's capabilities and skills. Once we have determined what transferable skills the individual has, then we can determine where they should go from there. In some cases, as our colleague over here said, it's really training for the essential skills of the job they're interested in, and we use the HRSDC essential skills program to support that. These are basically entry level positions an individual would participate in, and we would train for those essential skills.

We also do a specialized assessment of the abilities of the individual to learn and obtain additional education. As you know, we have a skills shortage in this country. If an individual has the ability to gain further education and the capacity to do so, we might recommend, through various programs, that they attend college and get those skills, so there is a direct match to a labour market need.

I hope that answers your question.

•(1130)

The Chair: Mr. Lucas, did you wish to comment?

Mr. Jerry Lucas: Let me address the social assistance question.

We recently responded to the report of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, which was just completed. Thinking back on my experience as early as 1981, during the International Year of Disabled Persons, the "Obstacles" report, which came from the federal government, recommended splitting social assistance related to unemployment from assistance related to the additional costs of disability. That's something we've always supported. We recommended that Ontario follow up on that. We believe that if you separate the two, you can deal with the unemployment issue without taking away the safety net. If that safety net stays with the individual, assuming they have a lifelong disability, what can start out as a financial benefit can transition to a tax credit if the person is able to successfully gain employment and increase his or her income. We believe they are really two parts of the system, but unfortunately they're currently blended.

Ms. Judy Quillin: I believe the first question was about employment agencies and what these agencies, similar to ours, can do to increase the number of individuals that achieve employment. In terms of the employment or vocational rehabilitation stream, there are two parts to it. The first part is the assessment of the individual's skills and capabilities. The second part is when they are placed, when that job match occurs with an employer, and the post-placement supports come into play. A middle piece addresses the needs-based approach with employers.

If all employment agencies take a look at those three pieces and utilized programs and services within their own communities to maximize those three pieces of the equation, I think outcomes would improve. There is a well-rounded assessment of the individual's capabilities. We strive for a good business-to-business relationship with employers to ensure that we are meeting their needs. The third piece would be post-placement supports, in cases where the individual may take a little bit longer to learn the skills and abilities of that particular job. This is where the employment agency can provide support.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Your time is up.

Does anyone else wish to make a comment or response?

If not, we'll move to Mr. Shory.

Mr. Devinder Shory (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Witnesses, thank you very much for coming here to assist us in our study on exploring employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

My questions will be for Ms. Gunn. I have visited your organization and have seen the work you began after you retired from life in the corporate world: starting a charity, the good food box program, and Christmas hampers. You have developed many programs that are very helpful. You are highly decorated, with many awards and nominations for the good work you have been doing. The list is very long, so I won't use my time that way. I certainly want to thank you for helping to improve the lives of those people who are in need in our communities.

During this study, I have learned that Canadians with disabilities have a tremendous amount to offer employers, but they seem to be under-represented in the field. I will focus on one of the programs you developed at the Community Kitchen Program, the moving forward program. You talked about it a little. You talked about the successful example of Jason, whom I have met personally. I have actually talked about him in our committee. He is such an inspirational young man. He's very proud to get back to a normal life. I understand that the moving forward program was developed specifically for those living with mental health issues.

I want you to comment on three things. First, I want you to share with the committee whether you think programs like the opportunity fund for persons with disabilities are helpful. Second, in dealing with the employers to get all these individuals back to a normal life, what are the challenges you want us to address, and what are the solutions you would propose? Third, is there anything the federal government could do, specifically the non-monetary initiatives considering the financial situation, to address what is available to persons with disabilities?

• (1135)

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: First, I'd like to address the issue of the employers. This is a very difficult area. All of our clients have some type of criminal record because of coming out of homelessness and also because of mental health issues. I'd like to give you an example because I don't think we get the full picture unless we have examples.

There is one gentleman in our group. His name is Daniel. When he was 23 years old, he was walking down the street after a fresh

snowfall. He picked up some snow, made a snowball, and aimed for a sign. He missed the sign and hit somebody on the back of the head. The gentleman turned around, and guess what: he was a police officer. Daniel was imprisoned for assaulting a police officer.

No one took in the idea that he had mental health issues; he was just committed. He did eight months for assaulting a police officer. When he came out he had a record. He went through our program. Every time he went to get employment he was barred because he had a police record. He didn't rob a bank. He didn't commit a murder. He did nothing like that. He was simply a young man having fun in the snow.

Is there some way we could educate employers? I don't know how this could be done. I have no idea what it would take. Even to be able to have those minor charges dropped and have a clean record would really assist him.

Without having any money, how do you pay to have that removed? It costs a lot of money right now to have a clearance done. This is one thing I think the government could look at: ways and means of helping people with mental illness, especially for such minor things as throwing a snowball and accidentally hitting a police officer. It wasn't intentional; he didn't mean to do that. That is one area I think we could address.

The other area is I think there has to be an awareness made for people with mental health issues. There was a huge committee across this country about mental illness, but not enough is known about it. Many people are afraid of it. Somehow an advertisement campaign or something to this effect would really help people with mental illness.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that response.

Mr. Shory, your time is up. We'll move to Madame Boutin-Sweet.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

Mrs. Gunn. You said that several partners are involved in your programs. Do you receive any funding from HPS, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy?

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: Yes, our main funding for this program is the opportunity fund and HPS, the homelessness fund. Yes, I do.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: What specifically is that money used for?

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: The opportunities fund pays for such things as workboots, vests, the equipment, the books that are needed. The other funding goes for our staff. We do need staff to run this program. It also goes for educational...and bringing in other agencies to speak and do the teaching. Bus passes, that's very urgent. These people have no means of transportation. It is so that their general needs to attain and graduate are covered. That's the main thing.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: So it is used to pay staff or to pay for the things you buy for people. It's not directly related to housing, but it is rather in its periphery.

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: It doesn't connect with housing, although we do work with a committee and a program that does house people, but it has nothing to do with housing whatsoever. It is to give them the skills so they can maintain and supply their own housing.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: I asked you the question in order to highlight this issue and make it public.

The direction of HPS is changing, and it should not only focus on housing. It should include other aspects related to housing. That was my point, and you just confirmed it. Thank you for that.

