



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 024

Wednesday, April 21, 2021

Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Wednesday, April 21, 2021

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)):
Good afternoon everybody. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting 24 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

The Board of Internal Economy requires that the committee adhere to the following health protocols. Please maintain a physical distance of at least two metres from others; wear a non-medical mask, unless you are seated, and preferably wear a mask at all times, including when seated; maintain proper hand hygiene by using the hand sanitizers provided in the committee room; and regularly wash your hands well with soap.

As the chair, I will enforce these measures. I thank all of you for your co-operation.

Today's meeting is webcast and is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021.

I would like to outline a few rules to follow. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You may speak in the official language of your choice. At the bottom of your screen, you may choose to hear floor audio, English or French. With the latest Zoom version, you do not need to select the corresponding language channel before speaking. The raise hand feature is on the main toolbar should you wish to speak.

I would remind all members that all comments should be addressed through the chair. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be muted. The committee clerk and I will maintain the speaking list for all members.

Before we get into today's meeting, I would like to advise you on audio issues in the committee. On April 14, the clerk distributed a letter from the honourable Judy Sgro, chair of the Liaison Committee, regarding audio issues in committee.

All committees, including ours, face the issue of witnesses appearing without proper headsets from time to time, which results in audio problems impacting our interpretation service. The committee previously agreed that every witness must have a connection test before appearing as a witness.

I have instructed the clerk to take further measures to reduce the incidents of witnesses appearing without proper headsets. The clerk will report to me before each meeting on witness preparation. The clerk will advise communications to convey the committee's re-

quirements more effectively to all the witnesses. Members may wish to set stricter outcomes for witnesses who do not have proper headsets. I can raise this issue with the committee when we next consider committee business.

Today the committee is resuming the study of the labour market impact assessment under the temporary foreign worker program. We will be hearing from the witnesses.

Before we go to the witnesses, I wish to welcome a new member to this committee, Mr. Maninder Sidhu.

Welcome, Mr. Sidhu. We look forward to working with you.

In our first panel, we will be hearing from the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Canada, represented by Derek Johnstone, special assistant to the national president.

We will be hearing from La Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec, represented by Charles Milliard, president and chief executive officer, who is joined by Alexandre Gagnon, vice-president, employment and human capital.

Our third witness will be from L'Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration, represented by Krishna Gagné, lawyer and vice-president for economic affairs.

I would like to welcome all the witnesses, and thank them for appearing before the committee today. We look forward to hearing from you.

We will start with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Canada. Mr. Derek Johnstone, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Derek Johnstone (Special Assistant to the National President, United Food and Commercial Workers Union Canada):
Thank you, Madam Chair.

On behalf of the United Food and Commercial Workers, I would like to thank the standing committee for the opportunity to share our perspective today and for the work of the committee on this important subject.

Before I put forward some of our thoughts, perhaps it might be a good idea to say a few words about who we are.

The UFCW is the voice of Canada's food workers. We are one of the country's largest unions and we are very proud and privileged to represent more than a quarter of a million hard-working people across Canada. About 80% of our membership works in food-related sectors and, as we like to say, you can find UFCW members everywhere in the food chain, from field to fork. Throughout the pandemic, our members have played a central role in holding the front line by providing the food and other crucial products and services that Canadians need in their day-to-day lives.

With regard to the discussion today, I must say that the UFCW is very concerned about the exponential growth of the temporary foreign worker program in recent years. We strongly recommend a more varied approach to the labour market challenges facing particular industries, and the agri-food sector in particular.

Key to a better way forward is the expansion of federal and provincial nominee programs. At the same time, much more must be done in terms of making sure that Canadians are fully equipped to take advantage of the opportunities that exist in the labour market, and government needs to ensure that everyone is treated fairly once they are there.

With that in mind, the UFCW sees the federal government's decision to create an additional 30,000 pathway opportunities for so-called low-skilled migrants as an important step forward. However, we are concerned that this is a one-time offer and that it's more about backfilling immigration targets for the year and less about establishing citizenship pathways as a fundamental element of a reformed temporary foreign worker program.

As we've learned through our experience with the agri-food pilot, a level 4 language requirement is a major barrier to most migrants in the food sector being able to take advantage of PR opportunities. Creating more accessible pathways to citizenship is critical, but so too is the need to develop more inclusive labour markets and more inclusive policy discussions about meeting the labour challenges of core sectors.

Prior to COVID, there were roughly 1.3 million Canadians on social assistance, which represents about 7% of the total labour force. Plus, there were additional millions of Canadians who were either unemployed or underemployed. Yet from 2000 to 2017, the total percentage of Canada's GDP dedicated to active labour market programs shrunk by 77%, going from 0.39% to 0.22%. During that same period, we saw annual migrant worker usage grow by 250%, going from roughly 134,000 to 335,000.

The point is that the approach to sourcing labour has become very passive, and the LMIA process is a good example of this. To access migrants, an employer must post the vacancy to the federal Job Bank. They must also demonstrate two additional recruitment initiatives, one of which could be posting the job on their own website, but there is zero requirement for employers to engage other stakeholders.

With the demise of the federal sector council program, there is no forum in Canada for stakeholders to come together and work towards sector solutions, which is a real shame, because the UFCW, for instance, is very well positioned to help develop engagement and deliver training for a number of NOCs in migrant-reliant sec-

tors. We represent more than 250,000 workers and their families in over 600 communities across the country. Many of our members are underemployed and looking for more standard opportunities. If employers were compelled to work with us on these issues, perhaps through the LMIA process, it could result in better outcomes that benefit, in our case, the agri-food sector as a whole.

• (1535)

In any event, the last thing we want as the food workers union is to see Canada become even more reliant on a temporary, precarious and vulnerable workforce, just like we now have in primary agriculture. To do so would mean less stability and security for some of Canada's most crucial sectors. Plus, if the last—

• (1540)

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Johnstone, but your time is up. You will get an opportunity to talk further when we go into our rounds of questions.

We will now go to Mr. Milliard, representing the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec.

You will have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please proceed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Charles Milliard (President and Chief Executive Officer, Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec): Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Hello, everyone.

[*Translation*]

Madam Chair, members of Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the labour market impact assessments that employers must conduct when hiring temporary foreign workers.

This topic is of great interest to the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec, but also to the 50,000 businesses we represent across Quebec.

Please allow me to provide a brief and necessary reminder of Quebec's unique approach to immigration. As you know, selection for permanent immigration falls under Quebec's jurisdiction. Quebec employers therefore have to deal with the duplication of numerous policies and administrative constraints. This situation is denounced by immigrants themselves, as the newspapers have recently reported. It is also denounced by employers, community organizations and immigration specialists. The delays associated with permanent immigration processes are extremely long in Quebec. It takes more than 27 months for an immigrant wishing to settle in Quebec to obtain permanent residence, while it takes six months for an immigrant wishing to settle elsewhere in Canada. This makes no sense.

These delays cause headaches for all Quebec stakeholders. A large majority of immigrants therefore turn to temporary immigration programs, such as the one we are discussing today, in order to settle quickly in Quebec and then benefit from the gateways that are the Certificat de sélection du Québec, or CSQ, and the Programme de l'expérience québécoise, or PEQ. With the exception of temporary foreign workers in the agricultural sector, the temporary foreign worker program, or TFWP, is used by immigrants and employers with an eye to permanent immigration. This should be kept in mind in today's discussions.

Quebec employers must have their labour market impact assessments approved by both the provincial and federal governments before hiring a temporary foreign worker. Changes to the program in 2014 have caused a great deal of anxiety for Quebec employers. In addition, at the time these restrictions were imposed, Quebec's working age population was declining, there was a prolonged period of full employment and there were a historic number of job vacancies. It is clear that the TFWP has not kept pace with the labour needs of employers in Quebec and that major relaxations are required. Even though we are in a pandemic period, Quebec has more than 148,000 vacant positions, while only 8,800 temporary workers could be hired in 2020, again outside the agricultural sector.

Today, we want to make five recommendations. I will present them to you quickly.

Recent changes to the Programme de l'expérience québécoise, which paves the way for an application for permanent residence, require immigrants to obtain two years of work experience. This involves systematic renewal of work permits and labour market impact studies. Our first recommendation is that work permit extensions be made upon request, without additional paperwork and without the need for a new study.

In addition, employers using the TFWP are almost always the same. The vast majority have long demonstrated that they favour the local workforce and treat immigrant labour appropriately. Our second recommendation is that a trusted employer program be implemented that would allow regular and exemplary users to be exempt from the requirement to conduct labour market impact assessments.

In addition, the list of occupations eligible for streamlined processing, which is determined by the Quebec government, has grown rapidly recently. It has grown from 37 recognized occupations in 2015 to 221 in 2020. However, we note that these changes

are not commensurate with the needs in Quebec. It is therefore essential to expand this list to include semi-skilled and low-skilled occupations for which there is a high demand. This is our third recommendation. These jobs are predominantly in manufacturing or services, and are largely represented among the 148,000 vacancies in Quebec that I mentioned earlier.

It should also be noted that the process in connection with the labour market impact assessment comes with other obligations, including the obligation to submit a transition plan. This requirement may seem legitimate when you look at the initial spirit of the program, but the real transition plan for Quebec employers is to be able to count on these workers in the long term. This requirement seems to us to be superfluous, and it must be reviewed. This is our fourth recommendation.

