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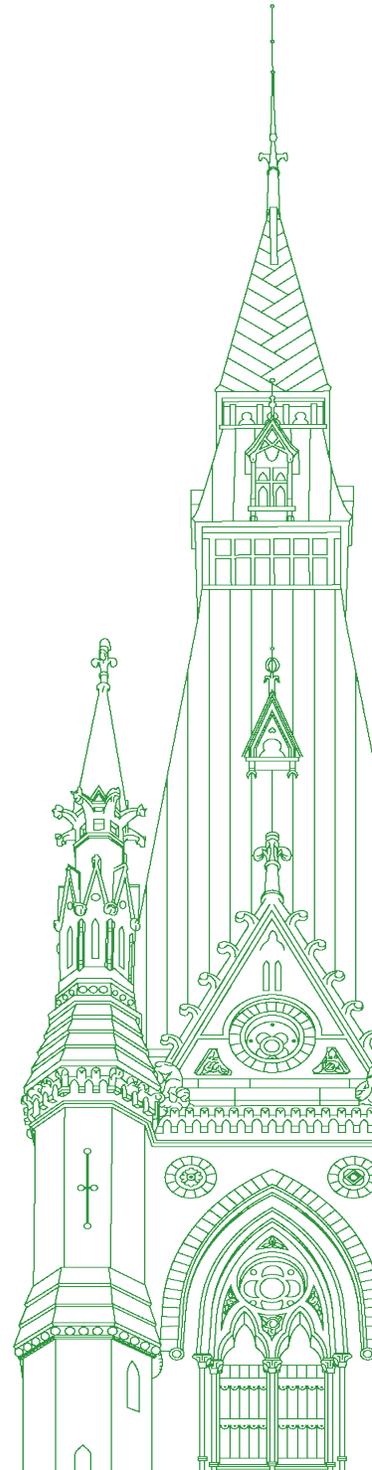
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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

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• (1105)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 11 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Pursuant to the orders of reference of March 24, April 11 and April 28, 2020, the committee is meeting for the purpose of receiving evidence concerning matters related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and to ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. In order to resolve sound issues, please ensure that you are on the English channel when speaking English, and on the French channel when speaking French. If you plan to alternate from one language to the other, please also switch the interpretation channel so it aligns with the language you are speaking.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

I'll remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If you wish to speak to a point of order raised by one of your colleagues, please use the "raise hand" function.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

Thank you to everyone who is using headsets. For anyone who is using the earbuds with the integrated microphone, please ensure that the microphone isn't rubbing against your shirt when you're speaking.

Should any technical challenges arise, for example in relation to interpretation or if you are accidentally disconnected, please advise the chair or the clerk immediately, and the technical team will work to resolve them. Please note that we may need to suspend during these times, as we need to ensure that all members are able to fully participate. If you haven't already done so, click on gallery view, if you could, on the top right of your screen, so that you can see everyone.

I would now like to thank the witnesses for joining us today. With us today we have the Minister of Seniors, the Honourable Deb Schulte. Accompanying her from Employment and Social Development Canada are Benoît Robidoux, associate deputy minister; Kathryn McDade, senior assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; Janet Goulding, assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; Cliff Groen, assistant deputy minister, Service Canada; and finally, Stephanie Hébert, assistant deputy minister, program operations branch.

Minister Schulte, please make your opening remarks.

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors): Good morning.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, I am very pleased to join you today and to appear before this committee for the first time.

[English]

We know that seniors are at increased risk of more severe outcomes from COVID-19 and are negatively impacted by the pandemic. They need our help and our support. As Minister of Seniors and member of the ad hoc committee on COVID-19, I am committed to ensure that seniors' needs across Canada are carefully considered and addressed. Since the pandemic was declared, I have been in contact with my provincial and territorial counterparts. I have heard from many stakeholders, as well as the National Seniors Council. What I am hearing is informing the Government of Canada's response to the pandemic.

To protect seniors' financial security during these uncertain times, the government has introduced the following measures. First, we are providing a one-time, tax-free payment of \$300 for seniors eligible for old age security, and an additional \$200 for seniors eligible for the guaranteed income supplement. This means that low-income seniors who are eligible to receive both old age security and the guaranteed income supplement will receive \$500 to help them cover increased costs caused by COVID-19. A couple where both are receiving the GIS special payment and the GST credit special payment could receive, on average, a total of over \$1,500 to help them cope with the pandemic.

In April, both low- and middle-income seniors received a supplementary payment under the GST credit worth an average of \$375 for singles and an average of \$510 for couples. We are reducing the minimum withdrawals from the registered retirement income funds by 25% for 2020. We have also adopted measures to ensure that guaranteed income supplement payments continue without interruption if a senior's 2019 income information has not been received. In addition, the government created the Canada emergency response benefit, CERB, to help all Canadians, including working seniors, with financial hardship as a result of the loss of employment income due to COVID-19. Pension benefits do not affect eligibility.

I want to address the situation in long-term care homes. As you know, seniors living in these facilities are the hardest hit in this pandemic. While long-term care is regulated by provincial and territorial governments, the federal government is working together, in a team Canada approach, to help residents and staff stay safe. We released interim guidelines for long-term care homes to prevent and control COVID-19 infections. We invested \$2 billion to purchase personal protective equipment for essential health workers, including long-term care workers. We provided \$3 billion to provinces and territories to increase the wages of low-income essential workers, such as long-term care workers. We deployed personnel from the Canadian Armed Forces to 25 long-term care facilities in Quebec and Ontario—20 in Quebec and five in Ontario. As the Prime Minister said, there are serious underlying challenges facing these facilities, and in the coming months the federal government will work alongside the provinces and territories to find lasting solutions.

Finally, the government is providing funding to support vulnerable Canadians, including seniors, with over half a billion dollars in funding to United Way Centraide Canada, the Canadian Red Cross, Community Foundations of Canada, local food banks and local food organizations. We are providing flexibility for \$50 million of previously funded new horizons for seniors projects so that they can now use their funds to meet the needs seniors are facing due to COVID-19. We also announced an additional investment of \$20 million in community projects that reduce isolation, improve seniors' quality of life, and help them maintain the social support networks they so desperately need.

• (1110)

[Translation]

Thank you for the opportunity to present what the government has done to protect seniors during this difficult time.

[English]

To the chair and the committee, I want to give you a personal shout-out and thanks for the excellent work you're doing.

I'd be pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Fortunately, we do have questions.

We'll start with Mr. Shields for six minutes, please.

Welcome to the committee, Mr. Shields.

Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's always good to see you, Minister. I appreciate the work you're doing for seniors.

You've run through the list of things that you've worked on. When you met with the shadow minister and me, one of the things in the letter that we discussed was the RRIF piece. I know that you've talked about the 25%, but what we're hearing constantly is that there are two pieces to the RRIF. We have those people who would like it to stay 100% within the fund, and those who would like to take out more, without penalty.

I'm sure you've heard about this. I'm sure you've looked into it. I'm sure you've discussed this with your staff and with Finance. What are your thoughts, and what have you learned about this particular aspect? It is a significant request that we're hearing from seniors.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much. I want to say that it's very nice to be back in the committee forum with you. I really enjoyed working with you over so many years on the environment committee.

Those definitely are two things that we're hearing, along with many other suggestions that seniors are sending us and telling us they'd like us to consider. Those considerations that you have brought forward are ones that were being considered before the COVID pandemic. Obviously, for the government, our focus right now is to get money into the hands of seniors in need, especially our vulnerable seniors, to make sure they can deal with the very immediate cost increases they've seen, such as grocery and transportation costs going up and increases in medication dispensing fees. All of those things we've heard loud and clear, so the focus was to get the money into the hands of Canadian seniors who are in need right now.

On these other considerations, such as the stock market fluctuating up and down, we immediately addressed that with a 25% reduction in their mandatory withdrawals out of the RRIFs, and I have to say that we are keeping a close eye on what is going on with the market and also on seniors' needs across the country during this time.

We'll keep considering these suggestions and will keep them in mind as we move forward in dealing with the pandemic and its implications for and impacts on seniors.

• (1115)

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you.

I would suggest that those two changes don't take a lot of bureaucratic staff to do. We don't need a lot of staff to do them, and they would put money in the hands of people very quickly. It wouldn't take a lot of changes to do this. A couple of regulation changes on either one of those, and it's money either in the hands of seniors or protecting their investments. It could be done very simply, so I hope you would continue to look at that and consider it seriously.

There's another issue I'd like to mention with the filing of income tax forms in the manner that I'm still familiar with, which is paper forms. We hear from seniors who are used to doing paper forms, but as you may have noticed, the CRA people were mentioning that those forms are being mailed in and are being left sitting in an office in Ottawa because CRA people are working from home. There again, for seniors, there's money in refunds that they could use very quickly, but it is not being returned. Do you have any response to that issue, which you've probably heard of?

