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Chair: Ms. Marilyn Gladu



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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the 17th meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is taking place in our usual hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. For members on Zoom, remember that the order of speakers will be called by me and to mute your mike when you're not speaking.

I have some good news for you. Last night I was elected vice-chair of the Liaison Committee, which is, of course, the committee of all the chairs of all the committees. The status of women committee is punching above its weight again, and I'll be happy to represent it there.

Today we are returning to our study on challenges faced by women in rural communities. Each of our witnesses is going to have five minutes to make comments, and then we'll go into our rounds of questions. When you have one minute left you'll see the yellow pen. That will give you an idea of how much time you have.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses. Today, as individuals we have Adrienne Ivey, who is a farmer; Gail Kehler, who is a rancher; and Pamela Napper-Beamish from Lloydminster. We also have, from Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology, Melissa O'Brien, who is the manager of communications and stakeholder relations.

We will go in that order and start with Adrienne.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Adrienne Ivey (Farmer, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chairperson.

Before I even start, I just want to apologize. This ties in very well with what I'm speaking about today, because my Internet connection is leaving a little to be desired today. Hopefully you can hear me and I'm clear, even if perhaps my voice doesn't match my lips.

I am Adrienne Ivey, a farmer and rancher, a mother of two teenage children and an agricultural advocate. I farm near Ituna in east central Saskatchewan, where we raise beef cattle as well as crops such as oats and canola.

It is very suiting that I'm speaking with you today, as this is a very important date. Today is Canada's Ag Day, a day to celebrate the healthy, nutritious and sustainable food grown across the coun-

try as well as the farmers and ranchers who grow it, but I'm not here today to speak on the good work we are doing as farmers. I am here to speak on the trials of remote rural living, which is especially disconnected during these extreme times of a global pandemic.

In these days of staying apart to stay safe, it has never been more apparent just how removed rural Canada is from the rest of our great country. Lack of connectivity has deeply affected our rural populations in ways never experienced before. As with many issues brought forward by COVID-19, rural women have been disproportionately affected by this.

At home on the ranch, we have struggled with reliable Internet and cellular service since long before the advent of the iPhone. As we watched technology develop and expand throughout our lives, we would never have guessed that decades later we would still be struggling with basics like online banking.

I reached out to the rural community to talk to them about this topic, and I was shocked at just how vast of an issue this is. From just outside of Vancouver to the prairie provinces like Saskatchewan, to the Atlantic provinces, rural women are struggling with connectivity. The stories from across Canada are eerily the same. Working from home combined with online learning has turned a bad Internet situation into a complete disaster. As mothers, it is devastating to watch our children struggle to keep up with their classmates online solely because of a lack of connectivity.

Beyond our children, we have more opportunities than ever to educate ourselves as women, but only if you can access the courses and webinars online. I have shuttered my agricultural communications business as I cannot count on a reliable connection, and for the limited data that we do have access to, I need to stockpile it for the days and weeks that our kids may require that data for online schooling. Knowing how much data I'm using today just to speak with you is very much top of mind, but this conversation is important.

In pre-pandemic days, any large Internet requirement, whether it be sending or receiving large files, virtual presentations or something as simple as FaceTime with family would mean a trip to the city to borrow a restaurant's or business's Internet. Just picture that for a moment, driving a hundred kilometres just to send a file. That is normal for rural living.

The next issue is the current cost. After paying hundreds and often thousands of dollars for equipment and installation, the monthly cost of rural Internet is enormous. For our household alone, we balance four cellphones as well as a satellite provider just to have enough data for the basics. Our cost for that is \$600 a month, yet for that cost, we often run out of data and cannot perform the most simple of online tasks.

As a society, we have some brilliant ways of maintaining our lives while social distancing: virtual health care, online therapy, Zoom social gatherings, virtual gyms and places of worship and ordering groceries online. While that is a list to be proud of as a country, sadly, it is a list that strikes anxiety into the hearts of rural women. We cannot access most of these things on any given day.

Moving forward, Internet and cellular service must be viewed in the same light as electricity, as a basic necessity of life.

The Chair: That's your time.

Ms. Adrienne Ivey: I believe the path forward does not lie—

The Chair: That's very good.

We'll now go to Gail, for five minutes.

Ms. Gail Kehler (Rancher, As an Individual): Good morning.

I'd like to thank Rosemarie for inviting me to this.

I understood it would be issues facing women. An issue that's facing me in my area is that rural crime has skyrocketed lately, so I want to talk about that.

I am not a public speaker, so this is really unusual for me to try this.

My husband and I are beef ranchers. We have property in lots of different areas around our farm. I have to travel up to 20 kilometres to get to my fields to check my cows and to do farm work.

The nearest RCMP detachment is a good 20 minutes drive from here. If I run into trespassers or whatever on my property, I have to deal with it for quite a while before I know any help will arrive. Our area doesn't have street signs or road signs in most places. You have to tell the police or any help to come by directions. It's like when I moved here from the city and I thought, I can't believe anyone can find anything, yet the police are required to try to navigate to places where they've never been before and to come when we have issues.