Finally, we believe that the maximum percentage of temporary foreign workers within a company should be increased to 20% for all employers, as it was in 2015 and 2016. This is our fifth and final recommendation. The problems caused by the 10% limit are widely known. You've heard about them before. The 10% cap imposes undue constraints on employers and limits the growth of many SMEs in Quebec.

• (1545)

As parliamentarians, you have a lot on your plate. However, if we keep in mind the objective of aligning the needs of our businesses and our desire to be a welcoming place, I am convinced that we can make the necessary changes.

I would be pleased to answer your questions.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Milliard.

We will now go to Madam Gagné, lawyer and vice-president for economic affairs, Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration.

Madam Gagné, you have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please proceed.

[Translation]

Mrs. Krishna Gagné (Lawyer and Vice-President for Economic Affairs, Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration): Good afternoon. Thank you for giving the Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration, or AQAADI, the opportunity to comment. We are in the field and we see that businesses have several complaints about the LMIA process. So I'm going to get to the heart of the matter.

We agree with several of the observations presented by Mr. Milliard.

First, the 10% limit on the number of temporary foreign workers that can be hired into low-wage positions does not take into account recruitment challenges. I'm talking about the regions, where I mainly practise. The labour shortage there is as acute for high-wage positions as it is for low-wage positions. This limit is detrimental to businesses, their development and job retention. Businesses are asking that this limit be raised, or even eliminated, at least for the next three years, given the unprecedented crisis that is occurring. One of the complaints from businesses is that they cannot sign new contracts because they rely heavily on foreign labour to fill low-wage positions.

This brings me to my next point, which is the 10% limit under Quebec's streamlined process.

The guidelines for calculating the 10% limit are considered inconsistent by practitioners and businesses. Let me give you an example. A welder earning \$23 per hour in Quebec is in a low-wage position. However, under Quebec's streamlined process, an LMIA is required for a high-wage position. These positions do not have to be considered in the calculation of the 10% limit. An unlimited number of workers can be hired in this manner, as these positions are not included in the calculation. However, Service Canada tells us that when hiring a low-wage worker, workers who have been approved under an LMIA for a high-wage position but are currently receiving a low wage must be considered. This creates an inconsistency. As a result, the limit is greatly exceeded, while workers approved under the streamlined process are not required to be counted in the calculation.

Businesses and practitioners are calling for an end to the inclusion of temporary foreign workers in low-wage positions under the streamlined process in the calculation of the 10% limit.

Through Quebec's streamlined process, the government already recognizes that there is a labour shortage for many positions. Since this is recognized, the LMIA requirement should be waived. In this situation, the obligation to conduct an LMIA is superfluous for employers. It creates additional costs and delays when employers need employees now, not a year from now. This is when there is a shortage. This process is becoming a drag on hiring foreign workers.

In addition, the length of employment allowed under LMIA's is sometimes random. For the same position within the same company, it can be two years or three years. We cannot understand the reasoning behind the length of time that is allowed. One can take the same LMIA for the same position and get a different length of employment. So employers are asking for three years for all positions.

In addition, the processing times do not reflect current needs. As I mentioned, the needs are immediate. In many cases, employers must turn down contracts until they have hired workers. The entire LMIA process for foreign workers abroad takes about a year or more. During the pandemic, this process sometimes stretched to 14 or 15 months. These processing times do not reflect the current realities arising from labour shortages.

• (1550)

I also want to propose the creation of a trusted employer program, as Mr. Milliard mentioned earlier—

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Madam Gagné, but your time is up. You will get an opportunity to talk further when we go into our rounds of questions.

Thanks to all the witnesses for their opening remarks. We will now start with our first round of questions of six minutes each.

Mr. Seeback, please proceed.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Madam Chair, I didn't think it was my round, but that's okay. I will forge ahead.

For everyone on the panel today, I have certainly had experience as a former member of Parliament in a riding where there were a lot of temporary foreign workers. I repeatedly heard from employers that the LMIA process was difficult, was costly and took a long time to process. For our panellists today, what would be the biggest thing that you would suggest we could do to improve the LMIA process?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon (Vice-president, Employment and Human Capital, Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec): I can begin, if I may.

There are some things that should be implemented with particular urgency, including the trusted employer program. Employers should demonstrate that they are using the program appropriately, that they have had experience with it, and that they are treating temporary foreign workers well.

There should therefore be a program to allow labour market impact studies, or LMIA's, to be suspended regardless of the position within these trusted companies, so that there is no need to require an LMIA.

Limits on the number of temporary immigrants per company should also be higher. If a priority had to be identified, it would be the establishment of such a program.

[English]

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Does anybody else want to jump in on that?

Mr. Derek Johnstone: I would just add that I don't think it should be made easier, quite frankly. I think as long as the conversion numbers become a reality in the program, especially in the so-called low-skilled stream of the program where you have very low conversion numbers of migrants to permanent residents and Canadian citizens, I don't think a feature of the program should be making it easier to sustain and grow a system that doesn't allow people the opportunity to become Canadian.

I think when we're talking about looking at the LMIA program and reforms there, we need to be mindful of looking at the TFWP as a whole and questioning some of the fundamental objectives of the program and the impact that program is having on labour markets, especially when you have large concentrations of migrants, and what that means for domestic labour sources. To date, the barriers for low-skilled workers are immense, and until that's addressed, I don't think we can in good conscience talk about making it easier for firms to bring in vulnerable migrants.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Do you want a little more time to say what those changes are that you would make? I know you've touched on some of them.

• (1555)

Mr. Derek Johnstone: For the program overall, as I said in my opening remarks, the government's recent announcement about allowing 30,000 low-skilled migrants to achieve PR is a good first step. We need those significant numbers annually. However, we have to be realistic too. Canada's whole story is about hard-working folks coming here and having the opportunity to advance their dreams. Did they all speak level 4 English when they came here? Absolutely not. We all have stories in our families about when our ancestors or our parents came here, or about coming here ourselves. I wonder how many of them could have passed the level 4 English exam. It's probably not many.

We have to be mindful of our own narrative as Canadians, and that needs to be reflected in all programs that have a pathway to citizenship. The temporary foreign worker program is increasingly becoming the predominant gateway to this country. We can't have a system that gives preferential status to—let's face it—an elite set within the labour market and we let thousands of people every year, in some cases for 20, 30 or 40 years, be on a hamster wheel without ever having the opportunity to lay down roots and really invest themselves in this country and help build our country for the future. It needs to start there.

In terms of the LMIA, I think there's an opportunity—and we've seen this in other industrialized economies—to involve some key stakeholders, such as trade unions, in trying to fill these spots. UFCW has some leading training programs. I have no doubt that many of our members would love to work in certain sectors that are becoming reliant on migrants, but employers are not compelled to work with us. There is no doubt that employers would prefer in many cases to work with the existing TFWP than to collaborate with some other stakeholders in trying to place domestic labour sources in those roles.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I think that's it for my time.

The Chair: Yes. Thank you.

We will now move to Mr. Schiefke.

Mr. Schiefke, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. Please proceed.

Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[*Translation*]

I want to thank the witnesses, Ms. Gagné, Mr. Milliard, Mr. Johnstone and Mr. Gagnon. We are very grateful to them for being here today as part of our study.

Mr. Milliard and Mr. Gagnon, I want to begin by thanking you for the hard work you do for the 50,000 businesses in the province of Quebec that are counting on you during a very difficult time for them. You answered my first question. I wanted to ask you what can be done concretely to improve the immigration process in Canada.

I thank you very much for the five recommendations that you presented to us to improve the system. I would also like to thank you for talking about the labour shortage in Quebec and the fact that 148,000 positions are currently unfilled. It is important to mention this in the report that we will publish on ways to improve the immigration system. People don't understand the current effects of the labour shortage on businesses in Quebec.

Here are my two questions, Mr. Gagnon and Mr. Milliard. I hope you can answer us in four and a half minutes and give us some examples.

What does this lack of labour, this lack of skilled or semi-skilled workers, mean for entrepreneurs and businesses in Quebec? Can you give us concrete examples of the affected sectors?

Mr. Charles Milliard: I thank the member for his kind words.

Before the pandemic, the lack of labour was the main problem in Quebec. I think it was in Canada as well. That's one thing that the virus hasn't changed, and that remains the sensitive issue that nobody wants to talk about right now.

The lack of manpower will slow down the development of many regions in Quebec, because it means that we won't be able to use all the generous programs offered by the federal and provincial governments. We are talking about digital transformation, innovation and the ability to do more online, and international trade to close the gap between our productivity and that of other countries.

It's the whole fabric of the recovery that is being hurt by this labour shortage. We are having a lot of discussions with the Quebec government right now. In our opinion, the immigration thresholds set in Quebec are not the right ones. Unfortunately, the government is not going in the right direction.

Interesting announcements have been made by the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, but entrepreneurs are caught in the crossfire of the political debate, which is not a success factor for the recovery.

I will let Mr. Gagnon continue on this topic, as he is our expert on labour.

• (1600)

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon: Thank you.

Workforce issues are obviously very consuming, particularly in the areas of health and education, which are under provincial jurisdiction. Currently, in the health care community, for every 10 people retiring, only three are available to fill those positions. In this pandemic year, the aging of the population continues. We won't even be able to replace every other employee who retires. That's very unusual.