Hon. Deb Schulte: I definitely have heard of the impacts. All industries, including our own government organizations and Canada Post, have been experiencing difficulties with people who get sick from COVID-19 and are having to stay home, with the implications of physical distancing that now need to be put into the workplace, and with working from home.

Obviously, Canada Post is not going to have an environment of working from home. They're going to need to put practices into place. We've seen that they are working very hard to do that. Their intent is to make sure that the mail gets to customers as fast as possible, and they're working on those issues that have been identified recently.

For the government, in terms of making sure that Canadians, especially seniors, receive those important benefits that they need, we are encouraging them to do as much online banking as they can. You're absolutely right that there are those who don't, so we are doing everything we can to make sure that those cheques get to seniors who need them and that the programs we're implementing are as easy as possible. That's why we are not making our benefit such that someone has to apply, because that just makes it very complicated for those seniors who, as you mentioned, aren't online.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you. I hope you follow that up with CRA and those forms move out and get dealt with.

Another one that you are very familiar with is medication. Seniors are very concerned about the three-month renewal for medications now going down to one month. As you would realize, this means that they have to leave their homes, and they're concerned about leaving their homes in these times of isolation. They're concerned about volunteers or the lack of volunteers to go and get these medications, and they're really concerned about why we have a shortage in Canada.

There are those three things in terms of medications. There are the increased dispensing fees, because you have to get these month-

ly if you're not on a plan, the availability and the one-month issuing. Those are causing significant concerns for seniors.

The Chair: Give a short answer, please, Minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much.

I just want to say that we are fully aware of the challenges [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Shields.

Thank you, Minister.

Next is Mr. Long, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, and good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to the rest of my colleagues, from Saint John, New Brunswick.

It's wonderful to have our minister here today.

I have a question for you, Minister. First, thank you for taking the time to join us today to talk about what our federal government is doing to support seniors during this incredibly challenging time for them and for all Canadians.

Over the past two months, my team and I have talked to hundreds of seniors living on fixed incomes in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay, who are facing significant increased costs for things such as groceries, grocery deliveries and medications as a result of COVID-19, and I have been advocating for federal financial relief for seniors on their behalf. That's why I was thrilled to be able to share the news with seniors in my riding of the OAS and GIS top-up that you announced on Monday.

Can you tell us about the impact of the COVID-19 financial relief measures we have announced to date, the impact they will have on the average senior couple? Can you also explain why the top-up to OAS and GIS payments is the most effective way to deliver COVID-19 financial relief to seniors living on fixed incomes?

• (1120)

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you for your advocacy. MPs like you have been writing and reflecting on the important messages they've been getting from their constituents. We've been hearing it also through the ministry, and I've been hearing it in my riding.

Seniors are really struggling with these additional costs and also with isolation. What we announced this week addresses these two things quite directly.

We have made it very simple to access this benefit, in that you do not have to apply. If you are receiving OAS or are eligible for old age security, you will be receiving the \$300 one-time special payment, and you don't have to apply. This is also true if you're receiving the guaranteed income supplement. You will get a special payment of an additional \$200.

A couple on GIS, the guaranteed income supplement, will get \$1,000 from this new measure we brought forward this week, along with the GST top-up from April that they would have received. On average, they would have received, as a couple, \$510, so if you add the two, that's over \$1,500 of immediate COVID-19 support. That is a significant help to seniors who are struggling with those additional costs.

To address the other issue, isolation, we've upped the new horizons for seniors money, which is money that goes directly to groups that are on the ground in communities serving seniors, helping them access those groceries and get those supplies. They need help. If they're in their homes and can't go out or are afraid to go out, now they have community support to help them.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you very much for that, Minister.

Mr. Chair, I want to share the rest of my time with MP Dong.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you to MP Long for sharing his time.

Minister, it's good to see you here.

As you know, I was a member of the Ontario legislature. I know that the current Ontario government has taken a very different approach when it comes to long-term care homes, as compared to that of the previous government, in terms of funding and policy priorities. I've seen it. I've seen the effects of it on the ground in my riding of Don Valley North.

How are you going to work with your cabinet colleagues and the premiers across the country to make sure that what we've seen with COVID-19, its effect on the vulnerable population living in long-term care homes, is not going to happen again going forward?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for that question. We've all been struck by the horrors we have seen in the news of seniors being negatively affected in these homes.

I just want to make a point that not all homes are challenged like this. There are many well-run homes, both private and public. I have my mother-in-law in a long-term care home and my father-in-law in a seniors residence. I can tell you that the staff there on the front lines supporting them are excellent, and they're well-run homes. Not every home is facing these challenges, but every home is working very hard to keep seniors safe, and you're definitely seeing that some are not doing well.

The federal government immediately wanted to provide support. This is regulated by provinces and territories. However, we've been there, as I mentioned, as a team Canada approach. Rather than wrangling over things, it was, "What do we need to do right now to keep the staff and the residents in these homes safe?" We immediately asked what we could do.

I heard on my calls that what was needed was help in understanding the guidance needed to keep people safe. Very quickly, the Public Health Agency of Canada worked with the public health agencies across the country to come up with guidance to help these homes keep their residents and staff safe.

We knew that there was an issue in acquiring personal protective equipment, with a world shortage in these supplies, so we worked

24-7 in engaging with all the resources we had to bring in as much PPE as possible, and we engaged with businesses in Canada that were looking at a built-in-Canada approach. Many have taken up the torch, and I give much credit to companies that have stepped in to start working on building PPE to support our essential workers, who are working so hard to keep us safe.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, welcome to the committee. You have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Good morning, Minister Schulte. I am pleased to talk to you this morning. As soon as I arrived in the House on December 6, I had the opportunity to ask a question about the importance of increasing the old age security pension by \$110 per month, starting at age 65. You crossed the floor to thank me and tell me that it was a good question.

Will this good question about the importance of increasing the pension for our seniors still apply today—during the crisis, the pandemic—and even afterwards?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for your question.

[*English*]

While the government remains committed to implementing our policies and our platform commitments, at this time we are focusing on what we need to do to help seniors during the pandemic. This is why we have worked to do a very quick implementation of a one-time quick payment to get the money into the hands of our seniors quickly. That is why we did it this way, but you can be sure that the government remains committed to implementing the policies that were in our platform.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Yes, Minister, you even promised to increase the pension. We had hammered home the message that it should be increased by \$110 a month at age 65, while increasing the guaranteed income supplement to help the most disadvantaged seniors. At this time, as you yourself said, the assistance is for getting through the crisis. That is one thing, but what will happen in the summer? Seniors will have received a one-time payment, but what will happen afterwards?

You say that you want to keep your election promises. After the crisis, can we expect that it will be high time to apply the increase to the old age security pension and the increase to the guaranteed income supplement? This is a period of rising costs, and that will continue after the crisis. I am thinking in particular of the costs of medication. In addition, seniors often have to pay to have their groceries delivered, and the cost of that grocery basket has also increased. Let's also think about the cost of transportation. Some people usually take public transit, but now they have to take taxis, which is more expensive.

In short, everything costs more, and the costs are going up for seniors as well. The assistance that is being offered right now is a good thing, but after the crisis, the needs will remain.

Can we expect an announcement from you after the crisis regarding an increase in the old age security pension and an increase in the guaranteed income supplement?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: I just want to say that the government has been watching very closely what has been happening to Canadians during this pandemic. We are focused right now on dealing with the best way to get Canadians through the impacts we're having as a result of the pandemic and as a result of the measures we've had to take to keep people safe and reduce the loss of lives. I'm very aware that there were increased costs. Seniors wrote, and we've been watching the market basket measures and looking to see what is actually going on, on the ground, with people who are trying to survive this pandemic.

What I can say is that we have seen that there are prices that have gone up. We saw the market drop. We've seen the market coming back up. We have seen prices go up, and now they're starting to stabilize and go down. We don't know what will happen as we move through the next few months. You can be sure that we're watching very closely what's happening and what measures may need to be done to help get Canadians, especially our seniors, through this.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you.

I made this request during the election campaign, and we reiterated it as soon as we arrived in Ottawa. We actually made it a condition of our support for the budget. We hammered away at that request. I went to Ottawa three times to ask for help. Finally it came. Let's hope that it will not be only temporary and that something else will be set up after the crisis.

Seniors are also very concerned about the state of our health care system. There was the whole issue of the CHSLDs in Quebec, seniors' residences and the care they receive. The crisis clearly shows that it is high time and extremely urgent to increase health care transfers. We are asking that this assistance be recurrent and that the transfers be increased to 6%. This is essential and crucial, because after the crisis, health care needs will remain.

Is the minister also aware that the government will have to deal with the desperately urgent issue of transferring health care funds to the provinces, including Quebec?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for the question. I want to assure the member that this issue is one that my colleague the Minister of Health would probably be best to address, so the committee should probably invite her to come and join you.