Last fall, and actually in the past year, our neighbourhood was targeted by thieves like we've never seen before. It's been outrageous. They come and they steal your vehicle.

We've had to put up security cameras and gates, and they'll smash right through the gates. We put up a bar across our shop door so they couldn't smash that in, and then they just broke a window and climbed through the window. When we speak to the RCMP,

they tell us that their hands are really tied because when they arrest the perpetrators, they go to the justice system, the justice system gives them a slap on the wrist and they're out again to come and do their shenanigans all over again. The perpetrators seem to know that the consequences aren't very great. It would be really nice to hear that we could have some sort of backup from the police when these things happen.

Basically, I'm not following my notes that great, but it's easy to hear a story and think, it's just stuff that they're taking, but property theft is more than that. It hits you in the heart. It changes the way you think about neighbours coming by or vehicles that you meet on the road. People think, that's why you have insurance, or it's just stuff and you can replace it. But anyone who's ever tried to collect insurance knows that your premiums go up. It costs you money besides the feeling that you've been invaded. It feels like a life and death situation when someone breaks into your place. You feel like your family is threatened, and you don't feel safe anymore.

My hope is that there will be some solutions coming towards higher penalties for the thieves and feeling like the police can do their jobs better.

I appreciate that you've taken time to listen to me this morning.

● (1105)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Pamela for five minutes.

Ms. Pamela Napper-Beamish (As an Individual): Good morning, Madam Chair, and committee members. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

My name is Pamela Beamish and I live in a rural area located near Lloydminster, Saskatchewan. We own and operate a fourth-generation grain farm where we continue to raise our family. In addition to the farm, I run a life coaching business in my home, so I am able to assist my son who lives with Down Syndrome while he attends our local high school.

The reason I am here is to speak of my experience with criminal activity as a woman, mother and an involved community member in our area. As well, we have women who have lived their entire lives on their rural property and did not once think that they would be experiencing the effects of criminal activity to the extent there is currently. In addition, for seniors or for persons who are less mobile, they have every right to enjoy their latter years where they worked so hard to build and enjoy.

I have been able to remain at home to raise our children, but now I have a greater role in protecting our children, our home and our property. When it comes to criminal activity in our area, which—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Excuse me, Mr. Chair. Could the witness raise her mike so we can hear her better?

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes.

Perhaps you could put your microphone up a little bit and speak very loudly.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Pamela Napper-Beamish: I've been able to remain at home to raise our children, but now I have a greater role in protecting our children, our home and our property. When it comes to criminal activity in our area, this is a great concern, not only for us and our community's safety but also for our mental well-being and, of course, the monetary cost of what is suffered over and over again. Add in the ridiculous, penalizing carbon tax and the government's refusing to support our oil industry and this affects thousands and thousands of families trying to put food on their tables.

I also would like to speak about the justice system. The prosecutor's office stated that they see over 600 files per month in the North Battleford office, which equals 7,200 or more cases per year. The waiting time for our case, in particular, was 16 months from the time the break-in took place to the time it finally reached the prosecutor's office. That's 16 months to have that same criminal continue doing what he or she is doing. As a mother, my first concern is my children's safety, as anyone would agree. That being said, when you have a child living with Down syndrome, that concern becomes a hundredfold. You would assume that home is a safe place to be, but not when it feels like a lockdown where someone has to be present at all times.

My son was totally oblivious to what was going on during this time frame. In some ways it was a blessing, but mostly it was difficult. Any kid in the country loves the space and scenery for playing, walks and bike rides. His bike was locked up from Wednesday to Sunday on long weekends, and Thursday evening to Sunday on regular weeks, as we never knew who would be coming over the hill under the influence of drugs or alcohol, with a stolen vehicle. Strangers would just walk in out of nowhere, sometimes high and drunk. Simple, normal day-to-day tasks became, and are still are, a planned and strategic routine where the locking of the house and buildings has to be in place just to mow the lawn, step out to the garden, go for a walk with the dog or play with the kids.

These break-ins are not limited to nightfall, as even our cameras have recorded suspects coming in at 9 a.m., assuming I wasn't home during a weekday. They brought their arms up to conceal their faces so the cameras couldn't see them, not realizing that I was there. Seconds after entering our shop area, our cameras got footage of their backing out and taking off. These criminals are carrying

more than just a tool to break in. There are pepper sprays, knives, guns and machetes.

In our break-in, a machete was the weapon of choice, but who knows what was in the SUV. Things can change in an instant, depending on their mental state or if they're under the influence of drugs. This topic is getting very old when it comes to a criminal justice system that no longer serves our provinces when it comes to repeat offenders or gang activity. This criminal activity affects everyone in the area, near and far. Our communities are constantly being hit as the criminals rotate their selected areas of choice. Poor weather seems to be a breather for us.

You know you're going to get hit at some point, if not several times. With this activity, you just don't know when and what it's going to cost you this time around. It can escalate from stolen fuel, or the ignorance of pouring your fuel on the ground, to the theft or damaging of equipment to houses being broken into.