This is happening not only in education, but also elsewhere, such as in manufacturing. There, too, there are many vacancies. These are positions that are not necessarily considered to require special qualifications or higher education. By the same token, they present additional barriers, in terms of temporary immigration, in terms of filling those positions and attracting those workers.

We were talking about expanding the list of positions leading to streamlined processing, i.e., employment positions exempt from the LMIA. It is critical that manufacturing companies be able to access this workforce. This should be one of your priorities right now.

Mr. Peter Schiefke: Thank you.

Every week, I speak with entrepreneurs in my riding of Vaudreuil—Soulanges. They always tell me the same thing: they say that they need workers, that they are short of manpower, that they cannot continue like this and that something must change.

Once again, I thank you very much for the work you are doing to help Quebec entrepreneurs. I also thank you for being with us today.

[English]

Madam Chair, I'm done with my questioning.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schiefke.

We'll now proceed to Madam Normandin.

You will have six minutes for your round of questions. Please proceed.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I thank the panel of high quality witnesses that we have with us today. We could easily spend two hours with them, and there would be more to discuss. A lot of things have been covered in their opening remarks. I will try to address other topics or ask them for clarification on what they have already announced.

To get things going, I have a question for Mr. Milliard and Ms. Gagné.

Mr. Milliard and Ms. Gagné, is it accurate to say that while unemployment is currently high, there is a labour shortage? Although it may seem paradoxical, is it possible that these two realities coexist?

Mrs. Krishna Gagné: I will answer part of your question.

It's entirely possible, because the fact that there is a labour shortage, which is mostly caused by the pandemic, does not create more

jobs or skill requirements. For example, companies that needed welders don't have more welders because people are out of work. These people are not qualified for this type of position, but they are probably qualified for positions where there is less of a shortage of workers. I can't comment on that.

In summary, the fact that there are more unemployed people does not make these people available and qualified for positions where there is a critical labour shortage.

Mr. Charles Milliard: I agree with Ms. Gagné. In Quebec, the unemployment rate is somewhat enviable right now. Just because people are looking for a job doesn't mean the right job is available. The needs of the employer and the position that the unemployed person is looking for do not necessarily meet. They are two rather different issues.

Mr. Gagnon, do you have any other comments on this topic?

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon: Yes.

I will be brief so as not to take up all your time, Ms. Normandin.

Unemployment is sectoral. We are talking about unemployment in tourism, in restaurants and in the hotel industry. Those sectors are particularly hard hit. The majority of other sectors have surpassed their pre-pandemic employment threshold.

As Mr. Milliard said earlier, we have reached an all-time record of 148,500 vacant positions in Quebec. So the labour shortage is very prevalent and will persist for many years to come.

• (1605)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

In this regard, the government has issued policy directives to consider unemployment at a uniform rate of 6% across Canada's administrative regions, even though that is not necessarily representative of what is happening in each region. As a result, LMIA's are no longer being conducted for certain types of jobs because the unemployment rate is considered to be too high.

Is that something we should potentially abolish because there is, despite everything, a labour shortage, regardless of the unemployment rate?

Mrs. Krishna Gagné: You are completely right. Many companies seeking skilled labour did not close during the COVID-19 pandemic. They remained active. However, as Mr. Gagnon and Mr. Milliard said earlier, the available positions don't necessarily match up with unemployed people. Saying that all LMIA applications must be refused when the unemployment rate is high is akin to taking an intellectual shortcut. It would be equivalent to disregarding the reality on the ground. A high unemployment rate does not create more skilled staff for the available positions.

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon: I would like to add something.

Thanks to federal transfers, significant amounts are currently being invested to help workers affected by the pandemic requalify. The goal is to redirect them toward positions in strategic sectors where workers are needed.

Unfortunately, there are a number of reasons why, despite the high number of participants, attendance is not really sufficient to confirm that decisions must always be made based on the unemployment rate. The mismatch between skills and company needs is still there. So the 6% threshold is not adequate in the current situation.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I would now like to discuss labour mobility.

We have heard representatives of several companies say that, owing to closed work permits, they could not move an employee from one of their branches to another. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, companies have stopped their activities and workers have had to wait to obtain a new work permit. We have seen this in the farming community, but also in other sectors. When there was a shortage of employees in one location, employees from elsewhere who no longer had a job could not go work there.

Should there be more flexibility in terms of work permits? For instance, couldn't work permits be issued by region, especially if the unemployment rate is low there, or by trade, particularly in the case of high-demand trades?

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon: Work permits should be more open. As you said, employers should be able to transfer employees from one branch to another, or even from one position to another within an organization. Currently, some temporary foreign workers can spend one, two or three years in a company. We would like to provide them with career opportunities, as well, but the temporary foreign worker program does not currently allow for this. That possibility should be available, so that an employer going through a difficult period could decide to transfer an employee to another branch or to a neighbouring business.

However, I suggest that you be careful, as an employer who hires temporary foreign workers obviously has to undertake a lengthy and expensive process. He must ensure to get a return on his investment.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Gagnon, but your time is up.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan you have six minutes for your round of questions. Please proceed.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their presentations.

Mr. Johnstone, I know that UFCW has worked extensively with the migrant workers sector advocating for their rights and addressing many of the concerns that migrant workers are faced with.

With respect to the issue around accessing landed status, the government previously had a program that would bring in permanent resident immigrants to the country for all kinds of skill levels, high, medium, low, the full range. That's now been done away with.

Do you think Canada would benefit from bringing back such a program, particularly to address the issue around the high number of temporary foreign workers that Canada is now relying on?

• (1610)

Mr. Derek Johnstone: Do you mean in terms of permanent immigration?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes.

Mr. Derek Johnstone: Absolutely. I think it's fundamental to address a lot of the concerns raised during the conversation so far, but also, as a trade union—and you touched on our work a bit, Ms. Kwan—we of course are focused on helping migrant workers, predominantly in the agricultural sector, to assert their rights as well as they can. Currently under the system, a migrant worker is tied to a single employer. That employer may or may not be a responsible employer. There are many responsible employers in the system, but we know from 30 years of doing this that all you have to do is pick up the Globe and Mail or take your mainstream publication to read about all the irresponsible employers. A migrant worker can either put up with that or go back to their source country, which may not be an option.

One theme that has been covered widely is that there are a lot of crooked recruitment firms that have really made hay with the temporary foreign workers program. As it stands now, we have people coming from places like Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, of course, paying upwards of \$10,000 for the opportunity to pick tomatoes in Canada. They get that money from loan-sharks. They get the money from organized crime. They get it where they can, because the fact is it is a life-changing opportunity for folks, and there are a bunch of unscrupulous characters and actors in the mix who capitalize on the desperation of workers, which creates a very vulnerable and precarious population.

The truth is, labour mobility within the system will help to some extent with that, but it won't have a dramatic effect on the situation. The only way that changes is if these folks have status—these folks become permanent residents on track to be Canadians. That's the only way to ameliorate vulnerability and precarity in the sector, or else we'll still hear these stories on a regular basis.

The fact of the matter is—I know that I've heard from my colleagues here a desire to expand the caps in sectors—we know through our experience that when a group of highly vulnerable workers in a sector becomes 20%, 30% or 40% of the sector, it's inevitable that it will have an impact on labour standards in the sector. When you get to the point where there are 60% or 70% vulnerable workers in a sector, as we see in primary agriculture—guess what—you get a labour market ghetto. You get a place where no Canadian in their right mind would want to work. You get a place where health and safety standards are pale in comparison to those in other dangerous sectors. You have a place where the only way people ever get a wage increase in those sectors is that the minimum wage rates increase, and even then we have an increasing phenomenon of people being forced to work on the black market, so God knows how much they're getting paid.

It's a big problem. I certainly sympathize with some of the business interests on the line, but to our labour economists on the phone, I would say if you have a bunch of unemployed workers and a bunch of jobs, there's obviously some sort of distortion taking place in the labour market. With the temporary foreign workers program—hundreds of thousands in Canada—there is no opportunity for equilibrium in the market so it never happens.

To the free marketers out there, I guess an argument could be made that the way these jobs get better is if we allow the market to do its thing, and that will not happen when you have sectors that are becoming reliant on migrants.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

In terms of announcements, the government actually just recently announced that 90,000 TFWs will have access to a pathway for permanent resident status. However, the government actually excluded those who may have lost their status or undocumented workers.

What are your thoughts on that? Should the government actually ensure there are pathways for those who might have lost their status, or those who are already in the country and contributing in many ways?

• (1615)

Mr. Derek Johnstone: The question is why did they lose their status? We know from our work in the heartland of Canadian agriculture, the UFCW, which for two decades has had a centre in Leamington, Ontario—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Johnstone, but your time is up.

We will have four minutes each for Mr. Saroya and Ms. Dhillon, and then two minutes each for Madam Normandin and Ms. Kwan before we end this panel.

Mr. Saroya, you can please proceed.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Johnstone, as far as I know, from back in 1974 when I arrived in this country, the labour shortage existed. It always has and it always will.

The LMIA program exists because of the labour shortage. Even today if you drive from Niagara Falls to Montreal, most of the workers in every single restaurant are students.

Do you think the people in the two- or three-year work visa program eventually should be allowed to apply for permanent residency in this country?