We have been very supportive of the provinces during this pandemic to help address the increased costs. We gave over half a billion dollars to provinces and territories, at the very beginning of this, to assist them with the health care costs and to help them get ready to address the rising costs and the changes they would need to do in order to get the health care system ready for the pandemic. As I mentioned before, we put \$2 billion on the table for protective equipment for essential workers, including those on the front lines in health care. We also provided \$3 billion to the provinces and territories to help them with wage subsidies for those front-line workers, especially long-term care workers who needed to be properly compensated for working in the environment they're working in.

We've been putting a tremendous amount of money on the table to support the provinces and territories in the health sector. We'll continue to be there for the provinces and territories. You heard the Prime Minister. We're there with our military, actually going in and supporting 25 long-term care centres with people—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Next we have Ms. Kwan for six minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for coming to our committee.

With respect to seniors and the long-term care situation, 82% of the COVID-19 deaths are in long-term care. To that end, while it is a provincial jurisdiction, I think we also have a federal responsibility as well. Would the minister agree that we need to set national standards and that the federal government should work with the provinces on a care guarantee and also properly fund health care services in transfer payments to all the provinces and territories?

Hon. Deb Schulte: As I mentioned before, this is probably a question that the committee should be inviting the Minister of Health to come and address. I am working in partnership with her to support the requests from the provinces for long-term care.

I've been talking to my colleagues in the provinces and territories to determine what assistance they need from us right now, because it is a crisis. It's not a crisis across the country. B.C. started off with an issue, and they took fast action—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister. Sorry, I don't have that much time.

My question is for you, as the Minister of Seniors. Are you at the cabinet table, the cabinet committee table, advocating for a national standard and for a care guarantee in long-term care delivery for seniors across the provinces?

Hon. Deb Schulte: I'm going to have to defer this question to the Minister of Health. I am working with her at this time to address the crisis today that we're seeing in some provinces with regard to long-term care.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What I'm hearing from you, Minister, is that you have no opinion on this, and you're not confirming that you're advocating for seniors, so what is the Minister of Seniors doing? I have to ask that question, because that worries me greatly. If you're the Minister of Seniors, I would hope that you're at that table advocating for seniors, for national standards and guaranteed care systems for all seniors across the country.

I'd like to turn to another issue, and that is the new announcement. The NDP pushed the government to come in with support for seniors and people with disabilities. That happened in the House, and the government made the announcement recently. The government actually set a standard for CERB, demonstrating the understanding that Canadians need at least \$2,000 a month to survive, yet seniors on fixed low incomes only got one-time payments in the announcements, as well as the GST. With many of the community resources closed due to COVID-19, the cost of living for seniors has increased, and they're struggling more than ever.

My question is this: Is the minister advocating at the table for low-income seniors to actually have their income topped up to \$2,000 each month—not just one-time payments, but each month?

• (1135)

Hon. Deb Schulte: There's quite a lot in your question to unpack. I just want to go back to the first point you made.

You can be darn sure that, as the Minister of Seniors and as a member of the COVID-19 committee, I am advocating very strongly that we support seniors in every way we can during this challenging time.

To address the issue you raised in terms of what we're doing for low-income seniors, I will say that, yes, we did support low- to modest-income seniors, along with other Canadians, with a GST top-up that came to \$375—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Minister, we heard that part already. If you're advocating at the table, then can you confirm for the committee that you support national standards for long-term care for seniors, and that you support a care guarantee for all seniors across the country?

Hon. Deb Schulte: What I can assure you is that we are addressing the urgent needs that are arising right now in long-term care.

We are working in partnership with the provinces and territories, and we will be working with the provinces and territories after we get through this crisis to do an assessment of what needs to be done and how we can work together to get that done.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It was a fairly straightforward question for the minister about whether or not she supports a guaranteed care system for seniors, and I did not hear an answer from the minister on that.

With regard to the CERB.... What the government has provided is a one-time funding for seniors. Seniors need this on an ongoing basis. We just heard previously the question about increasing the pension for seniors, and the government has parked that now because of COVID-19. Especially in light of that, shouldn't we actually, during this COVID pandemic, support seniors, recognizing that the minimum standard that the government has set with CERB is \$2,000 a month to survive? Shouldn't seniors be treated the same? Why are they being treated as second-class citizens?

Hon. Deb Schulte: I want to remind the member that seniors are continuing to receive their benefits during this pandemic. Those who are on CERB have lost their income and don't have any.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, but what I'm talking about is a top-up, though.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Seniors are in a different situation; they are already getting their benefits. What we have done is make sure that we got the money as quickly as possible into the hands of those low-income, vulnerable seniors, rather than give a small amount trickled out over many months. We made sure that we got it into their hands as quickly as possible, and this is in addition to the money they're already getting through their benefits. It's like putting apples and oranges together; it's not the same.

However, we did make CERB available to working seniors, because we know that many seniors are working later in life, so if they lost their jobs due to COVID-19, then they will also get the CERB.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: But they're—

Hon. Deb Schulte: The CERB is available to working seniors as well who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There is a difference, Minister. It's one-time funding versus ongoing monthly support.

The Chair: Next we have Mrs. Kusie for five minutes.

Mrs. Kusie, you have the floor.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. It's so nice to see you here healthy and well.

In your announcement this week, you indicated, of course, that you're providing a one-time increase to OAS and GIS, but many seniors receiving these payments aren't struggling financially due to COVID-19, given that seniors can receive OAS with an annual taxable income of up to \$128,137. As Conservatives, we're very concerned about the deficit coming out of this. We're already at \$252 billion, with a debt of \$1 trillion. My colleague previously indicated that we have put forward policy options regarding both RRIFs and RRSPs.

Following an idea that we have seen in major media this week after your announcement.... The Globe and Mail, as well as academics out of the University of Waterloo, for example.... What is the rationale for providing this tax-free benefit so broadly, including to high-income seniors who may not be experiencing financial hardship?

• (1140)

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for that question. It is an important one.

Those who are on old age security, OAS, with an income of up to \$80,000 will receive the full amount of old age security. Above that, they would have normally gotten a claw-back. That is 7% of the seniors who are on old age security. Just to make that clear, 6.7 million seniors are on old age security, and the majority of those, 93%, are living under the \$80,000 cut-off limit.

I'm saying that it's not a lot of money. You're making it sound like rich people are getting this benefit. There is a very small number of people who may be getting this and who are deemed to be in more well-off circumstances, but the majority—as I said, over 90%—are seniors who are trying to cope with these additional costs that are making it difficult for them to put food on the table and make ends meet.

There are statistics and information that we've been getting about the incredible rise of seniors going to the food bank just to try to get enough food on the table, and they can't pay for the medicines they need. The most important thing was to get a payment as quickly as possible into the hands of those seniors who were struggling, and that was the objective of the government. It's why we had the one-time payment option go to old age security recipients and guaranteed income supplement recipients, so we didn't have to make them apply. You've already heard from some of your other committee members where some of those challenges are. We wanted to get it into the hands of the seniors.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: But, Minister, why did you not decide to target low-income seniors at this time, by providing an increase only through GIS payments?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Well, we've done both. We've addressed those who are facing additional costs and struggling, and we've definitely given more money to those who are at a lower income. Those are people who are living on an income of under \$18,600 yearly. They are on a guaranteed income supplement, so they are getting more. They're getting an additional \$200. For a couple on guaranteed income supplements, that totals over \$1,000 to help

them get through the additional costs and cope with the COVID pandemic.

I'm not sure if the officials would like to chime in and give any more information. I'm certainly thinking that might be helpful.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: We'll certainly have time for that in the second round, Minister. Thank you.

Something that has been of great concern to me is the Service Canada phone system, which has been overwhelmed for months with long wait times and an inability of people to get through. Absolutely, it inadvertently impacts seniors, as, for many, the phone is their only form of communication right now. Since Service Canada centres are closed, it makes it more difficult for seniors; and many seniors, of course, aren't comfortable using the Internet.

I'm wondering what you've done to ensure that seniors have received timely access to Service Canada so that they can access the benefits they need.

The Chair: Please give a short answer, Minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte: We've put extra staff into Service Canada and into the areas that need to be able to work on getting these benefits out the door. We've been assigning staff accordingly within the department to try to help reduce those backlogs. There was a peak as new programs came on, then they evened out, and it's gotten better. We're very mindful, and we're keeping an eye on that and putting more resources where required so that Canadians and seniors can get the benefits they need.

Thank you.

• (1145)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mrs. Kusie.

Next we have Ms. Young for five minutes, please.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm going to be sharing my time with one of my colleagues.

Through you, I'd like to talk to Minister Schulte.

I want to commend the great work that you have done as Minister of Seniors. You will recall that, when we both became MPs in 2015, we both expressed real concern that there wasn't a full minister designated for seniors issues, and there hadn't been for some time. You quickly brought together a number of MPs and formed a seniors caucus. I was happy to be a part of that to address some of the issues that seniors are facing. I was certainly thrilled when you were named Minister of Seniors.