We, as citizens and taxpayers, are extremely frustrated as this has been going on for years and is out of control. I feel that the RCMP are just as frustrated as we are, and it's an increased workload and taxpayers' money. We have spent over \$30,000 in security cameras alone, as well as \$12,000 in special doors for our shop and building. We pay \$100 per month for SecurTek service. As the first witness described, our bills for downloading security cameras is enormous.

When it comes to insurance deductibles and premiums, when you're running a business it's pretty tough to keep up with the cost of rising insurance premiums, especially when you're continuously getting hit. These costs are not covered. How long will insurance companies allow us to be even covered, or how long will it be before insurance becomes so out of reach due to increased expenses that the courts don't deem part of the sentence?

Insurance coverage is required to be able to purchase or lease equipment. Banks aren't going to give a loan without insurance. Our insurance, from 2018-20—in three years—increased by \$13,900. A friend's landscaping deductible was \$500, and in four years it has increased to \$5,000.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we are going to go into our first round of questions. We are going to go to Ms. Sahota for six minutes.

No, I missed Melissa. I'm so sorry.

Now we are going to Melissa for five minutes.

You have my apologies

Ms. Melissa O'Brien (Manager, Communications and Stakeholder Relations, Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology): It's not a problem.

Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members.

My name is Melissa O'Brien and I am the manager of communications and stakeholder relations for Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology, also known as SWIFT.

SWIFT is a non-profit, municipally led broadband expansion project created to improve Internet connectivity in underserved communities across southwestern Ontario. SWIFT was created by the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus and is currently overseeing a \$210-million project in southwestern Ontario. The Government of Canada and the Province of Ontario have each committed up to \$63.7 million to support the project.

Per the Statistics Canada 2016 census profile, the population of SWIFT's region is 3.6 million people, roughly 10% of Canada's population. Of those, 372,000 lack access to fast, reliable Internet. This deficiency, caused by market failure in the rural broadband sector, impacts businesses, families and women throughout the region, leaving them at an economic and social disadvantage when compared with their urban counterparts.

At no time before now has there been such unanimous agreement on the need for broadband service in rural Canada. COVID-19 has changed life as we know it. With many more people now required to work from home, education increasingly being offered remotely, video conferencing replacing face-to-face interactions and health services and programs continuing to move to online platforms, access to high-speed Internet has now become essential.

Connectivity challenges, which have long plagued smaller communities, have been magnified by the health crisis, which has further highlighted the digital disparities between urban and rural living.

The federal government has recognized that those who live in rural areas and within first nations communities experience a greater digital divide and are paying much more for slower, less reliable Internet than are those who reside in urban areas. For women living in rural communities, the lack of access to reliable and affordable broadband has formed employment barriers, caused missed education opportunities and created challenges to accessing social services and online digital resources and information for many.

COVID-19 has disproportionately had economic impacts on women and has led to the deepening of pre-existing inequalities. Women who are living in rural areas without access to broadband service in their homes are at a greater disadvantage when it comes to finding and securing employment.

We have heard from women all across southwestern Ontario who are struggling as a result of the lack of Internet connectivity in their communities, with many, who have expressed frustration with their inability to access the required bandwidth and Internet speeds needed to support remote working, stating that it could have negative impacts on current and future employment opportunities for them.

Furthermore, women who are the head of single-parent families are also more likely to be employed part time or may use the Inter-

net to start a home business to provide them with flexible work arrangements so they are able to maintain their role as the primary caregiver while generating an income. Where there are connectivity resource constraints within the home, e-commerce opportunities become significantly impeded. As well, affordability of service can also be a limiting factor.

Finally, poor or, in some cases, almost non-existent network connections and lack of access to affordable digital technologies can lead to gaps in digital skills and literacy among women in underserved communities. As the global workforce continues to become increasingly digitalized, lack of connectivity in rural areas may reinforce the marginalization of women.

If broadband is a superhighway to opportunity, then ensuring that rural communities have greater access to high-speed service is key to aiding women in overcoming social and economic barriers. Equitable and affordable connectivity is vital for empowering women and can be a powerful tool for creating a greater space for female inclusion in today's ever-growing digital society.

As a result, I have three general recommendations that I'd like to share with you today. First, as a basic necessity, and many would say as an essential service, broadband needs to be available to all Canadians regardless of where they live.

Second, Internet service needs to be affordable, especially for low-income or single-parent families. Currently the federal government, in partnership with Internet service providers, has established the connecting families initiative, a low-cost Internet program. It's important that ongoing support be provided to such programs or similar initiatives to ensure that those who are struggling to afford reliable Internet service are provided with equal opportunity to benefit from high-speed connectivity.

Last, digital empowerment is as important as connecting women to the Internet. Promoting and supporting female digital skills training and literacy play important roles, enabling greater participation in today's technology-driven world.

Again, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

• (1115)

The Chair: I'd like to thank you for speaking, and I apologize again for skipping over you.

Now we are going to go into our first round of questions.

Ms. Sahota, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for appearing today and for their evidence.

My first question is for Melissa. Can you provide us with an update on the delivery of broadband Internet across southwestern Ontario and on whether you have faced any impediments from the government, such as lack of funding or consistent announcements of funding that is never delivered?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: For SWIFT right now, we have finished our procurement. We're into the implementation process. The project has been very successful, with collaboration from all levels of government—federal, provincial and local.