Mr. Derek Johnstone: I would just start by stating a fact that when the seasonal agricultural worker program was established in Canada in 1966, a decade before the year you mentioned, the grand total of temporary foreign workers in Canada was 256. Now it's upward of 400,000.

The difference was, of course, that for most of our history you could come to this country and build a life. At some point we decided for skills that some people deem as low-skilled, whether it's pulling tomatoes off a vine, clearing tables in a restaurant, being a line cook or a cashier.... There are over a thousand TFWs in Canada who are cashiers. There are over a thousand TFWs who are hair stylists. Thousands are butchers at the industrial and retail levels. These jobs were gateway jobs. They were jobs. You came to Canada. This is where you started and you worked from there, but at some point we decided that the foreign workers were going to do these jobs, and we were not going to give them an opportunity to become citizens. That's what's changed.

To answer your question, they should absolutely have the opportunity to become citizens. Seventy-five per cent of our history was based on that. Canada is a nation of immigrants, as we all know. At some point we have decided that.... It's interesting. These jobs we are talking about are the front-line jobs throughout COVID. The media and politicians are calling the people in these jobs heroes. But when it comes to letting these heroes become Canadians, the answer is no.

Mr. Bob Saroya: These heroes are not even qualified to get their vaccine yet, by the way.

Does anybody else want to add something to this?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon: If I may, I will add that we have common goals in this respect.

We are also concerned about the time frames and the possibility for those temporary workers to have access to permanent residence. What we are asking for today is intended to help them have access to permanent immigration programs as quickly as possible. We feel that this is an important issue, and we agree with the unions.

There is a problem when it is said that they won't necessarily be accepted in our programs and that their arrival would not be facilitated. Quality long-term jobs, which can be done by low-skill or unskilled workers, are currently available in Quebec. These are permanent needs. We need those people. So they must be given access to Quebec's and Canada's labour markets. That would meet our workforce needs.

• (1620)

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Gagnon, but your time is up.

We will now proceed to Ms. Dhillon for four minutes.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question will be for Mr. Johnstone.

Canada's immigration system is under constant development to ensure that it is as responsive as possible to the ever-changing domestic and international landscape. Labour market trends show that immigration is fundamentally tied to the growth of our populations and the resiliency of our workforce.

Pilots like the municipal nominee program and rural and northern immigration pilot have been introduced in the immigration system to decentralize immigration from large cities and also to provide stability for workers. Providing immigration certainty for workers and minimizing their exposure to potential exploitation is extremely important.

Do you consider economic PR pathways to be the right direction for the government to continue on, and what are some of the policy changes you would like to see to further this goal?

Mr. Derek Johnstone: They are fundamental.

You mentioned the exploitation of workers. I've already talked about it, in addition to nation building, growing our GDP, population growth is core to that. If the concern and priority of the federal government is to reduce well-documented worker abuse and exploitation that happens in many instances in the temporary foreign workers program, then permanent immigration must be central to that. There's an opportunity to do that through the federal and provincial nominee programs.

The UFCW was very pleased to see the establishment of a federal nominee program through the agri-food sector. We supported that announcement. We've certainly advocated for a federal nominee program for many years. However, we have been disappointed by the fact that would have long been the standards for immigration to Canada in terms of wooing high-skilled workers have just been transposed on to low-skilled migrants. There has to be some consideration given to the practical reality that there are language challenges for some very hard-working migrants. It's an excellent opportunity to take a more stakeholder-oriented approach to easing folks through their quest to get PR.

In Manitoba, in the meat sector, one of our locals there, UFCW Local 832, has long worked for the provincial government on provincial nominee programs. We offered language training. We worked hand in hand with employers to make sure that migrants had the skills they needed over time to fully integrate into their communities.

We need to have that conversation federally. As I said in my opening statements, we had a forum 10 to 15 years ago which was terminated. That was the federal sector council program. We need to get back to sector approaches at the federal level, which bring to-

gether stakeholders, labour, employers, civil society, the government, to work together and combine our efforts to put together policy that is not only going to solve the labour needs of our core sectors but give folks a fighting chance, at every level of the labour market, to realize their dreams in Canada.

That conversation is not taking place. It needs to take place if we're going to seriously reform the program for the better.

The Chair: All right; your time is up.

We will now proceed to Madam Normandin.

Madam Normandin, you will have two minutes for your round of questioning.

Please proceed.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Milliard, since I have a bit of time left, I would like you to tell us about your fourth recommendation, concerning the obligation to submit a transition plan.

We have heard less about that aspect in our committee. If you told us about it, we may better understand that aspect when the time comes to discuss the recommendations we must include in our report.

• (1625)

Mr. Charles Milliard: The goal of the transition plan is to transit the use of temporary immigrants.

However, in the current situation, especially in Quebec, we know very well that most people see the TFWP as permanent. It would be hypocritical not to admit that. In the current context, the obligation to provide a transition plan is not only superfluous, but nearly useless. In fact, we want to hire those workers on a permanent basis.

Mr. Gagnon, does that complete your comments?

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon: In fact, the transition plan enables the employer to temporarily hire a temporary foreign worker, under the condition that they indicate how they will ensure to find local labour to staff that position over the short, medium or long term.

Records in terms of vacant positions and in terms of labour shortages have been set for a number of years and will continue to be set for many years, according to economists. It is in this context that inconsistency is manifesting. For the majority of positions, the transition will be done only through the process enabling temporary immigrants to become permanent residents.

Ms. Christine Normandin: That's great, thank you very much.

I have one last question, quickly. Would the mobility that could be achieved through work permits also foster that transition, as it would help immigrants specialize during their time here?

Mr. Alexandre Gagnon: Indeed. Governments are actually also starting to invest in labour development and training for temporary foreign workers. They hope it will not be a temporary passage. We must seize the opportunity to support workers, to train them and to francize them—in Quebec, obviously—so that they can be properly integrated into our businesses over the long term.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Madam Normandin, your time is up.

We will now end our first panel with Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have two minutes for your round of questioning.

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

Going back to my previous question, Mr. Johnstone was just about to talk about the reasons why people lost their status. I wonder if he could finish.

Mr. Derek Johnstone: Well, it goes back to my earlier point. A lot of folks are in a situation where they're facing some abusive treatment by employers. They feel obliged.... In that scenario, as I've said, going home is not really an option for them. Not only is the money they earn in Canada needed to support their families back home, but they may also owe it to somebody, so they have to stay here. The only alternative, when you're tied to a single employer and you can't go home, is that you go off the grid and you become part of the labour black market. That's the reality. It's becoming more and more common for migrants in high-density areas such as Leamington, Ontario, in particular.

Again, it goes back to my other point. These are the folks who have been picking our food throughout COVID and for the 50 years before that. They're the ones who have really kept some of our most crucial sectors going throughout this period. It seems kind of reckless for us to all of a sudden demand that this skilled group of workers be sent home. Number one, we owe them for the contribution they've made to keeping Canada going over the last year and for the decades before that. On top of that, it's the right thing to do.

It's the right thing to do, and we need the skills in this country.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I ask if the government should change the program, then, and allow the people who are already here and who have lost status to be able to get permanent resident status?

Mr. Derek Johnstone: Absolutely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

We only have seconds left, I think, so in terms of final words, what is your most urgent issue that you want the government to take on immediately?

Mr. Derek Johnstone: The most urgent issue the government needs to take on right now is to take.... There's this acceptance that the only way to solve labour market challenges in Canada is to open the floodgates to temporary foreign workers who never have the opportunity to become full citizens of this country. We need to abandon that immediately, and we need to start looking at permanent immigration while at the same time properly investing in domestic labour sources as part of a larger strategy—

• (1630)

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but your time is up.

I would like to thank our witnesses for appearing before the committee today. If there's anything you would like to bring to the committee's notice but you did not have time to do so, you can always send us a written submission.

With this, our first panel comes to an end. I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes so that we can have the sound check for our witnesses for the second panel before we proceed.

Thank you.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: We will continue our study of the temporary foreign workers program.

I would like to welcome our witnesses. Thank you for joining us today.

We are joined by Olymel L.P., represented by Louis Banville, vice-president, human resources; and Isabelle Leblond, corporate director, human resources.

Our next witness is the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, represented by Leah Nord, senior director, workforce strategies and inclusive growth.

We are also joined by Restaurants Canada, represented by Lauren van den Berg, executive vice-president, government relations; and Olivier Bourbeau, vice-president, federal and Quebec.

Welcome, all. All the witnesses will have five minutes for their opening remarks.

We will start with Mr. Banville, vice-president, human resources.

Please proceed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Banville (Vice-president, Human Resources, Olymel L.P.): Thank you very much.

I will stay within the five minutes allocated to us and will share that time with my colleague Ms. Leblond.

Olymel thanks the committee for the opportunity to share its concerns in the context of the current labour shortage and to contribute to the government's deliberations.

Olymel is the country's leading pork producer and its leading meat processor. We employ 15,000 workers in Canada, across five provinces: Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick, Alberta and Saskatchewan. We are a key player in the vitality and prosperity of our regions.

Over the years, Olymel has continued to improve all its practices to optimize each of its recruitment channels. Despite all of our local and international efforts, we are unable to complement our workforce to support our activities and our growth. The repercussions of the labour shortage are reaching an unprecedented critical level and are being felt in our activities across Canada, but mainly in the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick.