The March of Dimes Canada representatives discussed poverty at length. There are people who earn less than \$20,000 or \$10,000 a year. As we know—and you also mentioned this—individuals lose some income when they start working. In addition, people with an intellectual disability often have lower wages than those with other types of disabilities.

I would like to know what kind of wages are earned by people you train to work in warehouses. Do individuals with mental health issues or an intellectual disability receive the same wages as others?

The question is for Mrs. Gunn.

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: For the first three months there is funding from the opportunities fund for that. After that we encourage the employers to pay the same wage they pay every other warehouse worker, because we do not believe there should be discrimination in these matters.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: You encourage them to do so, but do they follow through?

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: We speak to them and tell them this is part of the contract, that they get the first three months paid and then after that it is regular wages. We do not believe they should be on a lower wage level because they have had issues with their past.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Ms. Quillin, do you have anything to add?

[English]

Ms. Judy Quillin: Yes, certainly.

We certainly advocate the clients coming through the program. We are looking for legitimate jobs in a competitive job market, so any client who comes through a March of Dimes program will be matched with a job that is open to all at a competitive wage. What we may do, perhaps, through HRSDC's opportunities fund, is provide a wage subsidy for the employer for a period of time, while our client is learning the skills of the job, to support the employer perhaps through a longer training period for that job, but at the end of that time, we expect the employer to hire at a competitive wage.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: A number of witnesses have told us that, when the government subsidy ends, so does the job.

Has that often happened in your experience?

[English]

Ms. Judy Quillin: I think with any program of this nature there can be abuse of the situation. I think that's where our approach and that of many of our colleagues is really approaching the employer on a needs basis. We're not looking at creating a job for someone with a disability; we're looking for a legitimate job that is open because someone has quit, or there's an expansion in the company, so it's a vacancy that needs to be filled anyway. This is something that when we put our client in there, the wage subsidy occurs, and if our client can't continue, perhaps because they haven't met the skill requirement, they simply have to hire someone else.

We are looking for legitimate work, and when the wage subsidy ends, that client has learned the skills of the job and will continue on. It doesn't happen in all cases, because the skills have not been learned. Then we look at other options for the client and for the employer.

● (1145)

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: What do you think about the idea...

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. Time is up on that.

Does anyone else wish to comment?

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: Yes, I'd like to speak to that.

With us, they have had 160 hours of hands-on training in warehousing, so when our clients go into these positions, they're already trained. It hasn't been book learning; it's been actual hands-on training. Therefore the three months' subsidy from the opportunities fund... After that, I would say about 72% of our clients have remained in the position. I think the key is the hands-on experience.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now move to Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you as well for being here today for this very important discussion while we, as legislators, find out what's really happening on the ground.

Ms. Gunn, I think it's appropriate that I clarify with the opposition exactly what the funds are for, because I believe there was a political motive in trying to somehow paint a picture that there's no money for housing. Let me be very clear that the opportunities fund, as I understand it, is for skills training, and it's for persons who are on the margins, as you've discussed, and who you so wonderfully help. It's unfortunate that you were put in the position you were. There's also the homelessness partnering strategy, which put \$1.9 billion in our budget over five years for housing and preventing homelessness. There are two distinct funds, and they're for two distinct separate purposes. There's no motive in saying something like this, other than making a political point that there's not enough money for housing, when we're funding two separate pools of money.

I'd like to talk to Ms. Quillin and Mr. Lucas. I think the thread that's run through your comments today—and I believe you're actively involved in this—is as an employment agent, if you want to call it that, for persons with disabilities, and how important that is in terms of the ability to properly match. Also, we had some witnesses here, particularly from the private sector, who said that one of the most important things, after someone was matched with a company, was the support and coaching that is required for persons with disabilities. Do you see that in your roles in terms of the people you help? If there are other supports that you think are necessary, please advise the committee of those things.

Ms. Judy Quillin: We see it as absolutely critical. When we work with individuals to determine their suitable occupation or job goal, if they're suitably motivated, I firmly believe we can pretty much find anybody a job. We have to work with employers to encourage them to hire, and then once that job match is made, on-the-job support is critical for success. That can come in many forms, as I noted in my submission. It can come in terms of a job coach, who can be there to help them learn the skills of the job. It can be there in terms of accommodation supports, doing the same job in perhaps a different way, a different process. That can be very intense at the beginning of the job match, and then weaned off during time until the person is completely independent. That often happens in conjunction with the wage subsidy, so that's a weaning-off process until the individuals have learned the skills and they can do the job individually. I think it's critically important.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I appreciate that.

We've also had witnesses who run specialized employment agencies for persons with disabilities. They're assisted through, again, many government-funded programs. They make applications to put specific programs together for individuals who have specific needs and are awarded, I would call it, on a contractual basis to produce certain numbers of training results and job-matching results. From your perspective, how important is that?

• (1150)

Ms. Judy Quillin: We are recipients of opportunities fund dollars, and we at March of Dimes serve all persons with all disabilities,

regardless of type or severity, so we're a generalist provider. I do know agencies out there that are disability specific and I think, especially when it comes to accommodations in the workplace and/or job carving, which is looking at a job and perhaps taking a piece of it that the person's abilities are suited to, that could be very helpful. I think there's a place for both.

I think the most important thing is the generic piece where we look at the abilities, regardless of their disabilities, and move from there, but there is a role for specialty agencies.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Is there one key thing we could do to overcome the myths employers have? I'm talking about private businesses, entrepreneurs, and small, medium, and large businesses. Is there any one thing you can think of that we could do to break those barriers, open those doors, and have those employers consider persons with disabilities on a larger scale than they do today?

The Chair: We'll conclude with responses to that.

Go ahead, Ms. Quillin.

Ms. Judy Quillin: Yes, and I think it was noted in the report which the panel created just a few months ago. It is a mechanism to support peer-to-peer discussion, business-to-business discussion about the successes that have occurred when an employer—not just the large corporate employers; I'm talking about SMEs here—has hired an individual and it has been successful and, in fact, created a more nimble company, created a more open environment within the company. That's the type of discussion the federal government has to facilitate. I think it has made a wonderful step starting that through the panel, and it should continue in that vein.

The Chair: Does anyone else wish to make a comment?

Mr. Jerry Lucas: I just want to say that we were recently approved for a grant from the federal government that we will be, hopefully, starting in the next couple of months. It's a partnership with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. We think that kind of a partnership is really important, because partnering with the businesses and being able to provide the wage subsidy hopefully will allow some businesses that might be a little cautious in trying to work with disabled employees to take that step and to gain a better understanding of what the capabilities are.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame St-Denis.