We've exceeded our KPIs with regard to premises passed, as well as fibre installed and infrastructure put in with regard to investments. We forecasted that the project would be \$210 million. At the end of our procurement, we're forecasting that the infrastructure investment will be roughly between \$260 million and \$270 million.

• (1120)

Ms. Jag Sahota: Thank you.

Melissa, you touched quite extensively on the impact that the lack of Internet has on women and their ability to function in today's world.

I'm going to ask the other witnesses if they can speak to my next question. In what ways do women living in rural communities have different experiences or challenges from women living in urban communities? How do these experiences and challenges vary in different types of rural areas? That's part of my first question.

I have another one. There are essentially three. How do these experiences and challenges vary among diverse groups of women living in rural areas?

Anybody can start with that.

Ms. Adrienne Ivey: I'll start.

On your first question, across rural Canada, the level of Internet access is extremely variable. It very much depends on where old systems started and where pathways happened to have fallen. It has very little to do with where people actually live and it certainly has nothing to do with the demographics of who are most in need. When I think about farmyards as well as communities like first nations, there are very few populations across Canada who actually have what urban people would consider a workable Internet situation.

As for how that is impacting us directly, you name it. In today's day and age, everything is done online. We can sometimes take part in a small number of those things online, but we can never be assured that the Internet will work on a given day. Even this morning, trying to log in to speak with all of you, I was not sure that the Internet gods were going to be with me today, so that I could speak with you.

The unreliability is absolutely immense, yet we're paying triple, five times or sometimes 10 times as much per month for the Internet that we have, unfortunately.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Does anybody else want to add to that?

Pamela or Ms. Kehler?

Ms. Pamela Napper-Beamish: I'm having the experience right now of not having great Internet. I'm trying to speak and I don't even know if you guys can hear me. The bills are extremely high, especially when you have a family and school and stuff.

I agree with everything she said.

Ms. Jag Sahota: For women living in rural communities who have complex care needs, such as those with disabilities or seniors, what barriers, if any, exist in obtaining the care and services that they need?

Anybody can answer that.

Melissa, do you want to start?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: Sure, I can take it.

As some of the witnesses previously pointed out, we know that a lot of services have now moved online. In rural communities, if you don't have access to these services—especially if you're caring for an elderly individual—I'm not sure how you're getting quality health care. Internet does play a primary role in delivering those services at this point in time. I think it would be nice to hear from somebody who maybe has more personal experience with that.

I do believe Internet connectivity is key to helping and assisting in delivering these services. As we come out of COVID, it potentially might be more likely that these online platforms will continue to be used. It is critical that we ensure that all Canadians have access to reliable broadband, so that they can participate in these online services that are now becoming more readily available.

Ms. Adrienne Ivey: I would definitely add that one of the greatest things in Saskatchewan to come out of COVID is the accessibility of online, virtual health care. I live over a hundred kilometres from the nearest emergency room. Online is essential to be able to teleconference or virtually connect with a doctor instead of having to drive a 200-kilometre round trip just to get test results or things like that.

Unfortunately, due to lack of connectivity, the people who need it the most—the people who live rurally and outside of urban centres who can't pop into a doctor's office or a hospital—don't have access to the platforms that are now available to us. It affects every segment.

• (1125)

The Chair: That's your time.

We're going now to Ms. Hutchings for six minutes.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings (Long Range Mountains, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to every one of you for joining us here today.

I'm saying hello from western Newfoundland. As my colleagues have heard me say many times, my riding is bigger than Switzerland. I have over 200 beautiful small communities. The largest community has 19,000 people and the smallest has 42. When you talk about rural there is rural, and then there is really rural. Trust me. I understand all the challenges of living in rural, but I also understand the beautiful opportunities of living in rural because I wouldn't trade it for anything, even if my Internet can be spotty sometimes, too.

First, I want to address the issue with the RCMP and the provinces. It's funny because I was speaking about this in my riding yesterday. Here in Newfoundland and Labrador and in many provinces, especially out west, the province has the agreement with the RCMP to deliver services in rural. In Newfoundland and Labrador the province pays 70% and the RCMP only pays 30%, but the RCMP get their marching orders, their mandate letter if you want to call it that, from the province.

You should look into that in your area, as well. I'm having that conversation now in my area, but you need to look into it because the two go hand-in-hand, and we do need to address it. I think you need to get the province in on that conversation as well.

I agree with everything you say on connectivity. It's such an important issue for health care, small business, education, safety, general connection to family and friends, and for the tourism industry. We all know how incredible it is, and we all have to have it. It's the new thing.

I loved Minister Monsef's line when she said John A. Macdonald connected the country with a railway and now we have the connection with the Internet. Being connected is a top priority for our government.

Under the connect to innovate program, Saskatchewan received over \$22 million, and that's going to put over 13,000 households on track this year. The other thing we've done that you may not know is that we developed Canada's first connectivity strategy. That uses all our tools in our tool boxes with several different coordinated initiatives to make sure we get all Canada connected, and we made a commitment that by 2026 we will have 98% of Canada connected. The latest one that I'm excited about is the universal broadband fund, which was announced in November. That was a \$1.75 billion investment to help households get connected.