I was going over some statistics. According to the Canadian income survey released this year, the number of seniors living in poverty is still high; however, it's significantly better than it was in 2014, when a staggering 28% of single seniors were living in poverty. Now it's 8%. COVID-19 has really shone the light on these seniors issues.

How are we assisting these vulnerable seniors specifically to make sure they don't end up living in poverty?

Hon. Deb Schulte: We've come a long way. The government has been working since day one on improving the situation for seniors. You know that we did a GST top-up in our very early budget to try to help those very low-income and vulnerable seniors. There were too many seniors living in poverty, and through our measures, we've had a significant improvement in the circumstances of seniors across Canada. However, during this pandemic, we've seen again that seniors are struggling, especially our more vulnerable seniors.

This is why we did the program to provide the \$300 for those on old age security, and an additional \$200 as an improvement for the more vulnerable who are on the guaranteed income supplement. As I said before, the money they got in April for the GST top-up has helped a couple on the guaranteed income supplement by over \$1,500 on average. That's a significant help for vulnerable seniors during this COVID pandemic.

What we haven't talked about is that there are a lot of seniors who are afraid to come out of their homes. They don't have access to public transit the way they used to, because they're afraid to use public transit. If they need to go somewhere, they're often taking a taxi. They're seeing a tremendous impact on their finances because they're having to spend more on the drugs they need. This was raised before by one of the members of the committee, that provinces are limiting the amount of drugs that people are able to have to one month, which means they now have additional dispensing fees. There is a long list of impacts that seniors are facing, and our vulnerable seniors are most affected.

One of the things we're doing is putting in significant investments in community organizations to help support seniors. We see so many organizations stepping up across the country specifically reaching out to seniors to make sure they get the groceries they need and to make sure they have a hot meal. This is coming through with over half a billion dollars that we have flowed into charities and supports for vulnerable Canadians, including seniors.

Part of our announcement this week was an additional \$20 million of new horizons money, because we are always oversubscribed in the new horizons program where community groups want to help seniors. In this environment, I've been so impressed with the creativity that people have brought on how to bring seniors together,

keeping them in their homes, keeping them safe, but making sure they feel a very connected part of the community.

I'll give you an example if you have the time.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you so much, Minister Schulte. I really want to allow my colleague Mr. Turnbull to ask a question.

The Chair: I'm very sorry, Mr. Turnbull. There are about 15 seconds left if you want to make a quick comment, but you won't have time for a response.

• (1150)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Minister, I just want to say that you've been a tireless advocate for seniors. As you know, I've been advocating for the seniors in my riding quite strongly, and I've found you to be very responsive and very active. I just want to acknowledge you for that and thank you for being here.

Hon. Deb Schulte: And I'll give a shout-out to you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

Next we have Mr. Shields for five minutes.

Mr. Martin Shields: One of the things you mentioned was new horizons for seniors in the sense of those supports that you talk about. We have two challenges with that. Many seniors who used to be volunteers for Meals on Wheels, delivering things to seniors, are not doing this any longer because they are afraid. They are isolating and don't want to go out. Have seniors really withdrawn significantly because of that?

Second, when we talk about new horizons, PPE is a real challenge. As we relaunch and open businesses, we have a lot of businesses like dental, health care and chiropractic care. They can't get PPE, so our volunteer base is further down that line in the sense of securing PPE. People volunteering is one thing, but without those resources, we have a real challenge.

Hon. Deb Schulte: There were two thoughts there, which I'll address.

You're absolutely right. There are many seniors who are isolating in their homes, doing exactly what they need to do to stay safe, especially if they have more complicated health challenges.

With the money for the new horizons for seniors program, the \$9 million that we gave to United Way Centraide specifically to support seniors and the \$50 million that we have generally provided to local organizations, I have seen a significant number of organizations pivot.... Well, maybe “pivot” is not the right word. They have modified their programs so they can get volunteers. You're right; seniors volunteer. They have time and enthusiasm, and they want to get involved. They want to share their wisdom and their knowledge, so they're usually the ones who are out volunteering to support seniors, and if they're staying home, then we don't have them.

We have been encouraging organizations to potentially hire students. You can see through the Canada summer jobs program that we've also put that into play, so that groups can hire students to help seniors, support them in their homes and keep them connected, train them on video equipment and get them iPads. These are things that we are allowing the new horizons for seniors money to be available for, and it's making a big difference in the lives of seniors today. It will also be helping some of our students get jobs and keeping people employed during this difficult time.

The other issue you raised was protective equipment. This is part of the push that the government has done to acquire as much protective equipment as we can so that we will have some stockpiles available for essential services. We're also engaging and ramping up the opportunity for businesses in Canada, putting orders in with them, getting them going, giving them their certifications and what's required so they can provide this equipment and start getting a national amount of PPE so that we can open up and get back to work safely.

Mr. Martin Shields: Again, those volunteers are at the lower end of anybody getting PPE; they really are. They're not going to get it. There are demands much, much higher on the list than they are, and that is a real problem.

There is money coming to new horizons, as you mentioned. United Way is not in my constituency; it is not in many rural ones. When is this money coming out to organizations like new horizons? When will they receive it?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Most communities, most ridings, had new horizons money that came to organizations in January.

On that money, we recently alerted those organizations that they had an opportunity to change their program. They didn't have to reapply if they met some new criteria in terms of supporting seniors in a different way, such as hiring volunteers, providing groceries and supports, providing equipment so that seniors could stay connected and getting volunteers to make phone calls and connect with seniors. These are things that the new horizons for seniors program is now allowing those in your community who had money in January to do today, to use that money in this way.

They have the opportunity to not do that and to wait until they can do their regular programming, because not everybody can change what they had in mind, but many are making those changes and providing the support they want to through these allowable categories. They don't need to reapply. They can just use the money right now, today.

That money is in communities on the ground already, and we've just added another \$20 million to have organizations that didn't get the money before, but want to do that kind of work in communities, to be able to access additional funding to do that. You will see it on the ground even in those communities that don't have United Way Centraide or Red Cross, which is another group to which we have provided money to help seniors as well.

We've put \$100 million on the table to food banks and food share programs, and they've have been distributing that money throughout the country as well through their food bank network.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Shields.

We're back to the Liberals for five minutes.

Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be splitting my time with MP Vaughan.

Minister, it's great to have you here.

I think many seniors at this time are self-isolating. They're homebound. Many are in long-term care facilities. They're not able to have visitors come in and go out. I know that this is having a significant impact on the mental health of our seniors. They are feeling isolated, even more so than they normally talk about, which I think is often a comment that seniors make. My mother is in this situation right now in long-term care.

I wondered if you could tell us about what we're doing to support seniors who are feeling isolated and whether you have any advice for them.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much.

Absolutely, these are the seniors we're concerned about, and we're concerned about their mental health.

Something that I haven't had a chance to mention yet is that we've launched a new online portal called Wellness Together Canada. That's ca.portal.gs. This is a portal that will help seniors to connect with those with the experience to be able to help them understand that they are not alone, even though they're isolated and it is a very scary time for them. It gives them the supports and the connections they need. That's so important at this time.

I do want to go back to the new horizons for seniors money that we've just announced and also to the money that is already in the communities through United Way Centraide and the new horizons for seniors regular organizations that have been supporting seniors. They have been incredibly creative. I was going to say this before with member Kate Young. We have seen incredible creativity. Let's just give you an example.

There is a program called HOPE. It has 150 seniors in the community who are part of its network. They usually get together twice a week to do yoga, and I think they make a lunch and have an education session on either diet or health—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Minister—

Hon. Deb Schulte: I'm sorry. Am I cutting off your time?

Anyway, I'm going off, but I just want you to know that we have been putting significant funding in the community and people have been picking it up, running with it and doing some incredible things to support seniors.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Minister. I don't mean to interrupt. I just want to make sure that MP Vaughan gets a chance.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): Thanks very much.

I have just a quick couple of questions.

When did work in your department start on a COVID response?

Hon. Deb Schulte: I would say.... I'm going to turn to my....

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Well before March?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Oh my goodness, yes. It was to get—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Yes, so it wasn't a prompt from the opposition.

Hon. Deb Schulte: No. We started—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the budget submission that is part of the ongoing process of Parliament, you are making budget submissions around to boost seniors support consistent with our campaign platform.

Hon. Deb Schulte: What we are doing right now is focusing on getting programs that are needed to support seniors at this time. So we are definitely focused on—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Just to be clear, the budget process is going on in parallel, and submissions to that budget process are consistent with our campaign platform while we also respond in real time to the emergency.