[Translation]

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your comments, Mrs. Gunn.

I was not familiar with the Moving Forward program, but I know that similar organizations are out there. In Montreal, Quebec, the work done by father “Pops” is akin to what you described.

Are any links established between similar organizations in different provinces? My question is specifically about funding. Would it be beneficial for all similar organizations across provinces to come together in order to submit a joint request to the federal government?

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: Ms. St-Denis, thank you so much for your comment. To me it is vital that we have open communication with different organizations that are doing the same. As I said before, you cannot be an island; you have to be a group and work together to address the issues. I would very much be open to that. I did some research from Calgary, but I have not found agencies that do exactly as we do. I would welcome the opportunity if I could have that information.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Regarding funding, you talked about some programs—either for persons with disabilities or individuals with mental health issues. Are the people who work for your organization volunteers, or are they paid by, for instance, the health care system?

•(1155)

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: Most of our people are paid employees. It takes pretty specific people to work with people with mental health issues and people coming out of homelessness. A lot of people are afraid to work in that area, but we do have some very qualified volunteers. We have 18 in our current cohort. We have, I think, eight volunteers who work alongside them. It is very important. We cannot operate without volunteers. Our whole organization has 1,800 volunteer hours every year, but most of our people are employees.

[Translation]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Okay.

Do the employees depend on annual funding? In other words, do you have to wait to see whether you will receive funding every year, or is that not a problem for you?

[English]

Ms. Marilyn Gunn: No, we have to wait until we know that the funding is through. That's a huge barrier for us. If there was something like three-year or five-year funding in succession it would really work well. We have to wait, so then they're on contract. All our employees are registered social workers, and have been trained to train people on equipment.

[Translation]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: My question is for Ms. Quillin or Mr. Lucas.

Does the attitude of employers with regard to the integration of disabled people in society vary from province to province? My understanding is that your organization is present in all provinces.

[English]

Ms. Judy Quillin: I don't know that I could comment fairly on that. I don't see any attitudinal differences from province to province. I think all our communities are open, and we don't have more

employers per se who are more interested in one area than the other. So I would say no.

[Translation]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Okay.

Thanks.

[English]

The Chair: Certainly we've heard that issue of funding and going year to year and that poses some problems, but on the other hand, those who might want to get in on providing a service also want to have that opportunity.

Thank you for your valuable suggestions and sharing your thoughts and insights in this area. We appreciate that very much.

I might mention to our committee that our next panel of witnesses will be the last panel, so keep that in mind. There's one more panel and then the next committee meeting will be with respect to drafting instructions with this study, completing our report, and dealing with some other matters. The deadline for witnesses for the next study will be this Thursday, so keep that in mind. We may discuss it a little further.

Do you want to make a comment now, Ms. Charlton?

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Chair, I'd like a clarification. At the next meeting, we're not doing this report. We're finishing up the last report, right?

The Chair: Yes, and we're giving drafting instructions on this report.

Ms. Chris Charlton: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. So once again, witnesses, thank you very much for attending the committee.

We'll suspend for a few minutes for the next panel.

•(1155)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1205)

The Chair: Order.

Before we get started, I want to repeat my earlier comments that the next meeting won't be with respect to panels or witnesses. We will conclude the apprenticeship report and drafting instructions with respect to this report. We have a Centennial Flame motion to deal with. As well, it is the deadline for submission of names of witnesses for our next study. Keep that in mind if you haven't submitted them yet to the clerk. She would appreciate it if you could submit them.

To our panel, you are our last panel before we issue drafting instructions with respect to our report. Thank you for coming before our committee and in some cases sharing personal experiences. We appreciate that.

Welcome to Alex Masek from the Boys and Girls Club of Ottawa; Meenu Sikand, who will be sharing some personal experiences; and Linda Soulliere, from the Coalition for Persons with Disabilities. We're looking forward to hearing from you.

We'll start with you, Mr. Masek. Go ahead.

Mr. Alex Masek (Senior Youth Worker, Boys and Girls Club of Ottawa): My name is Alex Masek. I'm 22. I was born in Ottawa and raised in the Overbrook and Vanier area. I was born with one arm, a below-the-elbow amputee.

I work at the Boys and Girls Club of Ottawa. I've been working there for four years. I coach kids. I run a youth council. I do speaking for the Boys and Girls Club.

Other than that, in terms of my past jobs, I worked at the Rideau cinema, a movie theatre downtown. I helped people with their tickets, served food, and opened and closed the building.

I also worked at Food Basics as a cashier. In terms of my experience as a cashier at Food Basics, with my disability, standing in one spot is hard because of the weight on each one of my arms. Working nine-hour shifts standing in the same place is really uncomfortable. I brought it up with them, and asked them if I could do things differently to feel better, to make my job input a lot better, and to benefit everyone else. I was basically told to suck it up and do the job, so I quit. I went to the Boys and Girls Club, where I got to be the role model I wanted to be, to show the kids who they are, to bring out the skills in them to be exactly who they want to be, to help them become the person they want to be.

What I love about the job is that I can show them that I may have a disability, but I can do this and I can do that. They really look up to me. Half the time people don't see me with a disability because it's so natural for me. I think places need that kind of thing, especially when you're working with kids. Kids love to see that you may have a disability but it doesn't stop you.

I find that every organization, whether it works with kids or other individuals, should have someone representing those who have disabilities so that they can have the knowledge and the experience to see that it doesn't matter if a person has a disability, the person can still get the job done or do it a certain way.

I plan on going to school in September for child and youth studies, and later on take my skills to group homes to deal with kids with behaviour issues and possibly kids with disabilities just so that I can get the information out there and help them become the person they want to be.

Regardless of the disability, you can be the person you want to be.

That is basically everything I wanted to say. Thank you for listening.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you very much for taking the time to come before this committee to share some of your personal experience, sir.

We'll now hear from Ms. Sikand.

Mrs. Meenu Sikand (As an Individual): Thank you.

My name is Meenu Sikand, and I have 25 years of work experience which includes paid employment in the private, public, non-profit, and academic sectors. Currently I'm serving as the chair for the Independent Living Centre in Toronto, and I also work for the Region of Peel.