As you have all said so eloquently, the pandemic added such urgency to how we need to get it done more quickly, and that's why we developed the rapid response stream as part of the universal broadband fund. That carved out \$150 million to get shovel-ready projects in the ground, to get communities connected by this coming November. Projects all across the country are being approved already.

Another challenge you all touched on when you spoke on connectivity is the cost of Internet. When the department oversees all these applications, affordability and community support are key considerations in the assessment project. They are putting a great lens on that.

We added a pathfinder service, and its use will tell you how successful it's been. I'm sure you have communities in your area, just

as I do, that have probably one paid employee on their town council and right now she has to decide when to shovel, when to put the mail in the box or what application she has to apply for, so we put the pathfinder service in place.

As of last week, the pathfinder service had over 1,800 inquiries and the response time is two days or under. That's great. There's a 1-800 number or an online service that communities or businesses or small ISP, small Internet service providers, can call to say they have a question about their town or how they work with their neighbouring town to make sure they have Internet service providers that want to connect to their area. The pathfinder service is working well and it is helping people to connect Canadians.

To let you know what projects are out there, there is \$2 billion in the Infrastructure Bank that the major Internet service providers can apply for, \$1 billion for the original universal broadband fund, \$600 million through low earth orbit satellites, \$585 million to connect to innovate through ISED, \$750 million through CRTC, and another \$355 million in a rural and northern stream.

• (1130)

Also, then, there's a first nation infrastructure fund. To date, that's connected I think 119 indigenous communities.

We have many tools in our tool box because our country is so different from coast to coast to coast. You have rolling plains out your way, with beautiful canola fields. Here, I have gorgeous mountains, and our Internet service providers say, "Oh my golly, can we go through them instead of over them?"

We need a variety of tools to make sure that we get all Canadians connected. I encourage you to go online. There's a great site in the department, where they basically have a lens and they can look right down on the country and they tell you exactly what the speeds are in your area, and what they actually are, not what the Internet service provider says they are.

When the department did a test for me, they showed my area and my backyard here. I was amazed. It goes into 250 metres. What was good about it...well, not good, really, because they said, "My golly, two miles down the road you have great connectivity."

The Chair: I'm sorry, Gudie, but that's your time.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: We'll continue.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, you may go ahead. You have six minutes.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today to discuss this important issue, the challenges faced by women in rural communities.

Apart from the big city of Granby, the riding I represent, Shefford, is mainly made up of small rural communities. They're absolutely lovely. I've lived in small towns before. I take pride in living in a rural area, but I'm very aware of the challenges that go along with that.

I want to discuss some of those challenges.

The Standing Committee on the Status of Women has spent a lot of time talking about how much women need reliable Internet access in order to stay in touch, receive services and connect with people.

We are aware of the so-called pole war that has hurt the broadband program. We realize that connecting a pole on the last concession road in a remote small town is much more expensive than doing the same in a city.

What could the government have done to offset that cost difference?

I'd like to hear what Ms. Ivey and Ms. O'Brien have to say.

[English]

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: I'm sorry. Was the question about how to get to the last mile?

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Yes. As we know, it costs more.

[English]

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: I think it's a very good question.

I know that for our project the determining factor was whether you go out and try to connect more of the underserved premises or start with the ones that are further away and cost more. That's a decision that needs to be made across the board when you're looking at broadband funding. Again, is it to get more of the underserved connected or is it the farther-reaching ones? I guess that is the question in terms of how you move forward. I think all levels of government—whether it be at the federal, the provincial or the municipal level—are looking at addressing that.

I don't believe that any household should be left behind and be further marginalized and become vulnerable, especially those in the rural hamlets and villages. I hear from women across our project region who are constantly feeling frustrated with the lack of reliable Internet that's available to their houses. They especially are struggling, as the other witnesses have touched upon, when there is online schooling taking place, as well as remote working.

They're struggling. That is a very good question: How we get them all connected as quickly as possible? I believe that all levels of government are working together to find that solution.

Ms. Adrienne Ivey: Yes. I would add that I think that possibly the most important aspect in the cost of that last mile is really a collaborative approach, working directly with the rural residents and getting as many of them on board as possible, and taking part in cost-sharing as well. I think it's really important to have larger

projects that encompass more people, rather than many smaller projects going on at the same time. Efficiency-wise, that's the only way to be able to cover a geography like Saskatchewan's, which is so vast.

• (1135)

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: The Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology is studying high-speed Internet access right now.

Ms. Napper-Beamish and Ms. Kehler, I truly feel for you. You've endured a lot of stress.

I'd like to ask you about policing and funding for police forces like the RCMP versus provincial police services. As I mentioned, the area I live in is vast. I've had to call police before and they told me that they didn't have enough officers to cover the entire area.

The lack of funding is especially glaring in indigenous police forces. We know indigenous women are much more likely to experience violence.