We currently estimate the rate of vacant positions in our plants at 27%, which represents more than 3,700 positions. Those positions are necessary to avoid the downsizing of our company, to make our plants operate at their maximum capacity, to optimize past investments and to successfully carry out future projects. Those 3,700 positions would create an additional payroll of \$200 million and an additional investment of \$250 million.

I want to point out that the temporary foreign workers employed at Olymel are represented by a union. They have a pension fund and insurance. They have the same work conditions as any Canadian employee; they are entitled to the same treatment and to the same protection. I also want to add that Olymel has a long-term perspective on foreign workers and supports them financially and legally to help them obtain their permanent residence.

One of our sector's major characteristics is that the industry is directly connected to primary agriculture. Animal production is connected to our slaughterhouses. A slowdown in our slaughterhouse activities has major upstream consequences on production. We are closely connected. That special phenomenon must be taken into account when it comes to our facilities' operational capability. Ms. Leblond will come back to this later.

Olymel feels that economic immigration, be it permanent or temporary, is one of the key solutions for meeting our labour needs, especially for positions in the regions that do not require special skills.

Currently, 600 immigrant newcomers are working with us. Nearly 610 employees who arrived through the temporary foreign worker program have been with us since 2018, and we are expecting 600 others over the next year.

I now yield the floor to my colleague Ms. Leblond.

Mrs. Isabelle Leblond (Corporate Director, Human Resources, Olymel L.P.): Good afternoon. I am the corporate director of human resources at Olymel.

I actively participate in anything to do with recruitment. I will mainly talk about the temporary foreign worker program, or TFWP. Olymel feels that the TFWP does not make it possible to adequately meet its current workforce needs in the regions. Mr. Banville talked to you earlier about the high number of positions we want to fill.

Our brief submitted yesterday contains more recommendations on a number of issues, and I will not discuss all of them. I will focus today on the two biggest issues—the limit set by the TFWP when it comes to the hiring of temporary foreign workers and their access to permanent residence.

The TFWP arbitrarily set at 10% the percentage of temporary foreign workers we can hire, and that is a major problem for us. We have come up with a recommendation on that limit. Since our slaughterhouse activities are a logical continuation of primary agriculture, as Mr. Banville pointed out, we want the limits to exempt the positions related to primary agriculture listed under the national occupational classification, such as food processing labourers and industrial butchers.

Should our recommendation related to this be rejected, we also propose to increase the limit to 30%, which would apply to the entire company, not only to the workplace. This could be another solution, but we by far prefer the first recommendation I submitted to you.

As for the permanent selection of temporary foreign workers, Olymel applauds the measures adopted by the federal government, whether we are talking about pilot programs or recently announced measures to allow temporary foreign workers doing essential work to apply for permanent residence. However, nearly all of our temporary foreign workers are currently unable to participate in those two programs because of the Canada–Quebec accord.

Quebec recently created a pilot program related to processing—

● (1640)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but your time is up. You will get an opportunity to talk further when we go to our round of questioning.

We will now hear from Ms. Nord, representing the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

Ms. Nord, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can proceed, please.

Ms. Leah Nord (Senior Director, Workforce Strategies and Inclusive Growth, Canadian Chamber of Commerce): Thank you, Madam Chair, vice-chairs and committee members.

I am speaking on behalf of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, which is the voice of Canadian business. We represent 200,000 businesses across the country, across sectors and across sizes, with our network that includes 450 chambers of commerce and boards of trade across the country, including our colleagues from FCCQ, whom you just heard from.

I'd like to thank them, the panellists before and the panellists with us here today, and the committee for the opportunity to speak to you today about the temporary foreign worker program and LMIA's, in particular.

I will start by saying that immigration plays an important role in the inclusive growth and diversity of Canadian workforces and communities. The Canadian Chamber promotes innovative and effective policies and programming to support new Canadians with labour market and community integration.

Throughout the pandemic, we have seen rising unemployment rates, and expectations are that the employment rate will not level out and return, at least permanently, to pre-crisis levels any time in the immediate future. However, despite these changes in the labour market, you heard last week from Statistics Canada, for example, that despite those fluctuating employment rates over the past year, throughout the crisis the job vacancy rate has stayed at the same pre-pandemic level. Thus, immigration will continue to play an important role in filling labour market gaps.

Although the Canadian Chamber has a number of recommendations to improve and modernize the temporary foreign worker program, we maintain that this program is a key component to the immigration system. We have also long supported pathways to permanent residency for temporary permit holders.

In regard to labour markets as we start to consider Canada's recovery post-pandemic, the Canadian Chamber believes that labour market analysis will play a critical role for a host of reasons, including immigration levels planning, and we can speak more to this in the Qs and As. We also could support the continued devolution of the immigration selection process and a continuation of moving to local levels of decision-making through the PNPs, the Atlantic immigration program, the expansion of pilots, including the rural and northern immigration pilot, and the promised municipal nominee program. We need local solutions built by communities for communities, with strong involvement from the business community, to effectively address community workforce needs.

With this said, I will now turn my attention to the focus of the committee's review. Heading into today, we canvassed a number of members and some feedback we received includes the following points, which I will note aren't limited to LMIA's, but that a broader commentary is needed to convey the totality of administrative and financial burdens.

First of all, permit processing times have traditionally been very lengthy. You've heard any number of examples of this, which defy the needs, particularly in the sectors that are seasonal in nature.

Second, permit processing adds to the administrative length and burden. Additional factors include needing to establish an account with the Job Bank, getting vacancies posted, requiring a one-month advertising period, and then LMIA processing times, etc.

Also, LMIA processing times have actually decreased through the pandemic, yet many members, especially in the agricultural sector, have said that more proactive communication is needed with stakeholders to help manage the program in light of evolving travel restrictions, border policies, etc.

We also have heard that consistency is needed in Service Canada. For example, there is often confusion between agricultural work permits and those in the low-wage stream.

Finally, our members have also found that a lack of communication and understanding between ministries, departments—namely, ESDC and IRCC—create further delays and administrative burdens.

The Canadian Chamber today has one main recommendation, and that is the development and implementation of a trusted employers program. As for the time I have left, I'll fit in as many considerations as I can.

First of all, such a program streamlines the application process and reduces the administrative burden for governments, businesses and workers. The same businesses often apply over and over again. It removes the need to constantly reassess legitimacy and focuses on the merits of each case and application.

Second, a number of our members, business partner associations and organizations have advocated for this for a number of years. The U.K. and Australia have successful TEP programs that have been implemented for more than a decade. We do have a precedent in Canada somewhat with the global talent stream, which does not require LMIA's.

• (1645)

We recommend starting with a preferred status model like a NEXUS model, with consideration over time to moving towards more of an across-the-board accreditation model.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Nord, but your time is up. You will have an opportunity when we go into our round of questioning.

We will now proceed to Restaurants Canada. I assume Ms. Lauren van den Berg will be speaking on behalf of Restaurants Canada.

Ms. van den Berg, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can please proceed.

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau (Vice-President, Federal and Quebec, Restaurants Canada): Actually, it will be me, if that's okay with you.

The Chair: Okay. I'm sorry about that.

You can proceed, please.

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: Thank you very much.

Restaurants and many small and medium-sized businesses that make up the Canadian food service sector are a critical pillar of our culture, economy and local communities. Before the pandemic struck, our industry comprised over 98,000 establishments from coast to coast to coast, serving about 22 million customers every day and contributing 4% to the country's GDP. Prior to this crisis, the food service sector was Canada's fourth largest employer, directly employing 1.2 million people and was also the number one source of first jobs for young Canadians.

We're also a reflection of Canada's enviable diversity. Women make up 58% of the food service workforce and 31% of restaurant owners, operators and staff belong to a visible minority. Half of all Canadian restaurants are run by talented, hard-working entrepreneurs who came here as immigrants. Immigration was vitally important to our industry before we were hit with COVID-19. This crisis has made the need for reforms all the more critical.

Heading into the pandemic, the restaurant sector was already struggling to fill more than 60,000 vacant positions. One in five Canadians between the ages of 15 and 24 are employed in the restaurant sector, but the workforce participation among teens has been steadily declining, unfortunately.

By its nature, food service is very labour intensive. Finding any staff, let alone staff with applicable skills and experience, has become more challenging than ever.

COVID-19 hit and turned an already challenging situation into a full-blown labour crisis for our industry. The food service sector lost more jobs in the first six weeks of the pandemic than the entire Canadian economy lost during the 2008-09 recession. No other industry comes close to this level of shortfall. One out of every five jobs lost during the initial lockdown from March to April 2020 was in Canada's restaurant sector. During this period, more than 800,000 food service workers lost their jobs or had their hours of work reduced to zero.

At a time when all other industries have recovered an average of 90% of their pandemic job losses, the restaurant sector still hasn't recovered half of the jobs it lost, which represents 300,000 fewer jobs in the Canadian food service sector and roughly 50,000 employees who are not currently working any hours.

By the time restaurants across the country are ready to reopen and bring back their staff, many of these workers will have already found employment elsewhere. What began as a shortage of 60,000 restaurant positions before the pandemic could become a substantially higher labour crisis for our industry, which could jeopardize the ability of many restaurants to stay in business.