Today's remarks reflect both my lived experiences and my volunteer work with the independent living movement in Canada. This consultation also attests to the fact that Canadians with disabilities and their high unemployment rates are gaining visibility in the Canadian political and policy agenda. Through the chair, I applaud this initiative—it's long overdue—and thank the committee for the opportunity to share my pragmatic perspectives on how to improve the employment situation of Canadians with disabilities.

My experience and my opinion is that any employment agreement is a mutually agreed upon contract between an employer and an employee. I strongly believe that employers have a responsibility; they need to create a barrier and discrimination-free workplace, so people with disabilities can work. I also strongly believe that no employer can afford to hire an employee who cannot guarantee to show up to work each day on time, appropriately dressed, and provide the flexibility to stay late or arrive early if the employer needs them. This is the reality of today's business, so employees have a responsibility to get to the workplace, and I can tell you that most Canadians with disabilities cannot guarantee that simple, basic requirement to find a job.

Without the creation of more freedom of transportation mobility for Canadians with disabilities, they will continue to face high unemployment rates. Canadian employers experiencing labour shortages will be unable to utilize this untapped pool who are able and willing to work.

According to a recent study of the 800,000 Canadians with disabilities who are looking for work, 340,000 have a post-secondary degree or diploma. They are knowledgeable; they have qualifications. Unfortunately, many of them are still unemployed, so we know there is a problem.

You have heard from many witnesses, so I'm not going to talk about the problems.

Speaking as the chair of CILT, an organization run by and for people with disabilities, I'd like to make three recommendations today for your consideration. I believe that implementation of these recommendations will assist all adults who are aging with a disability, as well as those who are aging into a disability. That's another workforce issue which you need to pay attention to and deal with if you want to keep the Canadian economy going.

A key barrier is the inability of Canadians to access the disability support services they need.

The second key barrier is a lack of the accessible transportation they need to get to their employer's workplace. When I say accessible transportation I mean a transportation system that is reliable, flexible, affordable, and is available when it's needed spontaneously—because I talked to you about the employers' need of having a flexible workforce. Let's change the transportation system.

Adequate access to required disability support creates a level playing field for job seekers with a disability. That is a must requirement in order to be employed these days, and allows them to enter into an employment contract the employers are looking for.

My first recommendation is to enable job seekers with a disability to access all Canada-wide employment opportunities by providing direct funds to hire their personal attendant, or other disability services they need, and allow them to manage these support services as self-managers within any Canadian community of their choice. I'll give you some examples that will showcase to you that this is not the case right now.

● (1215)

For example, if a person is needing attendant care and is relying on accessible transportation services, they're pretty much tied to the local community where they live because accessible transportation is provided within a certain jurisdiction, so they cannot do the cross-boundary jobs. The boundaries for jurisdictions are very, very small. It's a small county, or in the case where I live, it's whether you can travel within Peel or whether you can travel within Toronto or York, so there are very, very limited opportunities. Then your disability services are also tied either to your residence or to the province where you live.

I am very lucky to be part of a program called direct funding. It's available in Ontario. That allows me to access funds so that I can hire employees who will allow me to get up in the morning, get to work, and stay late if it's needed. It's a very successful program, but again, it's available within the province of Ontario. Even though it's successful, only 700 people have access to this program. That tells you the limitation of even the successful programs. Given its limitation, it gives people control, portability, and flexibility over their attendant services.

What I'm proposing is to look at ways to make it a federal program or a program delivered consistently throughout the provinces so that people like me have access to all Canadian jobs, not just a job available in Peel, or worse, just in Toronto. We know economies keep changing from one province to another. Alberta is looking for employees. Ontarians are looking to find work, but we cannot move. My family cannot move because they're tied to me, who needs attendant services, and my funding is only within Ontario. Two years ago my husband was laid off, and as a family we were stuck in Ontario. He could not access opportunities available in Saskatchewan, Alberta, or other provinces where the economy is booming. There are a lot of disincentives and there are a lot of barriers that we're talking about.

My second recommendation is to remove financial disincentives or inequality for working Canadians with disabilities or those who wish to work, to provide a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for money that Canadians with disabilities spend on modifying a personal vehicle to make it accessible, or for the money spent on hiring an accessible vehicle for those who don't drive themselves.

Lack of accessible transportation is another significant employment disadvantage that persons with disabilities who are seeking to secure employment in a competitive job market face. To overcome this employment disadvantage and to remain gainfully employed, some individuals with disabilities may buy personal vehicles and

make them accessible; however, it is often very expensive to convert a regular vehicle into an accessible vehicle. Basic modifications to adapt a van for a driver using a wheelchair can cost from \$10,000 to \$45,000, in addition to the purchase of the vehicle itself.

The government does not offer any financial grants to employed individuals with disabilities who are able to drive or be driven in an accessible personal vehicle, even though they may not have the resources to pay for modifications. For many people with disabilities, their net income after paying taxes and such expenditures really create inequality as well as a disincentive to work.

Again, you have to look at today's reality. Employers are not necessarily all in one downtown core. The employment situation is available all across different regions, different localities. If people with disabilities cannot walk to work, cannot go to work, or make the meetings, how do you expect them to be employed? No employer should be forced to hire that group, so you are creating a disincentive.

Some people who can be independent through accessible vehicles are doubly penalized. If the time permits, I can explain that to you later.

● (1220)

I'm also asking you to create a special stand-alone category to hire caregivers specifically trained to assist adults with disabilities through a foreign-trained caregiver worker category, because again, finding caregivers who can take directions for people with disabilities is very difficult in today's market.

As my one last comment I'm asking you as a federal government to take leadership in coordinating that interprovincial role where people with disabilities have access to direct funds and the ability to take funds with them where the employment is.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Ms. Soulliere, go ahead.

Ms. Linda Soulliere (Executive Director, Peel Halton Dufferin, Coalition for Persons with Disabilities): I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak today and address this important topic. There are three areas I hope to cover.

First, I'm going to give you a short background on the Coalition for Persons with Disabilities and our experience in assisting persons with disabilities to find meaningful employment. Then I'm going to let you know what programs work for our client group, and finally, what gaps we see in service, and what isn't working so well.