Do you think the crime and violence that you face would decrease if more resources were allocated to police, with the necessary funding being transferred to the provinces and Quebec?

[English]

Ms. Gail Kehler: It would be nice if we could have more police on staff. It feels like they have to cover too many areas. Only certain police, I believe, are allowed to even go on the reserve. I believe there are issues around access. I'm not sure. I don't know a lot about the activities there, but I would like to see more police on the beat and have more police presence.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Do you have anything to add, Ms. Napper-Beamish?

[English]

Ms. Pamela Napper-Beamish: In our area the RCMP have a very large area to cover. We are actually at the point where the detachment has suggested that citizens go on patrol. Community members will go out and take what you might call shifts, for a two-hour stint. They'll drive the area to make sure the activity leaves our area.

When it comes to the indigenous areas, I asked the Onion Lake detachment to submit if they had anything, but they had just had a shooting. There were shots fired at the RCMP up there, so I just left them alone. Otherwise, I would have had that information.

The Chair: Now we're going to Ms. Mathysen for six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses. It's very interesting today.

Ms. Ivey, you were specifically talking about the struggles of keeping up with those huge Internet bills and what's necessary. The interesting thing I have learned over the years in terms of farming is the technological investment that's required—the fact that you're using tractors, combines and equipment that is remotely driven, or using drones to cover those hundreds and hundreds of acres that you farm.

Can you talk about the specific costs related to that kind of technology? Is that accessible to you at all? What could be provided in terms of supports to ensure that affordability is there?

Ms. Adrienne Ivey: Thank you. I love that question. That is an excellent question.

Farming definitely utilizes far more technology than ever before, and it's something farmers are really excited about and want to embrace. Part of using technology comes with data management. We have so much information we're compiling on each of our farms right now that has to do with soil health, animal health and even the metrics around the finances of the farm. We have all this information, but because we can't collect it in a timely manner from our equipment, we cannot make decisions based on that information, even though it's at our fingertips. We just don't have the Internet capability to really analyze all that information.

When it comes to affording the actual technology you're speaking about—whether it's GPS systems in our tractors or monitoring some of our animal health systems—we're already paying for that technology even though we can't use it. The tractors and combines all come with that stuff in them. It's not even an option. We utilize it to the small extent we can, but if we had more connectivity on the farm, we would be able to utilize these amazing tools that we're already paying for.

The sky is the limit when it comes to technology in farming, and I'm so excited to see where it takes us. However, we're a very long way from being able to utilize what we already have, let alone what we're going to see in the future.

• (1140)

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: That need to constantly be competitive, the idea of the family farm versus more of the larger industrial farms.... There is that competition requirement, so to keep up is key in terms of that industry, I understand.

Ms. O'Brien, I actually had the opportunity to participate or listen in on the presentation by the members of SWIFT. I think it was a couple of weeks ago. Being in southwestern Ontario, of course, it's a huge concern for me. While my riding is very urban-suburban, it certainly is impactful on all of that community that surrounds us and the supports that the surrounding area has to come into London to receive, unfortunately.

Some of the requests that you had of the federal government.... There was a lot of information given by my Liberal colleague in terms of what's available. However, you're very well aware of what is and what isn't. One of the concerns that you had, of course, was

with regard to the universal broadband fund, the CRTC funds in southwestern Ontario. You mentioned that you cover 10% of the population that is underserved; however, you've received none of that funding. Is that correct?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: That was previously, under the connect to innovate program. What the request was.... Because southwestern Ontario represents 10% of the population, there would be an assumption or an expectation that at least 10% of the funding would be directed towards that area. Under the connect to innovate program, there was zero funding awarded to southwestern Ontario.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: One of the problems, too, is that there are a whole bunch of sources, but they are not coordinated. One of the presenters said that it actually isn't efficient. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: In southwestern Ontario, I believe that there are roughly five funding mechanisms in place to solve the same challenges in a geographic location, none of which are currently taking a very coordinated approach. Ideally, it would be nice to see a coordination between all of them. The issue that comes with that is that ISPs are now applying for multiple funding mechanisms that all have different applications and processes to them, so there is some repeat in terms of how much time that takes, the time constraints that's putting in. Then, a lot of them tend to kind of be putting in for all the applications and waiting to see what comes back.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: One of the key comments was that the CIB is now a loan. How useful would it be for that to actually be turned into a subsidy for you guys?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: SWIFT wouldn't have access to that. I think the commentary was around the fact that the smaller ISPs have been really engaged in the SWIFT project. We have 16 unique ISPs that have been receiving funding through SWIFT, and each one of them has a very important role to play, whether it's large, medium or small. We've been very successful with the smaller ISPs participating. That subsidy through the Infrastructure Bank isn't something that's really accessible to them for the dollars that they would need to—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Again, it's about the coordination of that and the use, the full use—everyone being able to access that funding appropriately.

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: Yes.

The Chair: That's your time.

Now we're going to Ms. Shin for five minutes.

Ms. Nelly Shin (Port Moody—Coquitlam, CPC): Thank you.

I'd like to thank all the ladies for presenting today. Every time I hear about rural crime and the Internet, I feel for you. I know that we have to get some things happening to help you.

