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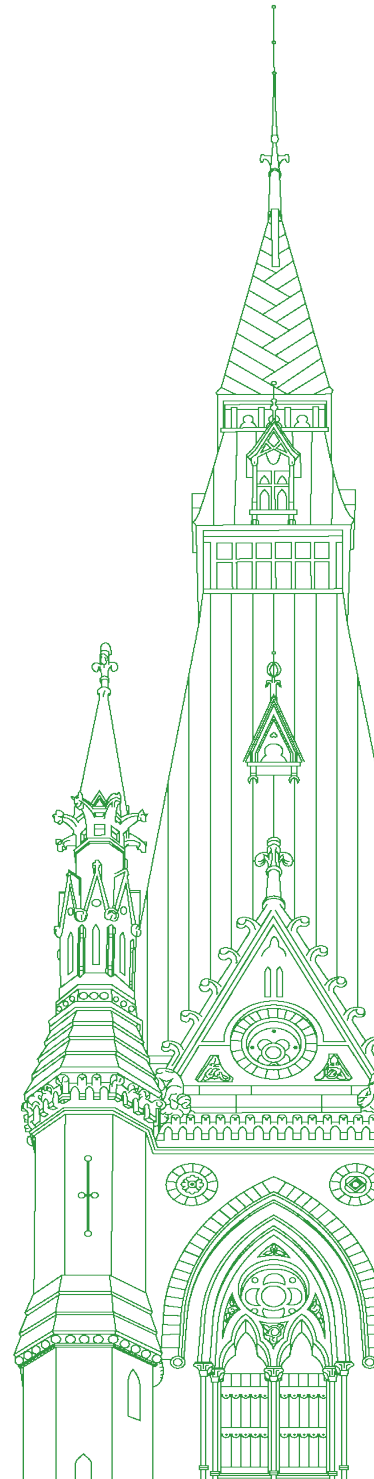
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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

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• (1440)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 22 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Mr. Chair, I have no interpretation.

The Chair: Do you want me to start over when this is resolved, Ms. Chabot?

Ms. Louise Chabot: There was no interpretation, but that's been resolved.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website, and this meeting is also televised.

Should any technical challenges arise, please let me know. Please note that we might need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the committee will commence consideration of the supplementary estimates (C), 2020-21: vote 1c under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and votes 1c, 5c, 10c and 15c under Department of Employment and Social Development, referred to the committee on Tuesday, February 16, 2021.

Also, pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will commence consideration of the main estimates 2021-22: vote 1 under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, votes 1 and 5 under Canadian Accessibility Standards Development Organization, vote 1 under Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, and votes 1 and 5 under Department of Employment and Social Development, referred to the committee on Thursday, February 25, 2021.

I welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks, followed by questions.

Appearing is the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. From the Canada Mortgage

and Housing Corporation, we have Evan Siddall, president and CEO; and Lisa Williams, chief financial officer.

Also, from the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Mark Perlman, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister; Benoît Long, chief transformation officer; Graham Flack, deputy minister of Employment and Social Development; Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister of Employment and Social Development and chief operating officer for Service Canada; Cliff Groen, senior assistant deputy minister, benefits and integrated services branch of Service Canada; Janet Goulding, associate assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; and Catherine Adam, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic and service policy branch.

That said, we will start with Minister Hussen, for five minutes.

Minister, welcome back to the committee. You have the floor.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members.

I'm happy to speak to the supplementary estimates (C) for 2020-21 and the main estimates for 2021-22 that pertain to my portfolio at Employment and Social Development Canada, ESDC.

Saying that our lives have changed significantly over the last year would be an understatement.

[Translation]

However, our government's priorities remain focused on protecting the health and financial security of Canadians. These priorities are supported by the appropriations requested in the main estimates, as well as the supplementary estimates (C) associated with the previous exercise. Today, I hope to provide you with some overarching context and answer any questions you may have.