The coalition was founded in 1985, and since 1990 has successfully operated Employment Access, a full-service employment service for persons with disabilities. In the initial 16 years, we were funded by several programs under Service Canada, until the labour market agreement downloaded employment services to the province, and I have an opinion about that. At that time, we became an on-hold disability service, where we still remain. As an on-hold service, we don't have access to targeted wage subsidies or client support funding unless we approach a mainstream service and beg them to help us.

We work with cross-disabilities and clients who would mostly benefit from these supports. I think the province had a vision of mainstreaming persons with disabilities but is now finding that the lack of expertise in the area of disabilities and accommodation by mainstream services is problematic.

During the transformation to Employment Ontario, I attended a managers conference, and there was someone from the province who stated, and she clarified this was to be off the record, "Client supports should be spent on those deemed most in need but also deemed most likely to succeed." I tried to clarify who makes the judgment on who is most likely to succeed, as the majority of our clients would never be voted as most likely to succeed in a competitive market, but with the right supports and accommodations, they can indeed be successful. Over 50% of the clients we work with do move on to employment, and many others who are not fully employed go back to school or volunteer in our community.

Over the years, we have used many of the programs offered by Service Canada to try to fill gaps for our clients. We process opportunities fund skills applications for clients who are not eligible for second career, wage subsidies for clients who are opportunities fund eligible, and we have successfully held the skills link contract and several community coordinator projects. We have just completed two employer appreciation events—one is still in the process—through funding from Service Canada.

I see a considerable gap between the funding available for our clients with disabilities under opportunities skills applications and those who are eligible for the provincial second career application. The cap is 7,000 for opportunities and 28,000 for second career, which limits the kind of secondary education that many clients with disabilities can pursue.

With respect to youth programs, skills link programs are designed for youth, and as such, they are pretty effective but don't take into account the realities of dealing with multi-barriered youth with disabilities. Most of the young people who come to us have been refused entry into a mainstream service as not being likely to succeed and too hard to serve.

In one group of 15 young people were the following disabilities: albinism and low vision; visual impairment; limited literacy and numeracy; autism; Asperger's; Tourette's; learning disability, non-verbal; attention deficit disorder and ADHD; schizophrenia; schizoaffective disorder; bipolar; and depression. Some clients were single parents or in conflict with the law.

Of the 15 who started in this group, 14 completed the program and one had to drop out due to a mental health crisis. Seven started work experience immediately. Later, others went on to work experience. Six finished that group, employed full-time, and three returned to school. The remaining participants are still receiving service with our jobs team. Every client who participated left with valuable skills and experience and a lot more job ready than when they started.

We've been told by Service Canada that in order to boost our results, we need to be more selective—again there's that phrase—and pick only clients we feel will be successful.

●(1225)

This is what many services do in order to meet targets, and clients who have more barriers simply fall through the cracks. Every person who has a desire to work has a right to service. We do not discriminate based on the severity of the barriers. Many of our clients are discriminated against simply because of their inability to speak and be understood. Oftentimes it is the hiring processes themselves that prevent them from realizing their goals.

Online applications for even minimum wage positions are difficult and lengthy, and many clients are just overwhelmed by them. Telephone interviews are often difficult for many of our more non-verbal clients. We need to spend more on educating employers around accommodations and the overall accessibility of their hiring standards. We need to have more resources and time to spend on working on some of the essential soft skills that ultimately increase the chances for success.

Now I'm going to talk a little bit about the gaps in service.

One area where there are very limited services available is for autistic youth exiting high school. We have just completed a two-year trial in the high schools, serving as a resource to guidance counsellors from I believe it was 26 different high schools. We served as a resource to guidance counsellors, co-op teachers, parents, and students in assisting to develop a strategy for students with disabilities.

Perhaps the answer to this—and what we found in trying to bring business on to the co-ops—is to develop more social enterprise that can offer an inclusive and safe environment and build capacity toward competitive employment. Business and funding could partner and fill the gap and provide resources for parents who are afraid of what will happen to their children when they can no longer attend school.

Another valuable resource, the practice firm concept, was originally funded by the Province of Ontario. We operated the only one that was entirely dedicated to persons with disabilities. There are over 6,000 practice firms in operation around the world, and while other provinces in Canada continue to fund these valuable services, Ontario has closed all its practice firms.

The practice firm gave practical work applications to our clients who had never worked and allowed them to develop the skills and confidence to be successful. It allowed them to expand their knowledge of our digital environment and current office equipment and software programs, and develop employability skills that employers could look for. The decision to no longer fund these programs has created yet another gap for our clients.

For many persons with disabilities, the reality is that they have either not worked for a long time or have never worked. The wage subsidy is one tool that assists us in marketing our clients and opening the door, but unless we take time to develop essential skills, it won't keep the client employed.

One of the issues facing our youth is not just finding a job, but finding a career and something meaningful. A social enterprise that is based on green energy, on solar installation, on technology would be exciting and rewarding for many of our youth who deserve more than to think they will only be able to get minimum wage jobs.

Am I running out of time yet?

•(1230)

The Chair: You are at your time limit. If you could conclude, that would be great.

Ms. Linda Soulliere: Employers for the most part still work under a certain stigma. We need to continue to hold events like the one we did, the inspiring partnerships event, where we had 289 employers attend. Since then we've gotten marvellous feedback. They want us to help them to change their hiring processes to be more inclusive. We need to hold similar events in communities everywhere; in fact, create a road show where you would go from community to community bringing employers together and giving them inspiration. We need to open the conversation with them.

The one area I want to wrap up with is program administration. We use a lot of the Service Canada programs. The most difficult part of administration is the short duration of contracts and having to renew every year or every six months. The contract periods never coincide with our year end or with our staff contracting periods. Sometimes we have 42 weeks; sometimes we have 38 weeks. There's always a gap between finishing one project and getting renewed for another project. It's hard to retain experienced staff.

The Chair: I appreciate that comment and we have heard that issue from time to time.

We'll move to Ms. Charlton.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thank you very much.

Alex and Meenu, let me say at the front end, thank you so much for sharing your lived experience. Your personal experiences and those of other witnesses who have come here to do that have certainly enriched our study and made it much more real to us.

Linda, I really appreciate your take, particularly on your last comment—I'd love to explore that further—with respect to the difficulty of dealing with contracts and contract extension and the onerous paperwork. Let me start somewhere else, though.