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

We are losing our employees because of the closures and reopenings caused by COVID-19. After the first wave, our employees came back to work, but, after the second wave, a number of them had already decided to find a new job in another field. What we are seeing now, with the third wave, is that a growing number of workers are permanently turning to other industries.

Our industry was already seeking 60,000 workers before COVID-19; it is easy to imagine the number of people we will need for the next reopening.

[*English*]

Knowing that the demographic pyramid will escalate that labour problem, we are looking into ways to attract and retain talent in our industry. Immigration is definitely a crucial one. It comes with its share of challenges, but it is worth it, especially since immigrants enrich our industry from their culture to our table.

Persistent labour shortages put a damper on investment and expansion. Even existing businesses are at risk if they can't be properly staffed. The restaurant industry is one of Canada's largest employers, the biggest source of first-time jobs for youth and an important part of every urban and rural community across the country.

We are therefore proposing a comprehensive national labour strategy that includes a food service stream of the temporary foreign worker program, which will be provided to you following this session.

In the interest of time, here are three recommendations for you to remember today:

The first is the fast-track list process for specific jobs, which gets prioritized by provinces, from which Quebec, for instance, made the mistake of taking out four key positions for our industry.

The second one is to reduce the administrative burden of the small business owners who most heavily rely on the program by increasing minimum temporary foreign worker permits to two years, reducing the \$1,000 fee and redefining it as a "per position" fee.

The third is to ensure that successful applicants are included in a form of fast track for immigrant approval.

Finally, as Canada continues to shift—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Bourbeau, but your time is up. You will get an opportunity to speak further in our round of questioning.

We will now move to our first round of questioning of six minutes each.

We will start with Mr. Allison.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you very much.

Mr. Bourbeau, you were just getting to your third point.

Could you give us that third point with which you were going to finish off?

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: I was simply going to conclude.

The third point was to ensure successful applicants are included in a form of a fast track for immigrant approval, so that we can hire them again and then potentially keep them in Canada to become permanent residents.

Mr. Dean Allison: I don't always give the government credit, but what was recently announced in terms of new pathways to permanent residency will definitely help in that case.

To all our guests today, one of the things that is lacking, and all of you touched on it, is a sector-specific strategy or a labour strategy, in general. The talk is 20,000 applicants for temporary foreign workers in health care. This is the new program for permanent residency. There are 30,000 applicants for temporary workers in other essential occupations and 40,000 applicants for international students.

I see your 90,000, and yet I heard during your speech, Mr. Bourbeau, you're short 50,000 to 60,000 workers right now. If we're looking at immigration of around 400,000 people a year, which is what the government is targeting, you guys would not be opposed to a higher percentage. It seems to me there is less than 25% that could be thought of in terms of the stream.

That's my first question for Restaurants Canada.

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: I do agree with you. Yes, pre-COVID, we were 60,000 workers short, so definitely, if we can raise the bar, we would be delighted.

We need people in key positions. We're not talking about people washing dishes. We are talking about cooks, chefs, restaurant managers, key positions, really important ones.

Mr. Dean Allison: Ms. Leblond, you were cut off as well, or you ran out of time to make your final remarks.

Food and Beverage Canada have been here. I'm not sure if you're members of those guys, but you certainly have lots of similarities.

They talked about a shortage of 30,000 workers right now going up to 65,000 by 2025. Certainly, you guys talked about the shortage of workers in your particular industry. My guess is you would certainly support any kind of pathway to permanent residency that tar-

geted a larger percentage of these core skilled workers, entry level or whatever you want to call them.

It was well said by the last group of panellists that not a lot of people who came to Canada may have understood the language to level 4, so we've been getting them into our factories and restaurants, and it gives them a chance to learn the language. There's a whole bunch of benefits there.

Certainly, you guys also have people coming in and working minimum wage jobs. There's a whole level of expertise you can use, and you could train people over time.

Would you like to comment?

● (1655)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Isabelle Leblond: Yes, the temporary workers we are recruiting abroad are mainly French speakers, specifically because that facilitates not only the obtaining of permanent residence, which is one of our objectives, but also the integration of immigrants into the regions. We train employees from beginning to end in our companies through work peers, and it's going very well.

Previously, the Quebec program made it easier to access permanent residence. Out of Olymel's current 600 temporary foreign workers, more than 200 are already on their way to becoming permanent residents. Had the previous version of the pilot program continued, that number would have doubled over the next few months.

It is a major asset for us to be able to offer permanent residence. Our positions are indeed permanent, and not temporary.

[*English*]

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you very much.

Ms. Nord, I want to ask you a question as well.

I'm a big fan of the chamber. I'm a former chamber president in my local area. The work you guys do is important. You guys have a whole range of skills. You have small to large businesses. Temporary foreign workers also fit as highly skilled people.

Would you not agree that if there were a sector-specific strategy or if businesses were to sit down in Canada, in general, it wouldn't be hard to figure out the 400,000 fairly easily? There are a lot of shortages in pretty much every sector across the board.

Ms. Leah Nord: Yes, absolutely, and that's the important point: across sectors and across skills. They're not "low" or "high". They're in demand. The other point here, though, from a chamber perspective as well, including the sectoral focus, and I've alluded to it, would also be a geographical one or an overlay and having a community focus as well. You've heard a lot here about rural communities, too, and the need to drive labour there as well.

The other point I'll try to make as we talk about pathways to permanent residency here is that we have any number of recommendations vis-à-vis the temporary foreign worker program. Even the name itself brings up some connotations. However, what is really important about this program, despite its temporary nature, is that people arrive with labour market integration and a job offer. They hit the ground running. This is unheard of in a lot of the other programs. This sets up temporary foreign workers for success from the outset, so we would hate to lose that in any sort of discussion about modernization and changes we'd recommend.

Thank you.

Mr. Dean Allison: Perfect.

I think I'm almost out of time, Chair.

The Chair: Yes, your time is up, Mr. Allison.

We will proceed to Mr. Sidhu, our newest member of the committee.

Mr. Sidhu, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for joining us and providing your valuable insights.

A closer look at labour shortages shows that each province has a different challenge and therefore a different need. The right interpretation of this data for a national labour strategy must incorporate a varied approach to immigration. This approach should harness local expertise and accurately address regional immigration challenges. The federal government has begun with programs like the agri-food pilot, in close co-operation with multiple levels of government, but it's crucial that we all work together.

Ms. Nord, in what ways do you think we can move this forward with a multilateral approach with multiple levels of government?

Ms. Leah Nord: That's absolutely what's needed. I said that in our opening remarks.

We have three buckets of recommendations for immigration writ large. One of them is on that devolution of the immigration selection process both to the provincial level and, more importantly, to the community level.

What I would say about the rural and northern immigration pilots—11 of them across the country—is that what was really innovative and interesting about those application processes is that a business community, either a chamber or an EcDev, had to lead that application, so it makes sure, again, that the business community is involved. Labour market integration is among the most important considerations, because that's what sets up our immigrants for success, to be sure.

The other point here, and this is crucial moving forward, folks, is labour market assessment. It's not very attractive or headline-grabbing, but we need to know both by sectors and across communities here what is needed, so the devolution is key.

Thank you.

• (1700)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that, Ms. Nord.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on capacity. Should capacity of existing programs increase, in your opinion, or should new pathways be developed?

Ms. Leah Nord: As the Canadian Chamber, it will surprise no one that we put an emphasis on the economic streams of immigration pathways. What we say about all pathways or all streams is that the importance of labour market integration and setting newcomers up for success from the outset would be the first point vis-à-vis that. I don't know if you have any other specific questions, but it is important.

Thank you.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Perfect.

Ms. van den Berg or Mr. Bourbeau, can you weigh in with your thoughts as well?

Ms. Lauren van den Berg (Executive Vice-President, Government Relations, Restaurants Canada): Sure. I'm happy to jump in. Thank you for the question.

I think that one of the really interesting challenges facing the restaurant and food service industry—both during this current apocalypse, but more importantly in the before times and what we hope will be a strong revival and recovery—is the discrepancy between the multicultural metropolitan cities and the more rural areas. The discrepancy is in the labour force and the labour shortages.

What we're hoping for when we speak about a dedicated food service stream, for example, a temporary foreign worker program, is a formula, a program or an initiative that takes those differences into account. It doesn't matter if the restaurant is in a more rural or a small-town community or a downtown financial core, they still need the same type of skilled, dedicated and passionate people to open their doors, whether it's front of house or back of house.

As Olivier highlighted in his opening statement, we were facing a pretty devastating labour shortage before this COVID-19 crisis. Right now, so many doors are shut across the country and so many operators are struggling to survive, to make ends meet and to keep the lights on. At the end of that tunnel that we're still in we can see the light, but at that light is also the looming labour shortage that we didn't address before this crisis hit.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

The temporary foreign workers program has been helpful in addressing labour challenges, although critics have suggested reform is required to address chronic shortages and ensure that the TFWP is as responsive as possible to labour market needs. The federal government has moved to immigration models using permanent residency in tandem with work in specific sectors experiencing labour shortages. Providing a consistent stream of workers for employers in struggling sectors while also giving assurance for migrants to remain in Canada permanently seems one of the most viable solutions.

Ms. van den Berg or Mr. Bourbeau, can you share your thoughts with the committee on this approach?