[English]

ESDC's main estimates for 2021-22 present a total of \$82.4 billion in planned budgetary expenditures. Over 95% of these expenditures will directly support Canadians through the department's programs, services and initiatives.

Before I address the supplementary estimates (C), I'd like to point out that my department did not stop helping Canadians when Service Canada centres were forced to close because of the pandemic. On the contrary, we increased the number of call centre agents and, when possible, simplified applications for certain benefits. We made it easier for Canadians to access services online, while maintaining all the measures to safeguard private information.

The 2020-21 supplementary estimates (C) reflect these actions. The department requires additional funding to continue to improve client experience, both online and in person, as well as to modernize the way it delivers benefits. The department will continue to make sure that Canadians have access to the benefits they are entitled to.

I want to be very clear. The safety and well-being of Canadians remain the government's number one priority.

The pandemic has certainly taught us the importance of having a place to call home. That is why the Government of Canada will keep investing in measures to address urgent housing needs. This includes continuing with our 10-year, \$70-billion national housing strategy. We'll also continue to support communities to prevent and reduce homelessness and ensure the sector's ability to fight COVID-19 through increased investments in Reaching Home, Canada's homelessness strategy. This will build on our existing goals by helping those in immediate need. It also advances the progress being made through Opportunity for All, Canada's first poverty reduction strategy, to reduce poverty and achieve the United Nations sustainable development goal to end poverty by 2030.

We know that homeless Canadians are among our country's most vulnerable, and our government believes that no one anywhere in Canada should be left without a place to call home. That is why we are the first government in Canadian history to take responsibility and [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] additional investments of nearly \$400 million under Reaching Home. In the fall economic statement, we would sustain our support into 2021 with an additional investment of nearly \$300 million. This is on top of approximately \$215.3 million invested annually into communities across Canada through Reaching Home, from 2021 to 2024.

At the same time, we will continue to invest in such longer-term programs as the national housing co-investment fund and the rental construction financing initiative, for which funding is included in this year's estimates.

Mr. Chair, the pandemic continues to have a tremendous impact on Canadian families with young children. For Canadian families, access to affordable, high-quality child care is not a luxury; it is a necessity. We are laying the groundwork for a Canada-wide early learning and child care system, in partnership with provinces, territories, indigenous peoples and non-profit organizations, so that every Canadian has access to high-quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive child care.

The Government of Canada is also proposing new temporary support of up to \$1,200 per child under the age of six in 2021, to further assist families with young children. As well, during the pandemic the Government of Canada was pleased to provide \$350 mil-

lion for the emergency community support fund to help organizations that are providing very critical services to vulnerable Canadians.

The main estimates for 2021-22 and all of the items outlined in the supplementary estimates process today demonstrate our clear commitment to Canadians and to building back better. There is no doubt that the financial resources requested will enable us to continue to do this work.

Mr. Chair, I'll be very pleased to answer any and all questions you may have.

Thank you.

• (1445)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. I expect we do indeed have questions.

We're going to start with Mr. Vis, for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister Hussen.

Changes in non-budgetary planned expenditures reflect an increase in low cost loans for the construction of sustainable rental apartment projects and for the construction, repair and revitalization of affordable housing.

That's the introduction from the main estimates document.

I assume the first part of this increase for rental apartment projects is in support of the rental construction financing initiative announced in the 2020 fall economic statement. Is that correct, Minister?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's correct.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

Which other program is receiving funds for the low-cost loans outlined in the introduction, beyond the RCFI?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I would turn it over to either Deputy Graham or Mr. Siddall.

Mr. Brad Vis: I guess that would go to Mr. Siddall, then.

Mr. Evan Siddall (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): The national housing co-investment fund would be the other program through which we would give loans to low-cost housing—grants or loans, but loans as well.

Mr. Brad Vis: Can you provide a rough breakdown of the \$3.2-billion non-budgetary figure in the mains?