We've heard from a number of people that wage subsidies are helpful at the front end, to bring people with disabilities into the workplace. I think there are lots of other barriers to recruitment as well, frankly, including how we advertise, how we do outreach, what kind of accommodations are in place.

Leaving the recruitment piece aside for the moment, I want to talk about retention, because what you told us, Alex, isn't that you had trouble getting in the door. You had a job at Food Basics. The problem was—the way you described it, or the way I heard it—there was an employer who was absolutely not willing to make any kind of accommodation to hang on to an employee who was obviously doing his job. You weren't being let go; you left on your own volition.

Linda, you talked about the importance of skills development, about ongoing training so that once you're in the door, you will continue to succeed and grow towards a career as opposed to just a job.

I wonder if all three of you could expand on that a bit. I think we've heard lots whereby you offer employers some money up front, and they bring people in the door, but it becomes a revolving door. Programs end and then people leave the jobs and we haven't really done anything to increase the participation by people with disabilities in the workplace.

I don't know who wants to start.

•(1235)

Ms. Linda Soulliere: I could start. For our service we do offer wage subsidies, but we also offer post-hiring support. We do have somebody who goes in to the employers and deals with whatever issues arise around accommodations as the employment moves forward. I think without having that post-hiring support we wouldn't have such success in long-term matches.

But you're right. Employers do use the wage subsidy and you have to be able to see if there's a sincere effort to maintain the client.

Ms. Chris Charlton: In your experience, are there people who use the wage subsidy over and over again, basically for the same position?

Ms. Linda Soulliere: We have seen that. At that point we will no longer use that employer because we see him as just trying to benefit from the wage subsidy and not having a sincere interest. Most employers are pretty good. We do end up with a lot of clients being retained further on.

The problem when it comes to youth is, because of their total lack of experience, it's not so much a wage subsidy but work experience that they need, with no guarantee of permanent commitment. We just want to see how they work. We want to see if they have the skills they need, and they need to be placed with an employer. The targets for employed after wage subsidy and after work experience are the same, so there's no difference. The work experience is really important to young people.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Thanks.

Alex.

Mr. Alex Masek: I have a question for you. How many people would you know who live off disability? You don't have to answer that. It may be the case that they start out young and they go for a job and then they don't receive support the way they need it or they don't use their best skills to benefit the company so they end up leaving, quitting their jobs, finding the easy way out. Disability is there to help them.

We need more support for youth with disabilities so that they have the motivation to excel, to continue to move up in their lives and be more successful. You would need a lot more help for the people who are starting jobs, rather than people who might be working for a while.

The Chair: Ms. Sikand, if you have a response, I think time will be up, but go ahead.

Mrs. Meenu Sikand: Legislation plays an important role in making sure that employers have accommodation policies in place and they follow them through. In Ontario we have the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and that is...the employment standards are trying to take away that practice....

But I agree with Alex that those work experiences are very important. Even when I said to attach disability services to individuals, they should not be stopped by just saying their place of residence, because those support services could be given at the place of work.

Also, if youth are managing their own services, I can tell you from experience that you develop skills because you are employers of your own services and you are managing your own services. The coping skills, the negotiating skills, and the purchasing skills that you develop are invaluable softer skills that will allow you to become more self-sufficient in negotiating with employers on accommodation.

Then, if it is needed that you have to file a human rights complaint in Ontario, go for it, but before that, there are a lot of steps. With respect to self-confidence in youth and in others, you can bring it about through some of the programs and initiatives we have highlighted.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you for that response.

We'll go to Mr. Butt.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to all three of you. Thank you for being here today.

Meenu, I'm going to start with you. I have a couple of questions for you because you made some specific recommendations. I'd like to get a little bit more of an idea of what you're suggesting.

I do know that in the Region of Peel we have a service called TransHelp, which is used predominantly by individuals with physical disabilities who may need to get to and from work every day, as it's possible. That's very rigid and structured, and it's not always the most convenient service.

You and I have met. I know that you have your own vehicle, but you've spent a considerable amount of money on modifying it so that you can operate it, so that you can actually drive your van with your hand controls.

I do know that governments spend quite a lot of money on subsidizing services like TransHelp. You talked about a tax credit or something of that nature which would help you pay to modify your personal vehicle to get to and from work each day. Have you looked at the numbers? Do you have an idea of what governments are currently subsidizing for that rider who's using that TransHelp bus in the Region of Peel every day to go to and from work?

Do you know what that's adding up to in a year versus maybe what you're proposing and if our committee were to recommend that the government look at some sort of credit to help with or reimburse some of the costs of modifying your own vehicle? Have you done a comparison? Do you have an idea of what numbers we're looking at?

Mrs. Meenu Sikand: Thank you for the question. Yes, I have.

Peel's numbers are pretty comparable to the transportation numbers across Canada. In Peel, what I've been told is that 90% of the ride cost is subsidized by the government. The user only pays 10% of the cost. If a ride on accessible transportation on average costs \$35 per ride, and if you even very conservatively take two rides a day—simply going to and from work is two rides—that means you are subsidizing that rider to the tune of \$450 each week. Over 52 weeks that subsidy is \$23,660. If a vehicle lasts five to six years—let's use five years—during that five years, if that person is not using their vehicle, you're subsidizing accessible transportation for that person at \$118,000.

I'm simply asking you to take a look at that. Through a tax credit, if you reimburse that one-year cost to an individual who, to become employable and retain employment, is willing to purchase and drive their own vehicle, you'd still save close to \$90,000 even if the vehicle lasts five years. I stretch my vehicle to seven or eight years, whatever I can, and I maintain it. That's a significant saving. You're also taking a disadvantage, or disincentive, from people, because when they look at their net income and it's so low compared to the people who don't need those services, a lot of people with disabilities say, "Why don't I stay on ODSP and not have all these income inequalities?"

You're taking the disincentive, but I think in the long run, as the population is aging, you'll be seeing more and more people who are not able to drive, so you'll need to address the needs of those people through accessible transportation. But whoever can manage their own driving, or hire somebody to drive a personal vehicle, at the end you will be saving money for the people who are aging and will definitely need that accessible transportation.

I'm not saying everybody will be able to benefit from this tax credit, but for people who can, it eventually will be a saving for the government and will increase employability. Also people will be able to manage their lifestyle and that of their families.