Ms. Lauren van den Berg: Sure. I'm happy to comment.

I think one of the interesting pieces coming out of this conversation, again, from before the crisis but also during, is the challenge around taking full advantage of the TFW program. There's an administrative burden involved in even applying. Again, as Olivier mentioned, that burden is financial. It's the high cost of entry for a lot of the operators, particularly those who have been extremely hard hit by this crisis and are facing increasingly frustrating turnaround times and updates.

As I mentioned, without those back-of-house positions that may not be the most glamorous, a restaurant can't open. Once again, when we're struggling to keep those lights on, every option to make the cost of doing business as easy as possible is even more crucial now.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

I only have a few seconds left so I just want to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to be with us here today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

We will now proceed to Madam Normandin.

Madam Normandin, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. Please proceed.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here. This is yet another diverse panel, which helps us gain a clear understanding of the various labour-related challenges that existed pre-pandemic and still exist now, during the pandemic.

I want to pick up on the point Mr. Sidhu made initially, about each region and each occupation type having different challenges.

I would like to hear your views on some of the one-size-fits-all programs the government put in place. The food service and retail sectors come to mind; when the unemployment rate in a region exceeds 6%, the processing of all LMIA applications stops. Right now, the unemployment rate is above 6% across Canada, so I'm interested in hearing your comments on the subject.

What does it mean for you? Despite the high unemployment rate, are your sectors still experiencing a labour shortage?

• (1705)

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: That's a great question. I can answer on behalf of the restaurant sector. I'll try to keep it short, since I'm sure you have a lot of questions to get to.

Just because the unemployment rate is above 6%, it does not mean we have the labour we need. Unfortunately, not everyone is willing to work in our sector. It's a very tough sector, one that includes a lot of young people. As I said in my opening statement, young people don't stay in these jobs long. They don't become as involved as they once did, so we are seeing a decline there.

We had considerable needs before the pandemic, and they are only continuing to grow. Today, our need for labour is huge.

Ms. Christine Normandin: If anyone else wishes to comment, please feel free to jump in.

If not, I'd like to turn to another topic: regularly having to go through the process. A number of witnesses have told us that, year after year, it is always the same employers submitting applications for foreign workers, and it is always the same foreign workers coming back. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

The topic of discussion I want to throw out is this: Should LMIAs or work permits be valid for longer periods?

Mrs. Isabelle Leblond: The process is a significant administrative burden for Olymel. Over the past two and a half years, we have submitted more than 110 LMIA applications and 1,588 certificate applications in Quebec alone. Half of those were renewal applications, so your question is quite relevant, Ms. Normandin.

Yes, work permits should be valid for longer periods, so they are more in line with provincial time frames for obtaining permanent residency. Say, in Quebec, someone is not able to become a permanent resident within two years, their permit should be valid for at least three years. That would give workers time to submit the necessary applications. What's more, we wouldn't have to renew their application or start the process over again, when we know we desperately need workers.

I'd like to answer your previous question, if I may. I was having an issue with my mike. The fact that a region has a high unemployment rate does not mean it has the necessary workers to meet the demand. I completely agree with that. We are based in rural areas, which have small communities. The unemployment rate might well be 7% or 8%, but if there are only 10,000 people living within a 45-kilometre radius, it's not a sizable enough population for us to be able to fill the 300 or 400 vacant jobs we have in a region. Meeting our labour needs depends on more than just the unemployment rate.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Where do you stand, Mr. Bourbeau?

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: To answer your question, I would say that work permits should be valid for at least two years. In addition, we would like to see an expedited process for skilled workers who are already working for us so they can come back. Something else we support is a streamlined process for employers, as Ms. Leblond pointed out. That would save us from constantly having to renew applications when we meet all the criteria.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

One thing, in particular, keeps coming up about the LMIA process. The example we heard involved welders, but the issue applies to a number of occupations. When a company doesn't have enough welders in a given area, it has to submit an LMIA application. It's reasonable to expect that the company next door is having the same problem and is also having to submit an LMIA application. In the end, all businesses across the sector are having to submit LMIA applications, even though there is a known shortage of skilled labour for certain types of jobs.

Should the government consider removing the LMIA requirement for more occupations, or perhaps requiring LMIA's on a regional basis? While this may not be the case during the pandemic, the unemployment rate can be quite low, which, from the outset, is a sign of a widespread labour shortage.

Should the government be more flexible about the LMIA requirement?

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: I would say yes on both counts. LMIA's should apply to a region as a whole and to an occupation as a whole.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Excellent. That was short and sweet.

Ms. Leblond and Ms. Nord, do you have anything to add?

Mrs. Isabelle Leblond: From our standpoint, the biggest challenge isn't really the administrative process. Nonetheless, we would appreciate a streamlined and expedited process for employers and employees, especially when it comes to renewing work permits. That isn't our biggest challenge, though.

The problem is really the burden of having to provide proof. We understand having to look for workers here, in Canada. We make every effort to hire locally and we are happy to prove it. However, we repeatedly have to provide proof, numerous times a month for the same plant, either because the deadlines don't all line up or because the program is being administered by new people. Having to prove that we are short on workers is an onerous process. That is probably the first issue I would tackle.

• (1710)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

That's probably all the time I have, but I think Ms. Nord had something to add.

[English]

The Chair: Your time is up, Madam Normandin.

We will now proceed to Mr. Davies for six minutes.

Mr. Davies, welcome. Please proceed.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Banville and Madam Leblond both referred to the labour shortage. I want to ask a macro question. We know millions of Canadians have lost work due to the pandemic, and I'm just wondering, pure economics law of supply and demand would suggest many more people are looking for work or ready for work now.

I know in the restaurant industry here in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland restaurants are closing and many skilled workers are out of work right now. I'm wondering how that has impacted the sectors you represent. I know you touched on it, Madam Leblond, and it may or may not have an impact regionally, but generally, has that increased the supply of domestic workers available for work in our country?

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Banville: Thank you for your question.

The mindset tends to be that the unemployment rate and the number of people looking for work in a given area go hand in hand. Someone brought this up earlier, and I think it's an important point to keep in mind. The problem does not have to be widespread in order for there to be a labour shortage. By widespread, I mean affecting all sectors in all regions at the same time. I'll give you two examples involving two regions that are far apart.

We have a big plant in Red Deer, Alberta, with 1,700 employees. In 2004, when the oil and gas industry was booming, we had to make use of the temporary foreign worker program. Today, that same plant receives plenty of CVs and job applications, so it doesn't need temporary foreign workers. It has enough local workers to meet its labour requirements, and we are very glad about that.

Conversely, in Quebec in 2004, workers were coming to us. Labour was not in short supply there. Today, we already have 500 workers, if I'm not mistaken, and we will soon need another 600.

There will always be Canadians who are looking for a job, but labour requirements vary from one region to another. It's important to take into account the sector—that's a nod to my counterparts in the restaurant industry—the type of job and the region. We want to be smart about using the temporary foreign worker program; it's not a silver bullet. It cannot apply everywhere at the same time in the same way. Regional differences matter. We are quite glad to hire Canadians living in Red Deer whenever we can.

[English]

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

Ms. Nord, I think you mentioned some miscommunication between the ESDC and IRCC that your members have experienced. Can you elaborate on that?

Ms. Leah Nord: Yes, but I want to address your previous point as well.

Mr. Don Davies: Sure, please go ahead.

Ms. Leah Nord: Committee members, we often talk about this “either-or”, but it’s a “both-and” moving forward. Labour mobility at a local level skills mismatch is a huge issue that’s wrapped up labour mobility. That’s from an individual motivations point of view, but it’s also a regulatory burden between jurisdictions across our nation. To say a lot more about that, I went back to the member who had provided that example. This is what they said to me when I asked for the example, and there are a lot of acronyms here. They said, for an example, between IRCC and ESDC, if there is a change needed to ensure that the worker’s name on the LMIA matched the work permit, it goes back to some place called STPS, to WALI, to the employer, to ESDC. It would be a lot simpler if there was a communication channel between IRCC and ESDC specifically. That’s just an example.

We also understand, as we get through the pandemic period, there are a lot of changes happening rapidly, but within the temporary foreign worker program that sits in the ESDC, it’s not coming through to IRCC as quickly as needed or we would like.

Thank you.

• (1715)

Mr. Don Davies: I want to pick up on something my colleague Mr. Allison mentioned.

For the new pathways for TFWs to become permanent residents announced last week, there are caps in place for each stream for a total of 90,000, and 95 non-health sector occupations are competing for a cap of 30,000. That’s an average of 315 applications per occupation. In your opinion, is that number equivalent or well matched to the interest to remain in Canada by the targeted groups?

I don’t know if anyone has an opinion on that.

Ms. Nord.

Ms. Leah Nord: The short answer would be no. We’ll see streams and approaches from sector to sector to sector, but across sectors and across skills levels, we need a little bit of everything.

There was a question earlier about whether we should do new streams or new pilots. What we need is an overall approach that’s flexible according to the community and the needs of the sector they are in. Until we have the number of pathways to permanent residency that we have temporary foreign workers, it’s never going to match exactly.

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: I would add to that, yes, it should be adapted to sectors but adapted to regions as well, to Mr. Banville’s point.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies. Your time is up.

With that, our first round of questions comes to an end.