● (1200)

Hon. Deb Schulte: It's not exactly the same process that we normally have, but yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: It's not a question of us just responding through the emergency process. The boosts we made to senior support in our first mandate helped 900,000 seniors get more money. The emergency response is another step forward, which includes the GST and the boost to OAS and the boost to guaranteed income supplement, but there's also, coming out of this, an expectation that seniors are going to get even more support from our government as we move to lift Canadian seniors out of poverty. That's the goal of this government before, during, and after COVID, is it not?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the poverty reduction numbers, we have reduced from an all-time high in 2014 the number of seniors living in poverty as a result of direct transfers to seniors.

Hon. Deb Schulte: We should feel very proud of our record in delivering for seniors.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I just want to read two comments to you and get your response to them. One is from a former leader of the Conservative Party who made the comments in regard to long-term care. Rona Ambrose who is the former leader of the Conservative Party said:

Unlike some of our predecessors in Ottawa, who often tried to impose rigid bureaucratic healthcare conformity on the provinces, we have respected their constitutional jurisdiction over healthcare and encouraged their innovations.

The Conservatives have resisted explicitly providing national standards for health care as a way of stepping away from the health care responsibilities of the federal government. I just want to contrast that as well with the comments made by a former minister of seniors and long-term care in Ontario just last November as we walked into the COVID situation—

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan, I'm very sorry to interrupt but we are past time and there will be no time for an answer at this point.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: No problem. I just wanted to highlight that the Conservatives in Ontario cut—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

[*Translation*]

It's Ms. Chabot's turn now.

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

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

Minister, we are pleased to have you here. Thank you for making yourself available.

Talking about seniors is talking about an entire generation. Being a senior also means being able to be healthy. Of course, we are more concerned right now about the situation of the most vulnerable or most affected by the crisis. I will not dwell on those issues. Health care for seniors falls under provincial jurisdiction. You said so yourself. So the support can't be just temporary. It is important to think about permanent support for health care funding.

My question is about the new horizons for seniors program. We know that there is a new horizons for seniors program with the United Way. In my riding, we had to call agencies because it was not widely publicized. In addition, a \$20-million investment in the program is expected a little later, but we have no details.

Could you elaborate on that?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for the question.

[*English*]

I do want to share a little bit about the new horizons and the \$20 million of additional funding that we have, and I do apologize if you did not get enough information. We did send emails out to organizations that are normally involved in the new horizons for seniors program to allow them to modify their programs to support seniors in communities. We also did alert MPs to get out there and see if they could help organizations to change their programs to be able to better support seniors. But we know that there were more organizations that wanted to do things supporting their community for seniors. This is why we brought the additional \$20 million into effect this week. We will be looking at those organizations that already applied but did not get funding because there wasn't adequate funding and we will be reaching out to see if they're interested in changing their program to support the seniors today in a new COVID-19 forum, a new way, and if they are, these are the ways we will try to get the money out quickly to organizations to support seniors.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Our last questioner will be Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kwan, you have the floor.

• (1205)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

For seniors who are receiving the one-time payment as a result of COVID-19, will this amount be counted toward their income for the purposes of GIS calculation next year or will that be exempt?

Hon. Deb Schulte: This is tax-exempt, so it's a one-time benefit that goes to seniors.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There will be no implications for seniors next year for their GIS application. I just want to be clear, because a lot of seniors are worried about that and asking the question.

Hon. Deb Schulte: I do not believe there's going to be an impact on the qualifications for next year. I'll just turn to those who have the expertise, our officials.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'll ask the officials when they come in the next hour, Minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte: My understanding is there's no impact to those on guaranteed income supplement because it's tax-free.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right.

In terms of the tax year, the taxation time period has been delayed. Regardless of that though, many seniors may not be able to get their taxes filed on time.

Can you provide confirmation that their GIS would not be interrupted even if they don't manage to file? In fact, would the government consider grandfathering everybody receiving GIS this year, so they don't have to worry about having their GIS cut off?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to talk about this because there was another announcement made this week that we haven't had much discussion on.

We definitely recognize there are many seniors who have had difficulty doing their taxes, certainly many vulnerable seniors, so we wanted to make sure their benefits would continue. I can assure seniors who have been unable to get their taxes filed, we are not extending the tax filing deadline, it is still June 1, and we are encouraging all seniors to get their taxes done as soon as possible.

There's some new information that has come out this week to try to help them do it in a virtual way, and the CRA is going to be reaching out and trying to get as much help as possible to seniors for getting their taxes filed. What's really important is those filings need to be done so we can be sure seniors are getting the right benefits they need, and that's important.

However, we are not going to be cutting off benefits for seniors as long as they are able to get their filings done before October 1.

The Chair: Thank you.

That, Madam Minister, completes two rounds of questions. I offer heartfelt thanks to you for coming before us and for providing us with those answers. You're now free to go, with our thanks, and we're going to keep your officials around for the second hour.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much to the committee. Again, you're doing amazing work, and I really appreciate the opportunity to come before you.

Have a great day.

The Chair: We're suspended for three minutes.

• (1205) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1210)

The Chair: We are back in session with the officials.

We're going to begin with our rounds of questions, beginning with Ms. Falk for six minutes.

Ms. Falk, you have the floor.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): That's perfect. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and just so you know, I will be splitting my time with MP Vis.

First of all, I want to thank the department for being here. We know that Canada's seniors are particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we certainly know also that they have not been immune to the economic and social fallout. COVID-19 has put a strain on the social services and the resources available to support Canada's seniors, and we know that this has exposed the fragility of our existing network.

In a previous meeting, I shared a particular struggle that some of my constituents are living with, who live in small rural communities and have limited access to support. We know the Liberal carbon tax is unfairly penalizing these rural communities. This also includes our seniors living in rural communities who have to drive a distance to get basic necessities like groceries or prescriptions, and shamefully, in the middle of this pandemic, the carbon tax has gone up, taking more money out of their pockets.

As a member of Parliament for a riding that's made up of many small rural communities, I know there are often barriers and challenges to accessing supports and services. One thing I'm wondering is with the closure of Service Canada offices, Canadians are required to access support by phone or online. This presents specific challenges for some of Canada's seniors, and greater challenges for those living in rural communities where network access is inconsistent.

I am wondering what timeline or plans are in place to reopen these offices and how this is going to coincide with provincial opening plans. I'm in Saskatchewan, and for example, phase two will be starting on Tuesday.

Mr. Benoît Robidoux (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): Mr. Chair, I will pick up that question and pass it to my collective group afterwards. At their level, we effectively closed these centres, and we have worked hard to improve our phone and online connections. People can send emails and get an answer within a standard amount of time. We did our best to help these rural communities that are more affected by that.

Again, the service centres, our call centres are not the best we ever had—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: For sure. I'm sorry, I just have limited time. I need to get to MP Vis.

I'm just wondering if there's a plan and a timeline. At least has a plan started?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I will ask my colleague Cliff Groen to answer that question.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen (Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Canada - Benefit Delivery Services Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Certainly.

Active plans are under way within the department. As well as the rest of the country—and frankly the globe—we continue to adjust our plans as the COVID pandemic evolves. We certainly have active plans in place. We know it is important that we are able to open our offices as quickly as possible, but it's also critical that we do so in a safe manner, both for our clients and for our staff.

As a result, when we closed the offices, we did establish—

• (1215)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay, thank you. I'd like to pass my time to MP Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you.

I read in *The Globe and Mail* this morning that individuals earning up to \$128,000 per year receive at least some payment under the OAS and will get the emergency benefit.

Can officials please clarify that?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Yes, Mr. Chair, as the minister mentioned before, there's a clawback, a tax recovery—

Mr. Brad Vis: But seniors making \$128,000 a year will get the \$300 benefit?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: If they're included in our database and still receive OAS so that—

Mr. Brad Vis: As Tammy Schirle, professor of economics at Wilfrid Laurier University, said, it's easy to understand why Ottawa would see the need to assist lower-income seniors.

I agree. I have a lot of seniors in my riding seeking additional supports. There has been some inflation in groceries in my riding, especially in the rural areas, but Professor Schirle said that she has not heard a rationale from the government for why it did not simply target benefits to those seniors and instead chose to send funds to higher-income seniors.

Can the officials please provide the rationale as to why seniors making over \$100,000 a year are going to be getting an additional grant from the government?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: First, the benefit is going to provide more to those who are low income, who are receiving the GIS, as you know.

Mr. Brad Vis: But you would also agree that it is going to seniors who also make over \$100,000, a six-figure income.

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I did respond to that before. I will continue my answer if you let me do that.

I would also say that, as the minister mentioned, the GST credit top-up that was provided to all Canadians from low- and modest-income benefited seniors in April. Only those of low and modest income benefited from that.

With this new benefit, the government believes that all seniors were somewhat affected by higher costs, so we just based the \$300 on all OAS-eligible pensioners. We're covering all the seniors who were not covered up to now by other programs.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay, thank you. I have very limited time.

The Chair: Next we go to Mr. Turnbull for six minutes, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks, Mr. Chair, and thanks to all the officials for being here. I really appreciate you giving us your time and answering questions.