I'm a caregiver to my mom who's 78 years old. I need to drive her. I need to drive my 12-year-old to soccer games and other things. So you're also making me a productive adult who has many roles to play in society.

Does that answer your question?

● (1245)

The Chair: A short concluding comment or question and we'll conclude.

Mr. Brad Butt: Yes. The reason I brought up transportation, and now I'm going to very briefly talk about the personal service worker aspect, is that I think a lot of the time this committee is focused on the individual in employment from nine to five, but not how the individual gets there and gets back home. That's why your perspective is important.

Let me ask you to clarify about your recommendations regarding a personal care worker. Obviously, somebody is helping you at 7 a.m. to get ready so you can get into that vehicle and get to your job at the Region of Peel, and when you come back home, someone has to be there as well. What were your specific ideas around something the federal government could do about making it more accessible, easier, or more affordable to have that personal care worker who's essential to getting you ready to get to your job every day, in your case for the Region of Peel, or whatever the individual's job happens to be? What was that recommendation again? Then I'll be done.

The Chair: If you could make it really brief, we'd appreciate it.

Mrs. Meenu Sikand: It's twofold. One is that I'm asking you to give me access to those caregivers, so I ask you to take a look at your foreign-trained caregivers category. Right now, finding people who are willing to work morning and evening shifts for adults who are managing their own attendant care on their own, is very difficult.

Equally important is to have funds that are allocated to me. Today I am greatly appreciated at the Region of Peel, but if tomorrow a better opportunity or another peer opportunity comes along, I'd be able to take that opportunity and take my funds with me to another province. What I'm asking you is to take a leadership role, work with the provinces, because you're also going to help provinces fill that labour shortage. Work with them to develop an interprovincial agreement so that disability supports are tied to the individual, are portable Canada-wide. Make it a Canada-wide disability direct funding program, not only attached to the provinces.

The Chair: Thank you for that response.

We'll move to Monsieur Lapointe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our three witnesses for joining us this morning.

I would like to ask each of you a question, but one of the difficult parts of being committee members is that we have only five minutes to question highly knowledgeable and intelligent witnesses. So if I have to speed up the debate a bit, it is not because I am not interested, but because I am limited to five minutes.

Mr. Masek, while you were employed at the movie theatre and the work station issue arose, was there not at any point some openness regarding the possibility of an occupational therapist determining whether one of the work stations could be adapted to your needs?

Did you have easy access to those services? Did you have an opportunity to meet with the employer, with the assistance of a competent person, or were you left to your own devices?

[*English*]

Mr. Alex Masek: Actually, they didn't really help me at all. They basically shrugged it off. I talked to a couple of the employers and I talked to my manager, because at the point that was the boss I went to. They were basically on the boss's side.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Lapointe: So no one in the public service encouraged you not to face this problem alone? No one told you

that an occupational therapist, with your manager, could help you figure out whether some sort of adaptation based on your needs was possible? If I have understood correctly, no service was offered to you spontaneously in an attempt to help you resolve that issue.

[*English*]

Mr. Alex Masek: That would not be educational for me. I wouldn't know where to look. As I was growing up, I always figured stuff out on my own, so I couldn't—

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Lapointe: Thank you very much, Alex.

Mrs. Sikand, access to paratransit is an issue that comes up often. I think that the situation has improved over the past few decades in downtown areas, but it is more complicated in rural areas. For instance, very few people over a stretch of 100 km or 150 km need the same service. So it is practically impossible for public authorities to be profitable. I don't know whether you have any ideas about that.

In no way do I want to diminish the importance of the paratransit need. However, there are some new technologies available. I made a small contribution to the development of an evaluation principle through Skype. It enables people at the other end of the province to use Skype to talk to a consultant and have their home evaluated. I must admit that, while we were developing this project, we never thought that it could be the perfect job opportunity for a disabled person. That kind of a work station could even be installed in the person's home. Yet I do not think we had the presence of mind to contact a university-educated acquaintance who may have been in a wheelchair. I would like to know what you think about those two matters.

Ms. Soulliere, if any time is left, I would like to talk about the undue administrative burden in the area of social action. I cannot believe that I used to spend 35% to 40% of my time in filling out documents to help illiterate people instead of teaching them to read. I did that for two years.

We know what the problem is, but do you have any solutions to recommend? I would really like to hear them, and I would like this problem to be resolved, to the extent possible.

• (1250)

[*English*]

Mrs. Meenu Sikand: I will answer quickly on the points you raised.

Skype is a great opportunity to connect, and I do use Skype socially. Some jobs can be done through Skype. I think that people with disabilities want choices. If they are to find comparative employment at the employer's place, they should have mobility choices and they should have access to accessible vehicles.

In rural municipalities, a lot of time the service is only available at certain times, perhaps 9 to 4. What if they find a call centre job in the evening? They can't access that employment.

For rural areas, an accessible transportation tax credit would be even more valuable. Many municipalities are getting out of providing accessible transportation completely, because of the cost.

What was the third point? There was accessible transportation, Skype....

Again, not everybody is able to stay at home. Not all jobs are like that. It would be really great for people with disabilities to have choices, as any other Canadian has in choosing employment.

The Chair: Thank you for that response.

We'll conclude with a response from Ms. Soulliere.

Ms. Linda Soulliere: I think the simplest solution is multi-year contracts. We used to get three-year contracts, which were great. They allowed us stability and we were able to set up the systems. They also allowed us to have a little flexibility around participants, the number of groups that you could hold.

When you start going down to 42 weeks or 48 weeks—I recently got two contracts that were each six months in length—it makes it really hard to address the true issues. By the time you get the program up and started, it's almost over.

I think you need to go back to multi-year contracts.

The Chair: Thank you for that comment.

We'll go to Ms. Leitch.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much, everyone, for taking some time to share your views and your personal stories with us today.

We hear about a number of new programs and different items that are often presented by individual employers and different organizations. What do you think are the key components of those new initiatives put forward that really make them successful? You have mentioned some of them, or you may see, for example, the Boys and Girls Club, or the coalition, or otherwise. If we were looking at new or possible other initiatives, what are those sorts of key success factors to creating a program that aids an individual with a disability to enter into the workforce? What would you say the top three items are in what we should be considering?