Mr. Evan Siddall: I can't offhand. I'm just looking to see if my CFO can. If not, we can respond in writing.

Lisa.

Ms. Lisa Williams (Chief Financial Officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): Yes, sure.

In terms of the \$3.2 billion, as Mr. Siddall indicated, there's approximately \$1 billion in relation to the co-investment fund. There are also monies in relation to RCFI, as you indicated—approximately \$2.3 billion. There is also money in there for the first-time home buyer program.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

I'll go to my next question. The rental construction financing initiative appears to be one of the most successful housing programs under this government's national housing strategy. When it started in 2017, there was \$2.5 billion allocated. This was then increased to \$14 billion, and now to \$25.75 billion. Is this an acknowledgement by the government that working with the private sector is the best way to increase Canada's purpose-built rental housing stock?

Second, is the government exploring other tools to encourage developers to increase the rental stock in this country, perhaps through tax incentives?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's an acknowledgement that the rental construction financing initiative works. Working with the private sector to build mixed housing or rental units, which also have a portion of deep affordability, is not the only way to address the housing crisis in our country.

We have a number of programs, as you are aware, through the national housing strategy. Increasing the budget a number of times for the rental construction financing initiative is a simple acknowledgement of the incredible demand for this program in the private sector, and it's effective on the ground.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Minister.

Would it be fair to say that money through the national housing strategy is going out the door faster through this initiative than any other program?

• (1450)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I wouldn't say that. The co-investment fund is also a very popular program that disburses loans and contributions—forgivable loans as well as straight loans—to proponents. They just happen to be mainly from the non-profit sector, whereas the rental construction financing initiative is usually used by the private sector.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Minister.

Turning to the first-time home buyer incentive, when I last received information on this government incentive, it showed that, over the course of eight months, only 16 people had used the program in Toronto, and a single person had used it in Vancouver. No stakeholder I've spoken with had a positive word to say about it. There are numerous reasons, but it boils down to the fact that it does not accomplish its primary objective of creating new first-time homeowners. Program users must already qualify for a mortgage to access it. No one who otherwise would be unable to purchase a home is now able to as a result of this program. What are the metrics CMHC uses to determine if the program has been a success or a failure? This question is for Mr. Siddall.

The objective of this program, as stated in CMHC's 2019 annual report, was to assist 20,000 first-time homebuyers in the first six months, and 100,000 first-time homebuyers from 2019 to 2022.

However, your amended corporate plan as submitted to the committee has “TBD” in the target column. Is CMHC's strategy to simply not establish a target so you can't be held accountable for failing to meet it? How many actually used the program in its first six months?

Thank you.

Mr. Evan Siddall: Let me give you a partial response, and if it's incomplete, Mr. Vis, we're happy to respond subsequently.

Those targets were established not by CMHC, but by the government. I will tell you that the number of approved applications so far has been over 10,000. The program has helped 10,648 Canadians and it has advanced \$193.4 million to them as of this moment.

Mr. Brad Vis: I have a follow-up question. I've heard from the mortgage brokers and from various banks that they incurred significant expenses to retool their IT set-ups in order to provide their clients access to the first-time home buyer plan. Did CMHC or ES-DC foresee this added cost, and did you chart out how these changes would impact the sector when the program started?

Mr. Evan Siddall: We did. We had consultations with a number of financial institutions in advance of implementing the program. Every time we make any single change, there are system changes required of financial institutions. That's not new information.

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes. Okay.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I just want to add, Mr. Chair, if I can—

Mr. Brad Vis: I have a tiny bit of time left, so I'm going to ask one more question, on the rapid housing initiative.

The government's response to my recent Order Paper question seeking clarity on the rapid housing initiative's project stream was unhelpful. With the exception of Quebec projects, the city and even the province of all projects was redacted.