On May 11, there was an article regarding federal workers being supposedly told to ignore cheating in the CERB and EI claims process. If you could just give me a yes or no response to this, is ES-DC ignoring cases of fraud?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: We are not.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Can you please explain the rationale behind the guidance that was given to employees in Service Canada, if you wouldn't mind.

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Guidance was provided to Service Canada. What we did with the CERB was to change our way to do integrity, to do more at the back end and less at the front end, because we had a huge volume to process.

I would say, though, that if you read that memo, there's mention of three elements that still need to be done by people who process the benefit at the front end. It's the same for the CRA; they have some elements at the front end.

There will also be an integrity process at the time that people receive their benefit and there will also be, at the back end, elements to do integrity post-benefit, later in the year.

We have a plan, it's just that we had to modify it to flow the benefit, which was a priority of the government, but we have not given up—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I am sorry to interrupt you. It was really a prioritization of speed, was it not?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: It was. That was the priority and we had to adapt the integrity model.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: If there were intensive front-end accountability measures for the CERB, for example, non-critical investigations referred to the integrity service branch, and stop pay orders similar to those in place for employment insurance, what effect would this have had on the timeliness of getting those payments out to Canadians who were in need?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: The impact would have been huge. If we had kept with the same approach as for EI, as you provided as an example, it would have been impossible to process all these claims with the speed we did. People would not have received their benefits and they would still be without them as we speak.

• (1220)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: The 7.3 million or more Canadians who have received the CERB would still be waiting for those cheques, likely?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: For sure.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: What are we doing about cases of suspected fraud or cheating?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Right now, where there are cases of clear fraud and we can find them early on, we block these payments. This is ongoing and this is what we're doing if there's a clear case of fraud at the entry—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Will you be able to reclaim—

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: —that we know of, for example, if we have someone with a SIN of a deceased person in our data bank, there is no payment. There are a few things we do right at the get-go, and there are a few more things we do very quickly after that, which use analytics to make sure that clear cases of fraud are not being processed.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: We're not standing idly by while people take advantage of the system like it's been implied, right?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: No.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, and just a simple yes-or-no question: were you asked to issue this guidance by the Prime Minister?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I was not, for sure.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Were you asked to issue that guidance by the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I was not.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Were you asked to issue this guidance by the minister's office?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I was not.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you very much.

If I have a little more time, Mr. Chair, I have one more question.

The Chair: You have less than two minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay, great.

On a different line of questioning, related to seniors, how will the additional funding for new horizons for seniors roll out and who will be able to access it?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: The \$20 million for New Horizons for seniors was just announced and approved, so we're looking at it.

Last year, we had a number of applications for the new horizons for seniors program. We had quality projects, eligible projects that we were not able to fund last year, so one of the first things we'll look at are those applications. We'll go back to those who applied to see if they could, as the minister mentioned, modify their proposals to adapt to a COVID situation, as we did for those to whom we provided benefits. We provided them with the flexibility to adapt their proposals. That's the first avenue we'll surely look at very quickly going forward.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay, great. Thanks.

I have one other question for you before my time is up.

I know that many vulnerable seniors who were living on a very low income prior to the COVID-19 crisis have been helped dramatically by our government's policies in the past. I'm just wondering whether a study has been done on the impacts of the previous work we've done to help vulnerable seniors get through this crisis. If not, do you think that would be a good study to do in the future?

The Chair: Please give a short answer.

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: As we get more data, it would surely be a good study to look at using the income survey, for example.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot: Good afternoon, Mr. Robidoux.

Thank you for joining us.

My question is about the new horizons for seniors program. However, first, I will ask a few questions that are not specifically about seniors; they are about the CERB and EI. I will ask these questions because I am trying to get the big picture.

The emergency benefits were very much needed. Contributions were made; they were adopted and enhanced. We know that these benefits will last for a certain period of time. As for the Canada emergency wage subsidy, we heard that it would be extended if necessary. The information was not as clear for the CERB.

If the CERB continues for 16 weeks, or four months, as planned, how will it be dovetailed to regular EI benefits or special EI benefits?

• (1225)

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Good afternoon, Ms. Chabot.

We are working hard to review how we can dovetail the CERB and the EI system. We have regular meetings on the issue. Some people have been receiving benefits since March 15, and their benefits will end after 16 weeks. Our team is working very hard to find a solution.

I will not hide the fact that it will be a challenge, given the number of people who applied in the first four weeks of the program. We are working hard to ensure that they are transitioned to the EI program, that the wait times will be reasonable, and that payments will be made as quickly as possible.

We are constantly thinking about that and about what will happen to the CERB and all the programs we have put in place.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you for your answer.

Having said that, I am certain that we, as elected officials, must talk about the transition that is going to take place. As you know, I agreed that one of the great advantages of the CERB was to be able to support workers who were not eligible for EI. That is quite an adjustment. I think there will still be needs after mid-June. In that sense, we have to deal with those situations directly.

My other question may be a little more specific. It's about supplemental unemployment benefit plans. I imagine you know what I'm talking about. They are agreements with municipalities or with industry, particularly the metal industry, to increase the 50% EI threshold by 20% to 40%. The agreements with the government are in place. But there is an impasse, because there are no rules for making the payments.

Do you have a solution for this?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: For those who were entitled to EI before March 15, there is no problem. If they were entitled to these programs, they can continue to receive additional amounts from employers who laid them off, generally on a temporary basis. So, yes, that is an option. For those who have been receiving the CERB after March 15, that's not a direct option, as it is for those receiving EI benefits. There is not as much flexibility.

The fact remains that, if they wish, employers who have temporarily laid off some of their employees, who are now receiving the CERB, are entitled to increase it by up to \$1,000. That increase is allowed under this program. Those employers can offer up to an additional \$1,000 directly to employees; that's the amount allowed to date.

As I was saying earlier, the government continues to examine on a regular basis the possibility of adjusting all these programs. This includes the cases you mentioned in your question.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I have already contacted the department and I was told that they are aware of the problem and that they are looking at possible solutions. However, even with the additional \$1,000 allowed—and that's the answer I received—I think there's still a problem. The goal is to have proper agreements. This should not deprive workers who are temporarily laid off, who are entitled to EI, and who have applied for the CERB, of income owed to them. At the end of the day, we want to support workers. We are counting on a quick response and an equally quick solution on this issue. Seasonal workers—

• (1230)

The Chair: Ms. Chabot, I'm sorry, but your time is up.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Don't be sorry, I understand.

[English]

The Chair: Next we have Ms. Kwan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the officials.

I have a constituent who was hoping to apply for the student CERB. However, she makes \$1,040, so she's \$40 over the limit. Is there any flexibility at all with respect to the application process here, or does she have to turn down her job? She has part-time work and is making \$1,040. Will she have to turn down that job in order to qualify for the student CERB?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Yes, based on the regulations that are public as of today, the threshold for the income exemption is the same as for CERB. It's \$1,000. In principle, if you earn more than that, you are not eligible for the benefit for that four-week period. Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Well, I would urge the government to take into consideration flexibility in that instance. It serves as a disincentive for this individual, to actually have to turn down her job because she's \$40 over in qualifying.

Now, we're in a situation where there are efforts to have people return to work. In some instances, I'm already hearing concerns from constituents about workplace safety and protective equipment and so on, and the lack of protective equipment and so on. If, in those circumstances, people refuse to return to work because they don't feel that it is a safe work environment, would they still be eligible for CERB?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: That's a very interesting question. I will first mention that before CERB, after CERB and as CERB exists, there's a labour code process for a refusal to work because you believe you are in danger, or you will put someone else in danger, so there's a process with the employers. Through that process, an investigation takes place. For federally regulated employees and employers, it's the federal government that would look at this inspection. In fact, it's a labour program that is within ESDC that would do this. I have to say that what is important to note is that through the process, the worker should be paid by the employer.

I think at the end of the process, if it's viewed that it is, effectively, dangerous to work and you don't want to go back to work, you're totally eligible for CERB, but someone effectively needs to use that

protection through the labour code. In a situation like that, this is what our workers should do.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then you have to file a complaint and then wait for the outcome? In the meantime, do you have to keep on going to work?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: No.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then as soon as you file the complaint, then you are able to not go to work, and still—

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Through that process, and now in most provinces and at the federal level, you could withdraw yourself from the work while the investigation is going on. If it's found at the end, for example, that there was no danger, the employer could not impose penalties or anything like that, so the employee is protected through that process of investigation, and that person should be paid. Being paid suggests that the CERB is not an issue at that moment. It's at the end of that process.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right.

In terms of going forward with CERB or with the student CERB, and so on, as the economy struggles to recover, what work is being undertaken so when people run out of the CERB, or they were not qualified for EI and that's why they got CERB, they will be supported once their CERB runs out and they're not able to get employment because the economy is slow in its recovery?