Ms. Linda Soulliere: I think one of the major things is the essential skills component. Then you have to have a long enough period so that there can be time to identify accommodations that are going to be needed in the workplace. Then there's having effective job development. Most of our clients don't find jobs on their own. We have to do some direct intervention. You have to be able to have adequate funding for job development and you need really strong post-hiring support. I think, especially when you're looking at youth, that you should have the longer essential skills program where you can deal with things like whether their medications are proper, or whether they need to address hygiene. We have a lot of very difficult clients and we often have to deal with appropriate behaviours in school. That's why the practice terms were so good, because it was a three-month intervention where they could be in a non-threatening work environment where we could address all of the issues.

I think you have to look at a combination. Those programs work well for our clients. I'm not sure about everybody, but then, when the

client moves to employment, we already have an accommodation plan, so we know what they need when they get there and we can negotiate that with the employer.

•(1255)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Do either of you have a comment?

Mrs. Meenu Sikand: If I may say, I support everything Linda said. I also say to make it specific to the individual. If the person wants to use the coalition or any other agency, that disability support service should be tied to the individual. At the same time, organizations have a great role to play, so keep funding those organizations. We have Independent Living Canada in Ottawa. We test 27 centres because they will provide the peer support and the knowledge that Alex just mentioned he was lacking when there was an employer discriminating. Fund those organizations as well, but also provide disability support, and adequate support, to individuals with disabilities who need it. That would be my recommendation. Also, support places such as Independent Living Canada, who will provide peer supports and help other youth to develop the confidence that I have today to be part of the workforce.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: I'm going to cut you off because I want to hear from Alex as well.

Mr. Alex Masek: I'm pretty sure I understood it correctly.

To add to what she said, I don't know if they have a program like that or an organization that talks to people with disabilities and finds their skills and finds the best skills that they have so that they can use those skills to find employment or somewhere that they could work and excel. I haven't seen anything online or anything that is like that, but I think it's very important that everybody has a skill that they could use. Why not find that skill and use it to the best of their ability?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: To your point, on the opportunities fund for individuals with disabilities, the programs that are provided do provide that sort of skills assessment component, so your point is very well taken.

With respect to moving forward, you have all mentioned at one point in time partnerships working with other organizations. What do you find is the most valuable component part of the partnerships that you develop? How are you best developing partnerships with employers to facilitate opportunities for individuals with disabilities to enter into the workplace? What is that key component of your partnership with the employers that allows that transfer of a skill someone has developed with the program you're providing or a skill that they may have to enter into the workplace?

The Chair: The time is up, so try to make your responses brief for anyone who wants to respond.

Ms. Linda Soulliere: I think the most important aspect is to open up communication with individual employers. We work with large and small employers, but I think we also provide some training around accommodation in the AODA, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and what they have to do to comply. I think the more you can actually have the resources to reach out to employers and to educate them, the better it's going to be for everybody.

The Chair: Thank you.

Maybe we'll leave it at that and move to Mr. Cuzner to conclude.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all three witnesses for being here today.

Certainly I agree with your comments on a focus on those with disabilities who are just graduating from school and making sure they have an opportunity for an initial job experience. It's an age of influence and a window of opportunity, and if it's lost then it gets even tougher the further out you go.

There are two things on which I would like you to elaborate a little more. I would think those virtual centres that you had would have been a really neat developmental opportunity and a learning ground. Could you give me an overview of the funding template and when that funding dried up? Could you give me two minutes on that? Then I want to ask a question on mobility.

Ms. Linda Soulliere: On the funding template, we had three staff through Employment Ontario. We had an IT person who would help those who had a background in graphic design, marketing, and IT. We had somebody to help with customer service. We had accounting positions. It was a virtual banking situation.

• (1300)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: For the most part was it a provincial program?

Ms. Linda Soulliere: It was a provincial program. It's funded throughout other provinces in Canada. There are still several operating, including in Quebec.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: There was no federal revenue support there?

Ms. Linda Soulliere: No.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Okay.

Ms. Linda Soulliere: It's a really valuable concept. When they decided not to fund, we had to close our doors.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: That's really unfortunate, because I can absolutely see the merit.

Ms. Linda Soulliere: They are so valuable especially for our clients who don't have those hard skills. It gave them an opportunity.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Absolutely.

I want to talk about mobility. This was asked by a couple of my colleagues earlier. It's about your suggestion about assistance or some kind of a credit with adapting a vehicle. My brother lived with cerebral palsy, and when he reached the age that he could get a licence, my folks helped him with a vehicle and got it adapted. He just blossomed. He was always pretty independent, but he just blossomed at that time, as somebody who wants to contribute to the community and the economy and all that kind of stuff. It does unlock it. So I really appreciate your suggestion.

Let's look at the other side of this. I know there are some people who are almost more comfortable and certainly function best at home. My case worker had two young kids nine months apart so she would work from home on Tuesdays, and she got more done on Tuesday rather than if she bundled the kids up and went out. Is there any way to identify those at home? Today's technology breaks down a lot of barriers. Is there some formal way of identifying opportunities where people can work at home and trying to align those opportunities with workers?

The Chair: We'll conclude with those responses, as there is another committee starting here shortly.

Please go ahead.

Mrs. Meenu Sikand: I think there are new opportunities. Telecommuting is becoming especially popular even for traditional jobs.

My point about accessible transportation, and your brother is an example of that too, is that people also need good employment and to pursue social activities. I'm pretty sure your young brother would want to have a girlfriend, stay late in the bar, etc., and this tackles a lot of those avenues too, because you also know that people with disabilities can be very isolated in their own homes and in their own community. That leads to mental health issues, and the number is staggering throughout Canada.

So yes, technology and telecommuting are new opportunities, and I think we all leverage them. I also work two days a week from home, but at the same time the reality is that we need to be mobile, to get out of our own homes and to go and interact with the rest of the community, regardless of whether we have a disability.

The Chair: Thank you for that intervention.

Does anyone else have a quick comment?

Linda, could you make it a short comment.

Ms. Linda Soulliere: There are also a lot of stigmas around disabilities where communication is affected, and people with communication that's affected are often thought of as less intelligent than people who are not affected that way.

I think we need to change our way of thinking and our philosophy around disabilities. We're not going to fit everybody into the same mould. If you keep putting unreasonable targets on services and make the outcomes what you think they should be, it's not going to work well, so just work with us on it.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that comment. We appreciate that.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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