During her appearance before the committee on February 4, Ms. Romy Bowers, senior vice-president at CMHC and future CEO, indicated that the government was on track to meet its RHI objectives. Is this still the case? Will all funds be allocated by March 31? How many units have been funded so far? Will CMHC commit to providing the committee with a complete unredacted list of the funded projects? Is the government planning a second round of funding for the project stream of the rapid housing initiative in its upcoming budget, if we ever see it? If so, could the details be provided to this committee in advance?

The Chair: We are well past time. There is no time left to allow for an answer to that question. If whoever is the appropriate person can provide us with an answer subsequently, that would be helpful, so that we don't shortchange the other members of the committee.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that.

The Chair: We will now go to Ms. Young, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be sharing my time with my colleague MP Han Dong.

Minister Hussen, it's good to see you again. I've had the good fortune of being on Zoom with you a number of times over the last week, and I appreciate you and your ministry officials joining us for the meeting today.

Last week, you virtually visited the city of London, where I represent the people of London West. You made a major housing announcement—over \$40 million to repair over 2,000 affordable community housing units in the city of London. All of the units will target vulnerable populations, including people who experience homelessness or are at risk of homelessness, people with disabilities and people experiencing domestic violence.

I think this is the biggest housing announcement in London in decades, and this speaks to how important the national housing strategy is for our government. But we need partners. I think you would agree that the City of London has been a great partner for these projects.

• (1455)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, absolutely. I have always said, and so has parliamentary secretary Adam Vaughan, that to meet and hopefully exceed our housing targets under the national housing strategy, we cannot do it alone. Yes, the federal government will bring leadership and resources, and a lot of the time the lion's share of the investments, but we need local partners as well to join us in our efforts to deal with these issues. The City of London is an example of that.

These 2,100 units will be repaired and rejuvenated, and will become more energy-efficient, saving the city and the housing authority more money. At the same time, this project will provide a better quality of life and a better housing experience for the residents of those units.

As we build more affordable housing fast, as we direct more help immediately to people through the Canada housing benefit, we must not forget to preserve, rejuvenate and renew the existing housing stock.

Ms. Kate Young: After the housing announcement, we held a round table discussion with a number of housing stakeholders, including community housing advocates, who were very supportive of what we were doing and what we were putting into place, but they were critical of the provincial government, in Ontario specifically.

I know this has been a problem in other provinces. I wonder what you take from this and whether you foresee the provincial government coming on board and ensuring that the investments we make will go even further.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. Again, in order to maximize and leverage the federal investments through the national housing strategy to build more affordable housing across the country in provinces such as Ontario, we also need the provincial partners to step up and provide the wraparound supports that are necessary for some of the residents of those future units.

In this way, you can see—for example, through the rapid housing initiative, the co-investment fund and other housing programs—that when municipal governments, non-profits, but especially provincial and territorial governments step up and provide the wraparound supports, then we're able to stretch those dollars and really create comprehensive housing that meets the needs of different populations based on their needs.

Ms. Kate Young: I'll throw it over to my colleague, MP Dong.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you, MP Young.

Minister and deputies, welcome to the committee.

Minister, can you give us a quick update on the rapid housing initiative? In particular, can you speak to the uptake of the program in urban versus suburban versus rural areas?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes. I think this has been an amazing program, a cutting-edge program that is incredible and has lived up to its name in terms of rapidly moving dollars to address the housing crisis in Canada. It is our government's response to the housing challenges that have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When we talk about rapid housing, we're not just referring to the housing being built quickly, but also to how quickly we've been able to conclude agreements with both cities and proponents, and also hopefully to make sure that the money is spent as well as committed very quickly.

In terms of the split between rural, urban, suburban and northern, I'll turn it over to Mr. Siddall to provide that context.

Mr. Han Dong: How are you doing in the rural areas?

Mr. Evan Siddall: We'll provide a specific breakdown after the fact. The major city stream, of course—the half billion upfront—is urban-weighted. The project stream tends to significantly benefit indigenous communities, which tend to be rural, but I'll give you a more specific breakdown in writing.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you very much.