We will now proceed to our second round of questioning. We will have four minutes each for Mr. Saroya and Mr. Regan, and then two minutes each for Madam Normandin and Ms. Kwan. We will start with Mr. Saroya.

You will have four minutes for your round of questioning. You can please proceed.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Madam Chair, thank you so much.

When it comes to the restaurant industry, I could write a book on it. I was associated with the restaurant industry for 30 years until recently. I was a director of sales for one of them that had hundreds of restaurants and we always had issues with labour.

When we were opening new stores up north in Ontario, we were taking the labour from downtown Toronto and putting them in hotels. That problem still exists today.

This morning I got a call from a McDonald’s franchise owner in my riding of Markham—Unionville. He owns seven restaurants between Richmond Hill and Markham. “Can you advise the government”, he asked me, “that the restaurant industry was overlooked by the government?” These are servers or cashiers in the restaurant industry. “They should be part of the new announcement made last week.”

The Chair: I’m sorry for interrupting. We will stop the clock.

The bells have started ringing for the vote to happen in 30 minutes. I would suggest that we continue, finish this second round and end at 5:30.

Do I have unanimous consent to proceed with the meeting until 5:30?

Seeing everyone is in agreement, we have unanimous consent. We will end the meeting at 5:30.

Mr. Saroya, you may start and I will start the clock.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you so much.

Mr. Bourbeau or anybody else can take the question.

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: Yes, indeed, to your point, we had a big labour shortage problem pre-COVID. In addition to that, it’s going to be bigger, especially when we see provinces like B.C., Ontario and Quebec closing everything. As I said in my opening remarks in French, because of the COVID cycle, a lot of people have changed their minds and found jobs elsewhere in other industries.

Yes, it’s going to be extremely important for us to have more and easier access to temporary foreign workers and also to reduce the administrative burden. We need to find an easier way to get access to these people, because we need them. We need these qualified people.

• (1720)

Ms. Lauren van den Berg: I just need 12 seconds.

Ms. Leah Nord: Go ahead.

[Translation]

Ms. Lauren van den Berg: Thank you very much.

[English]

The short answer is yes, I do think the restaurant industry was overlooked. Yes, I do think the restaurant industry frequently is overlooked when it comes to labour shortages, because there is the idea that there's always a restaurant at the end of your street.

I think this crisis has taught us that, no, there won't necessarily be one. The recent announcement is a great first step, but it was disappointing that restaurants were once again left off the proverbial menu.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you so much.

I'm also disappointed that the restaurant industry was overlooked. It's one of the biggest industries throughout the country. The small and medium-sized restaurants are overlooked.

Also, I am getting the complaint that this LMIA program is too expensive, it takes too long and it's arbitrary. An employer says they need this person for this reason, but those people are rejected and the reasons given are not to the employer's satisfaction.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Ms. Leah Nord: I will add that the Canadian Chamber of Commerce actually has a recommendation to insert an appeal process, which is currently absent, into the TFW program.

I also want to highlight the point here about small and medium-sized businesses and administrative burdens. The restaurant sector is an example, but 98% of businesses across this country are small and medium-sized. They're struggling.

I will give you any number of stats from across sectors at a macro level, but we need to simplify, to make it easier and to help them not only through this crisis but beyond.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nord.

Mr. Saroya, your time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Regan.

Mr. Regan, you will have four minutes for your round of questioning. Please proceed.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

My question is actually for all three groups, but in the short time I have, I think I'll start with Ms. Nord.

In relation to critiques of the temporary foreign workers program, one of the things we've heard about is the need for employers to be able to access workers more quickly. You may be aware, of course, that Monday's budget dedicates \$29 million to maintaining enhanced capacity to serve visitors applying for temporary resident visas and permits. You may be aware that this will help preserve departmental capacity to process documents such as work permits.

Along the same lines, what actions do you think the federal government could be taking, or should take, to further speed up processing and get people filling these vacancies?

Ms. Leah Nord: Absolutely anything that moves these processes online, and faster tracking processes.... We welcome many of the announcements from the budget this week. That's the biggest among them.

Again, I'll come back to my original recommendation. Number one is a trusted employers program. We can reduce the administrative burden of having to apply for things over and over again by using a NEXUS-preferred program, like they do in the global talent stream with the NOC codes. This would allow that process to be eliminated. It would allow assessments on the application itself and even possibly get us to a point where we don't have to do it any more. Again, I have spoken to the appeals process. There are any number of things to do, but I would say that is number one and where the lowest-hanging fruit would be.

Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Banville.

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Banville: I find Ms. Nord's idea really interesting.

For us, it is all about increasing the percentage, because our needs are great. However, for adjustment overall, we're in favour of a regional balance, that is, the percentage should be adjusted based on a study of variations from one region to another. Some places don't need to use temporary foreign workers because Canadians can be hired. I gave the example of Alberta earlier. In other areas, like New Brunswick and Quebec, it's very difficult for us.

In my opinion, 20% is a minimum rate. If we want to manage it intelligently and with respect for Canadians seeking work, we need to adjust it to the various labour situations across Canada.

• (1725)

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Since Mr. Banville mentioned a couple of Atlantic provinces, I'll ask this of Restaurants Canada. I won't guess which one of you will answer.

The Atlantic immigration pilot, as you probably know, makes some specialized adjustments to ease processing for workers and for employers. For example, there's the designated employer benefit to be exempt of the labour market impact assessment. Of course, for workers, spouses are able to apply for open work permits in more of the national occupational classification codes.

If the government is to embark on developing other region-specific immigration programs, should it follow the same approach?

Ms. Lauren van den Berg: The short answer is absolutely yes. The Atlantic immigration pilot program was a phenomenal success by almost any metric. Our operators in the region were positively thrilled about it—about the outcome, about the relative ease with which they were able to access that enthusiastic skilled labour, and about the enthusiasm with which they often stayed on, as long as they could, to work those permanent pathways. We've been asking for a good long time for similar programs—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. van den Berg. The time is up. You may send in a written submission if you don't get the opportunity to talk about some of the issues you wanted to raise today.

We will proceed to Madam Normandin for her round of questioning.

You have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

My question is for whomever wants to answer and it has to do with work permit flexibility.

A closed work permit allows an individual to work for a specific employer and in a specific position. That type of permit doesn't allow the company to move a worker from one franchise to another or to promote the worker. Yet if a worker were to become more qualified, it could make it easier for them to become a permanent resident.

Should work permits be made more flexible, allowing holders to work in certain types of jobs or in certain regions, for example?

Mrs. Isabelle Leblond: I will jump in here.

As Mr. Banville said, under our collective agreements, our foreign workers have the same rights as any Canadian worker. It's not true that in our collective agreements, positions are segregated according to the National Occupational Classification system as they are in the TFWP. Some of our foreign workers are perfectly qualified to work as supervisors, electromechanics or welders, but we can't assign them to those positions.

Ideally, we need to find a mechanism that provides some flexibility in that respect. I also understand the need for guidelines. In the event of a major shortage, if the percentage assigned no longer meets needs, I'm sure that it would be an asset if companies like ours could move these workers to a similar job within the same company.

Mr. Olivier Bourbeau: I would add the following flexibility: if an employer and employee agree to change the employee's duties, it would have to be accepted.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

Ms. Nord, would you like to add anything?

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Nord: The agreement in that is key, because the employer who brings in the employee or employees bears a burden for all of those administrative costs. I know that this has been brought

up before, and I get that there are issues toward being tied to a singular employer, but if you come in bearing the cost, and no sooner does someone arrive than they've jumped somewhere else, that's problematic. That's an important caveat.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Nord. The time is up.

We will end our round of questioning with Mr. Davies.

Mr. Davies, you have two minutes, please.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I don't know who would want to answer this. My mind is going to the very significant issue of housing. We know that there's clearly a serious affordable housing crisis in this country right now. We know that the federal and provincial governments work together to regulate the housing of temporary foreign workers.

I have two questions. One, what suggestions would you give the government to ensure that we can actually find appropriate affordable housing? Two, is there any issue with healthy housing right now, given the COVID pandemic, that is unique to the situation now?

Ms. Leah Nord: The answer is yes and yes. Housing is a critical issue across a number of sectors. There is currently a consultation. Our members take it very seriously. We take very seriously what has happened through the crisis as well. It is a big wake-up call and it has to go hand in glove with anything going forward.

Thank you.

• (1730)

Mr. Don Davies: Being from the Lower Mainland, I hear from employers all the time that they can't attract and retain people, because the people simply can't afford to live there. Leaving aside the labour market issue, you have a livability issue.

To any of the other sectors here, do you have specific solutions to offer for how we can develop appropriate housing in the regions or sectors you represent?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Louis Banville: I will jump in and answer that question.

The housing aspect is fundamental. The program will always need to ensure that housing is comfortable, sanitary and in good condition. You must make sure you meet a standard in that regard. These are human beings who come from very far away and need to be in a proper place.

We have a team looking for housing for foreign workers. One of the problems—

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Banville, I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up.

With this, our panel for today comes to an end.

I would like to take a moment to thank all our witnesses for appearing before the committee and providing their important input as we continue our study on the labour market impact assessment under the temporary foreign workers program.

If there was something you were not able to raise today, you can always send a written submission to the committee. We will take it into consideration when we compile the report on this study.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>