• (1235)

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: This is in fact in the department, and for many people in the department this is basically what we do every day now. We're thinking about the exit strategy. We're thinking about, as you just said, what happens to these people, and what the timing will be.

The government just announced extensions to the wage subsidy, which reflect the analyses of whether it is time to get out of it, or there is something to be done.

As you know, the student benefit was done through regulations to a large extent, including the parameters that would allow us to really adapt better ways, if we needed to adapt for the summer, without going to Parliament for legislation, which would be a bit more complex and take longer.

In a nutshell, I would say we spend a lot of time thinking about the return to work and the transition of the economy within this COVID period. Those things occupy a lot of our time and our thinking.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I hope the government will come forward with some sort of programming, because a lot of people will be in a lot of trouble if not.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Shields for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Martin Shields: Mr. Chair, I will defer my time to MP Albas.

The Chair: Mr. Albas, go ahead, please.

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I wasn't going to be coming up, but MP Turnbull raised my interest on a few things.

Now, we have reports that public servants are not looking into cases but are actively ignoring potential fraud by ineligible people when it is obvious. That is not doing checks later; that is ignoring the issues that are right in front of the public servant. Conservatives aren't saying dig into every case. We're saying that when it's obvious that someone is not eligible, they shouldn't ignore that, and they should look into that. We're not saying slow down the system. We're saying ensure that the resources go to the right people.

The CERB Act clearly requires eligibility, yet you've said here that a memo has authorized the department to not verify eligibility. How do you justify an internal policy that is inconsistent or contrary to the will of Parliament?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I could turn to Cliff Groen after this about the memo, but the memo didn't say not to look at any integrity issues. It said to look at only the critical and essential integrity issues at the entry, because if we had continued to do what we do on the EI system, where essentially most of the files are looked into, it would have been impossible to do as an adjustment to the integrity framework at the front end. It was not abandoning any checks and balances at the get-go. That's what the memo was saying. It was not directed this way, clearly.

I will ask Cliff—

Mr. Dan Albas: No, I'll ask the next question, please.

You said that no political direction was given. How is that possible? Are you saying that the department makes the rules, not Parliament?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I'm not saying that. The government gave clear direction that the priority was to provide the benefit to Canadians. We needed to adapt our system to do that, and we did. I'm not saying—

Mr. Dan Albas: So the government doesn't have to follow the words that are approved by Parliament. Are you saying the government ignored the law? Did the government give you direction to ignore the law?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: We didn't ignore the law. We followed the law that was approved by Parliament for the CERB, and we followed the integrity framework that was presented for that. We're doing exactly what the law allows us to do. We have adapted—

Mr. Dan Albas: I'm sorry, sir, but the CERB act says very clearly—

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: We have—

Mr. Dan Albas: It says very clearly that—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I have a point of order.

Mr. Dan Albas: —someone has to have \$5,000 in income—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Albas. We have a point of order.

Go ahead, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: This is really objectionable, accusing a senior member of the public service of deliberately breaking the law.

Mr. Dan Albas: That's not a point of order.

● (1240)

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I ask that the chair rule this line of questioning out of order since it is a direct attack on the integrity of the individual and he is unable to defend himself because the member opposite is continually interrupting him.

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan, I respectfully disagree. This matter is relevant.

Mr. Albas, out of courtesy to the witness, you should allow him to respond, but your questions are not inappropriate. Please go ahead.

Mr. Dan Albas: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll try my best.

Sir, you've said here today that you're following a memo and not what is laid out in the CERB act.

Let me ask you this question. If a senior who is, let's say, age 75 phones in or applies online and has no T4 income or any other income for the 2019 year, would they be red-flagged and would they be processed under the current memo?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I will go back to your earlier question. You said—

Mr. Dan Albas: You know what? Maybe that line of questioning....

Mr. Robidoux, could you please answer my question?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: You said that I said we were following a memo and not following the law in doing the integrity process. We are following exactly what is written in the law when it comes to integrity with the CERB, number one.

Mr. Dan Albas: I'd like you to answer my question on a retiree aged 75 who phones or applies online and has zero employment income that would qualify for the CERB. Would they be red-flagged right now and would they be processed right now under this memo?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: We have no income data from when they applied in the system. CERB doesn't have that set up. That type of integrity will happen at the back end of the process at the end of the year, when we'll have the data. We'll then claw back the benefit if they didn't have the \$5,000. This will happen; it just will not happen now.

Mr. Dan Albas: If someone phones in right now and is aged 75.... First of all, do you treat someone of a particular age differently? Are any questions asked? I heard from someone that people are actually asked further questions if they are 75 or older. Can you confirm that?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Cliff Groen will answer that specific question.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Thank you very much.

First of all, I'd like to be clear that there is a requirement for any applicant to complete an attestation in which it is very clear what the requirements are, and they are fully aligned with what is in the legislation. In order to apply for and receive the benefit, any individual has to complete that attestation, in which they are confirming they meet all of the eligibility criteria, including income they would have received, their age—

Mr. Dan Albas: Can I again ask you to answer the question, though, about the senior—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Albas. Thank you, Mr. Groen. We are out of time.

Next we have Ms. Young for five minutes, please.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by commending our public servants for the amazing job that they've been doing over the past two months. It's exceptional, considering the circumstances and considering that we're all trying to work under stressful conditions, so I do want to make sure that they are commended.

I do have questions about the registered retirement income funds. The government announced that it was reducing the required minimum withdrawals from RRIFs by 25% for this year. Do we know how many seniors you estimate would be taking advantage of this new measure? Is there any idea at this point?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: This is a program that is managed by the Department of Finance, and I have to say that I have no data about that. It probably will be a bit difficult even for them to answer that question, because seniors could have all year to exploit that, to kind of take the opportunity for that 25%.

To be clear, there are rules about the minimum that you need to withdraw from your RRIF, but this could happen on the last day of the year. Right now, it's hard to know how this is affecting seniors, because they could manage their financial situation the way they need or prefer. Until the end of the year, it will be very difficult to answer that question, I believe, even for officials from the Department of Finance.

• (1245)

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you.

Also, I want to ask about the \$350 million that's going to be provided to charities. We heard about the United Way, the Red Cross and other charities that are going to be able to deliver programming, but we still are trying to get details from these groups. A number of seniors I talked to are still questioning how they are going to take advantage of this. How is that money going to be disbursed specifically to seniors in various communities?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: You're talking about the \$9 million, right?

Ms. Kate Young: Yes.

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Instead of trying to give you my best answer, I'll ask Janet Goulding, who runs that program, to give you the best answer possible.

Ms. Janet Goulding (Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): The additional \$9 million that was allocated to the new horizons for seniors program is being administered through United Way Canada, but the money is being distributed through local organizations that are providing services directly to seniors by delivering essential services like food or medication or helping seniors get to medical appointments. It's not the United Way itself. The United Way is providing that funding directly to organizations that are working in communities across the country to already provide services to seniors. The funding allows them to continue to do that.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much.

Depending on how long this pandemic lasts—and that is the big question that we have—is the department considering more top-ups of the GIS or the OAS?

You did talk about an exit strategy. I'd be very happy to hear that we are looking towards that, but there is certainly fear within the seniors community that this will last a long time and that possibly the top-up that we've announced this week will only be enough for a couple of months. Is there consideration in the long term that we might have to add to this again?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: As I said, these days, we spend a lot of time every day on this, and we're looking at all the permutations possible, depending on how the economy will recover, when socialization is relaxed, how things will evolve, so we have different scenarios. We're thinking about different options, and we're looking at, for example—and I'm not going to pick any benefit in particular—whether we should expand some of these benefits as they are and for how long. We're looking at whether we should, indeed, expand them, but modify them. We're looking at when we should, in fact, stop them.

In that context, we're thinking also about those, for example, who are receiving the CERB and are EI-eligible. We're thinking about how to tag these people and put them back into the EI system in a way that they will still have a smooth transition and receive the benefits that they are entitled to. We're thinking about all these different permutations. The only thing I can say is that we spend a lot of time on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Robidoux. Thank you, Ms. Young.

Now we're back to the Conservatives for five minutes. I'm not sure whether it's Mr. Shields or Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: If Mr. Shields wants to go, I'm more than happy to let him, but I can take a round. I'm just respectful of our guest.

Mr. Martin Shields: Go ahead.

Mr. Dan Albas: Thank you, Martin.

I would like to go back to the question of eligibility. In the CERB act officially, there are three parts: You need to be physically in Canada, you need to have made \$5,000 of employment income, and you need to have ceased work due to COVID-19.

I would like an answer. Are there any extended checks when someone identifies himself or herself as being age 75 or older? I heard anecdotally from someone that there's an extra check process for that. Can you confirm that?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I believe that for people who apply to CRA, there's a check for the age. I don't know if it's related to 75, but there's a check.

You mentioned the lower age. I believe there's a check there too at CRA. When we can, without hurting the delivery of the payments, we do the check on the basic information we have. I hope that answers your question.