Melissa, you mentioned the importance of digital empowerment for women, especially in this time of lockdown when many services have gone online. You mentioned the need for digital literacy. What is already being done to teach women digital literacy, and how can it improve and grow?

What role does the federal government have in being able to give women these tools?

• (1145)

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: I think about offering training to empower women and girls to use technology and make the most of the digital opportunities that are available.

I think about smaller communities that maybe didn't have access to high-speed Internet now getting access to high-speed Internet. How can they participate, create and innovate while these opportunities are becoming available to them?

I think of senior women who maybe now are becoming more online and are not aware of the services, apps or how to utilize those technologies, whether it's to create a network, a community of their own, or to leverage different apps that maybe are health apps. Maybe it's about having additional training available and making them aware that this is an option.

I think of e-commerce, of their starting their own online businesses. We talk about a gig economy. Freelancing is a big opportunity, especially for women who may be parents or taking care of elderly citizens. We go back to the fact that a lot of part-time work is happening. It's having those e-commerce opportunities and understanding, first, that they're available and, second, how they can be utilized to have more women's economic activity happening.

Technology is a key and a solution to that, but training is a big aspect to empowering them, to making them even aware of what's available to them.

Ms. Adrienne Ivey: I want to add to that because this is something I'm very passionate about. I see a huge disconnect between the youth in rural communities and the youth of urban communities. While educating women is incredibly important when it comes to the digital world, things are changing so quickly that it's hard for education to keep up with what is happening online.

I see a disconnect among rural children, who don't have access to anything online, like simple YouTube videos. They don't have the same comfort level of getting on a computer, tablet or phone and being able to figure it out as they go, something most urban kids seem born with these days. In reality, it's just the comfort level from being immersed in it from day one. We would eliminate a lot of these large gaps in knowledge if we had accessibility and a certain comfort level across the board.

Ms. Nelly Shin: Thank you so much.

The next question is for Gail and Pamela, who spoke of homes that are being broken into by thieves, leaving families traumatized with fear and a changed perspective on life.

What kind of support are these traumatized families receiving and is there social infrastructure in your communities that families can access to receive support?

Ms. Gail Kehler: In our area there has been no support at all, except for us talking about keeping our eyes open for each other. I had no support at all when we were broken into.

Ms. Nelly Shin: In that sense, then, there are no counselling services available locally. Would there be online access that your community is aware of?

Ms. Gail Kehler: I assume there would be, but I haven't researched it. I don't know of any personally.

Ms. Nelly Shin: This is for any of the women on the panel. Have the lockdowns caused the social services that are available to close down completely? Have they been able to convert and go online, especially with the Internet connectivity being very poor? These are some concerns that I have, if anyone wants to speak to them.

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's it for your time.

We'll go now to Ms. Zahid for five minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Serré will be taking my time.

The Chair: That's wonderful.

Monsieur Serré.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Zahid, thank you for giving me your speaking time.

Thank you, as well, to the witnesses for being here today.

We agree with you wholeheartedly, of course. We understand what you're going through, especially the problems with the Internet, but also the crime. Being from northern Ontario, I haven't had the same experience as you have, in Saskatchewan, when it comes to crime, so I'd like to know more about that.

• (1150)

[*English*]

My first question is for Melissa. I'm looking at your website, and you indicated you received \$210 million. About \$63 million came from the federal government and \$63 million came from the province. I want to make sure I understand that you have received \$63 million from the federal government. I want to clarify that point and then I'll ask another question.

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: SWIFT is funded under the new building Canada fund's small communities fund. It is a joint federal and provincial infrastructure funding program. Both the province and the federal government have contributed \$63.7 million.

Mr. Marc Serré: That's wonderful. That's an example of partnership, when we look at SWIFT, municipalities, the provincial government and the federal government. Connecting Canadians in 2013-14 had \$250 million. Connect to innovate in 2016-17 had \$500 million. Now, in the 2019 budget, the federal government set aside the largest investment of Internet funding from the federal government, close to \$1.7 billion. It leverages the work of the provinces, municipalities and, we have to remember, the private sector. You're right.

I was part of the wardens caucus when I worked with Eastlink or Bluewater Cable in that area. I completely understand.

I just want to commend SWIFT for the work that you've done to gather that partnership together. Maybe this is useful to the committee here for making recommendations to the federal government.

What would you say is the success of SWIFT, and how can you look at expanding the SWIFT model with municipalities? You have three or four large cities: London, Waterloo and Windsor. In northern Ontario we had this funded through FedNor. When we look at Blue Sky and NEOnet, they're working with the private sector.

What recommendations do you have for other provinces to do what you've done?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: I think you mentioned one of the major ones. It's the collaboration between all levels of government. It really allowed us to leverage the contribution agreements.

The second one I would say was the business model and the competitive nature of our procurement. We had an expectation when we set out that the ISPs—Internet service providers—would contribute roughly about \$3.7 million. Due to the competitive nature of the RFP process, we've seen them come in with more than the required amount.