• (1250)

Mr. Dan Albas: Let's say someone who is age 75 has not shown any income. One of the eligibility requirements is \$5,000 of income in 2019. Are you saying that neither Service Canada nor CRA—which, by the way, should have that information easily accessible—does a check on that?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I could turn again to Cliff to give you exactly what we do for age 75.

We check what we have for information and we would do that. I would remind you there are some people who are 75-plus who do work and have earned income in the previous year. All that is to say that when we have information, we do check, but we are not trying to gather information outside of the system to check these things at the entry point.

Mr. Dan Albas: In regard to the \$5,000, if someone has not shown that they've earned \$5,000, is there a red flag put on their account?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: For people who apply at Service Canada, we don't have that information, so there's no red flag possible.

Mr. Dan Albas: What about the CRA?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I will let a CRA official speak to whether or not they put a red flag on that.

Mr. Dan Albas: Going back to your comments earlier that you were not asked by the Prime Minister or the Minister of Employment, are you saying that the memo was 100% originated in the public service?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: The government gives us direction about the intent of the policy. This was provided by the legislation. It was provided by the direction that it was very important for us to deliver that benefit as quickly as possible to Canadians, and the operation of the benefit fell out of that approach.

Mr. Dan Albas: How was this direction documented?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I will turn to Cliff.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Thank you, Benoît.

When we deliver any different program, always our starting basis is the legislation. All of our actions, all the guidance and direction we provide for our staff—

Mr. Dan Albas: How is it documented, sir?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: The documentation starts with the legislation, and then we have guidance that we develop for our staff. That is the process we use.

Mr. Dan Albas: Is there an actual document in which the Prime Minister or cabinet, or the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, as the lead minister on this file, does that? In what form was it documented to give direction to utilize this policy?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Again, as I was answering, the documentation is the legislation. We use the legislation. Then we have to loyally implement the legislation as it is drafted. That is the process—

Mr. Dan Albas: For people who have not made \$5,000 or are of an age that, as I said earlier, may or may not make them eligible, how is it, sir, that you are then able to determine eligibility and issue the cheque?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: The design of the program is clear. It is an attestation-based model in which information is requested from the clients to confirm that they meet those criteria. In addition, other questions are asked of those individuals. We use that information at times for upfront controls, and there are payments that are stopped. At other times, that happens after the fact. If we decided to put all of the upfront controls in place, we would be in a situation in which millions of Canadians would not have received payments. We absolutely—

Mr. Dan Albas: I believe—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Albas. That's your time.

If you want to take another 10 or 15 seconds to complete your answer, go ahead, but there won't be another question.

Go ahead, Mr. Groen, if you need to.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Thank you.

Both we and CRA have lots of measures if there have been payments made to individuals who are not eligible. We have lots of measures available to us and CRA through which that money will be recovered.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Long, for five minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the department.

This is for anybody in the department.

The recent HUMA report called “Advancing Inclusion and Quality of Life for Seniors” recommended that the federal government work with the federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for health and social programs to develop pan-Canadian guidelines for services to be provided to seniors, regardless of where they reside in Canada.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both issues related to limited services as well as inequities across the country. Moreover, it was recently reported that 79% of all deaths from COVID-19 were related to long-term care facilities.

What action is the government taking in the short term to work with provincial and territorial partners to ensure that seniors have access to the supports they need to age in place?

Anybody can take that.

• (1255)

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Kathryn, are you on the line?

Ms. Kathryn McDade (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Sorry, Benoît. I am on the line, but I'm not sure I heard the entire question.

Chair, I believe it's a question regarding a recent report from HUMA around inclusion for seniors. I'm not sure that I have anything to add to the answers that the minister provided around the short-term or urgent work that's being done with provincial and territorial governments to support seniors in long-term care facilities.

The minister also talked about her own work on the New Horizons for Seniors program, and with organizations like the United Way and the Canadian Red Cross, to support local organizations that deliver services. I'm not sure I have anything to add to her answers.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Can you comment on what the government can do in the longer term to ensure that seniors have access to safe and appropriate home health care or long-term care, regardless of where they reside? Can you give us some comments on the long term?

Ms. Kathryn McDade: I don't think I would try to comment, Chair, on long-term care and home care policies. I know, as the minister said, that colleagues at Health Canada who have the lead role with provincial and territorial governments are thinking about the long-term implications of the pandemic, but they'd be best placed to answer those questions.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

In April, the government announced that an additional \$350 million would be provided to charities and non-profits to deliver essential services. There were few details provided, though, other than that funds would flow through national organizations and be quickly distributed to local organizations that serve vulnerable populations.

Could you please provide more detail as to how these funds will be used to support organizations that provide essential services to vulnerable seniors?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I'd like to ask Janet Goulding to answer this question.

Ms. Janet Goulding: On the \$350-million emergency community support fund, we expect that our partners, the United Way, Community Foundations of Canada and the Red Cross, will be opening a call for proposals very shortly.

There will be a very transparent process for organizations to find out how they can apply to the fund, and the funds are, of course, targeted to charities and non-profits that are providing services directly to vulnerable populations that are impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

That information will be available publicly on their websites very shortly.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Goulding. Thank you, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Can you just comment quickly on what measures are being put in place to be sure that social service workers have access to the training—

The Chair: Mr. Long, you are out of time. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

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

My question is about seasonal workers who have to deal with the infamous EI black hole. We are very pleased that they are eligible for the CERB, since, in their sectors, activities will be resumed late, or perhaps not at all. However, if these workers are not called back, how will their hours be calculated so that they will be eligible for EI again in the fall, even if they receive the CERB?

Yesterday, the government made an announcement for the fishery. One of the measures introduced states that income earned by fishers in previous seasons can be used to calculate their EI benefits. Are similar measures being considered for workers in other seasonal industries?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: Thank you for your question, Ms. Chabot.

As I said earlier, any specific cases that arise this summer or fall will be handled according to how the situation evolves and how the recovery unfolds. We are studying all of this very carefully and we will look at the possibilities and options for the government in due course.

Ms. Louise Chabot: So I gather that you still don't have an answer to that question.

I do not have any more questions, but I will address the issue of the CERB fraudsters, although I wanted to avoid it.

As an elected official, I am concerned about the support available to businesses and industries, some of which use tax havens with complete impunity. I am much more concerned about this corporate tax avoidance than I am about the possibility that a few people will abuse the CERB. I am sure that the recipients of this benefit are not acting in bad faith. It is possible that some people may be abusing the system, but I do not think many are.

I will conclude by giving the example of a senior in my riding who, like 60% of seniors in Canada, relies on their pension alone as a minimum income. This person, who also has a little job on the side, applied for the CERB and received it, but has since returned the cheque because they did not qualify.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Kwan gets the last word.

You have two and a half minutes, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

Could officials give us an update on what work is being done regarding single parents with children who have lost their income because their ex cannot provide for spousal or child maintenance? What work is being done? The last time the minister appeared before this committee, she said she was actively thinking about this. It has been almost more than a month since this matter was brought to her attention. What work is being done to address this issue?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: We are continuing to look at this as one of the angles with the benefit in order to help these women right now. This is part of what we're looking at in terms of things that could be done through CERB to help people.

I can tell you that we are looking at it and trying to find—

• (1305)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When can we expect—

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: I couldn't tell you when, but I can tell you that we are looking closely at this issue.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, I hope something will be done very quickly. As each month passes, these families are getting more and more desperate, and they've had no support. I just wanted to flag that.

Another issue is the Canada summer jobs program. The government changed the criteria without consulting MPs. While I support increasing the eligibility hours and the 100% funding for NGOs,

the problem with that is it does not come with additional funding for the riding. Effectively, it means that fewer organizations will get support for the Canada summer jobs program.

Is there any consideration of increasing the overall budget for the Canada summer jobs program?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: [Technical difficulty—Editor] made all these adjustments because we were concerned that the demand for summer jobs would be less than expected.

As you know, we wanted to create 70,000 jobs, and we were concerned that because of the COVID-19 situation and social isolation, a lot of the jobs would be.... Employers would have applied in a pre-COVID time. We thought that a lot of them, when we offered them the funding, would not have the jobs still available due to their business shutting down or being reduced to a large extent.

We are in the process of doing that now. We'll know more about what the take-up is on the jobs and how the flexibility helped to keep it at least the same. I can tell you that the minister is quite ready to think about adjusting as we move forward, when we have more information about what the real demand is for those who have applied.

Also, the minister has asked MPs to inquire in their ridings about supplementary demand for these jobs—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Robidoux. Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

That completes the time allocated, and then some.

I want to offer a sincere thanks to all of the officials who appeared before us today. Thank you for your patience and thank you for your professionalism. We very, very much appreciate the work you do. We also appreciate the effort you put in here before the committee today.

With that, we are past the hour. We'll see you in a week. Take care, everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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