It's a cost-sharing program. It's one-third federal, one-third provincial and then one-third ISPs. The ISPs have been coming in higher with their bids to try to secure that funding, and I think that's been very much key. Again, going back to the collaboration between all levels of government, it has really helped the program to be successful.

Mr. Marc Serré: Yes, that's why by putting federal leadership with the largest funding in history...then the Province of Ontario followed through with \$150 million to rural areas. Hopefully other provinces will do the same to leverage those funds.

The other aspect is that SWIFT works closely with mayors and councils. As an MP, as soon as the budget came out in 2019, I talked to every ISP in my area. The big telecoms haven't been very supportive, let's say, of rural areas. The key is to talk to the local ISPs in the private sector and talk to the mayors and councillors so that we can push to get that. If you don't apply, it's very difficult.

I want to thank SWIFT too for the feedback you've provided to the small ISPs about the universal broadband fund. We've made a lot of the changes with connect to innovate, connecting Canadians and now the universal broadband. There have been a lot of good changes. We got answers for the rapid response funding—which is unheard of—in 60 days and 32 days from some of the smaller providers to do Internet by 2021.

I want to make sure SWIFT continues its advocacy and pushes other municipalities to do the same.

Thank you.

The Chair: That's your time.

Now two and a half minutes go to Madame Larouche.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses today. All four of you have substantiated and clarified some of the realities women in rural areas face.

I want to shift the focus back to elderly women for a moment. They're being told to use the Internet to connect and stay in touch with friends and family. We need to take a hard look at what Internet service is costing them. To make ends meet, they shouldn't have to choose between buying groceries or paying their Internet bill to stay in touch with their family. Bringing down the cost of Internet service is something we really need to keep an eye on.

My next question is for whoever would like to answer.

On the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, we talk about an economic she-covery and the importance of ensuring women in rural areas have the same opportunities as women in urban areas. That means connectivity, yes, but also transportation.

How could the government invest more in transportation infrastructure for rural communities, not just urban areas? Do you have other suggestions to help women access more business opportunities?

Would anyone like to comment on the importance of doing more to help women start businesses, or the continuing gap between the opportunities available to women in urban areas and those available to women in rural communities?

• (1155)

[*English*]

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: I can say a few words on that.

My focus is clearly on connectivity and having that access. When I think of senior women and having that support system, part of that is connectivity, especially after COVID.

With that being said, a potential recommendation could be for the federal government to have grants specifically targeting female entrepreneurs who are looking to start online businesses or personal businesses. That would be one recommendation that I could make that would specifically target women getting back to work after COVID. We know that women typically have been working in sectors that have been negatively impacted by COVID, such as hospitality or retail. We've discussed today women working part time. They take on more home responsibilities and, therefore, may take a step back but are still looking for potential employment opportunities online and having that connectability is key to this.

There may be potential for grants that focus specifically on women to provide them with these opportunities and to make them aware that these opportunities exist.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Ms. Mathysen for two and half minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Thank you.

Ms. O'Brien, under the SWIFT 1.0 plan, you have 23% coverage so far with the help of the federal government with \$62 million.

You're asking for an additional \$313 million for SWIFT 2.0. Is that correct?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: I don't have the numbers offhand, but I know that, in partnership with the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus, they are looking for direct funding to support a SWIFT 2.0 project. They are seeking a funding commitment from both the province and the federal government. Again, it would be that layering effect that allows us to really leverage the contributions that are available.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I also kind of wanted to hear.... You had Denise Stonefish on the council and also a few women. I think of Mayor Joanne Vanderheyden, as an example.

What did you hear specifically from them in terms of their unique perspectives and how they saw things in terms of going forward with SWIFT 1.0 and 2.0?

I also kind of wanted to hear about the role of co-ops, the co-ops that played an important role in SWIFT programming. I don't know if you can fit that all in.

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: Okay. I will try to get it all in.

Chief Stonefish is on our board. She as well as Joanne, have been very supportive in moving forward. Unanimously, the SWIFT board is in agreement as well as the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus to seek additional funding. That aspect is there.

Chief Stonefish and Delaware Nation had a very unique project there. It was a pilot project with TekSavvy that has been very successful.

If I want to speak a little bit about the co-ops, too. They play an important role, especially in Oxford County. We had a co-op go in there, and we awarded a project that was serving premises that were about four premises per kilometre—some pretty rural areas.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Co-ops come in when the bigger providers won't touch it. Is that right?

Ms. Melissa O'Brien: I think we've had involvement from all levels. We've had involvement from some of the larger ISPs, the middle and the smaller. I think that's what makes SWIFT so successful. Again, each ISP has a role to play. We are seeing that through this business model. It has been successful in terms of delivering that and creating that competition in southwestern Ontario.

We've had a lot of smaller players now moving throughout the region, who may not have had that opportunity before. It's kind of creating a little bit more competition in that market space.

• (1200)

The Chair: That's wonderful. Thanks so much.

I want to thank all our witnesses for your work today. I appreciate it, and I appreciate your testimonies.

For the rest of the committee, we are going to go in camera. We'll suspend the meeting while you go find the other link and get onto it.

Thanks so much. I'll see you there.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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