Also, I want to talk about the Canada housing benefit, which is very important to provide support for newcomers, low-income families, indigenous people and veterans. Following what MP Young was saying, I know that for this particular program there are provinces that have not signed on to it. In your view, what's the holdup? Why don't we have all the provinces signed up to the Canada housing benefit?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Actually, most have. I think the Province of Quebec is the only one that hasn't signed—and, I believe, one more—but most of the provinces have signed, the latest being the Province of British Columbia, where we signed the Canada-British Columbia housing benefit to the tune of \$517 million.

The first province to join us in this housing benefit was Ontario, at the beginning of last year, in January. That program is worth \$1.46 billion, cost-shared between us and the Province of Ontario.

It is a very deep benefit because it targets certain populations—women and children fleeing domestic violence, people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of experiencing homelessness, and others. We're talking about a very deep benefit that enables people to transition from long-term stays in shelters into independent rental units, and also enables those who are starting to pay their rent to be able to stay in their homes.

• (1500)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

Minister, we are glad to see you here. I thank you for your availability.

You spoke in your opening remarks about the importance you place on the security of the citizens of Canada. You are well aware that earlier this week, for the second time, the CRA had to block the accounts of 800,000 citizens because of serious security issues.

Can you assure us that all measures are in place at Service Canada to protect the records of citizens who have an account there? Have you increased security measures?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you very much for your question.

[*English*]

I will turn it over to Ms. Lori MacDonald to answer that question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, in fact we've put a number of procedures in place over the course of this summer as a result of security concerns we had in terms of accessing personal information. We're pleased to say that we actually introduced a new multi-factor authentication system—a two-factor authentication system—to ensure that the personal information of Canadians accessing our services is even more secure than it had been in the past.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'd like us to talk about the Service Canada performance report. You know that the Auditor General recommended that Service Canada publish call centre performance information service standards in a transparent and consistent manner and audit the results to confirm their accuracy. You were to govern yourself accordingly in the short term.

Was all of this put in place?

Also, in your earlier testimony, there was some discussion about flexibility and the impact of the closure of the Service Canada call centres and mobile service centres. I think it is only appropriate that that not happen again.

Where do you stand on the performance report?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

I will rely on Ms. Lori MacDonald again to answer that question.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

I'm happy to say that over the course of the past year we've actually put two new services in place to augment...our vulnerable populations where we have not been able to re-establish the site visits. We hope to do that this year, once some of the guidelines have been increased in terms of access to travel and so on.

These two measures include two new alternative service delivery models to reach those more vulnerable populations. One is called "e-service", where clients can actually go online, fill out a form and send it to us, and we respond within 24 to 48 hours. We've actually reached many thousands of Canadians with this new service.

The second measure is through eCOLS, which is where we've used third party intervenors to support us and rule in northern communities to support particularly indigenous communities for service. That's a toll-free number where a Canadian can call the toll-free number—and we actually return their call as well—and we do all of their services for them online. This is also a system in terms of their being able to remain safely in their homes. Those two services are actually augmenting the service that is not available through the travel program.

In terms of the call centres, I'll turn to my colleague Cliff Groen. As Minister Hussen indicated, we have invested significant amounts of money in augmenting our service call centres this past year, including hiring up to 1,500 additional staff.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] to address some of the issues that were in place.

• (1505)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I would now like to turn to the rapid housing initiative.

As you know, this was supposed to be quick. In the second part of this project, applicants had until January to respond. Yet they only recently received a response to their application. Many of them are concerned that their project may not see the light of day.

What is happening with this project?

Will [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] their project be turned down because of the department's tardy response?

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The rapid housing initiative is a special program that our government introduced to respond to the housing challenges that have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Out of the \$1-billion program, the first \$500 million went to the 15 municipalities in Canada, including a number in Quebec, that have the highest number of individuals experiencing homelessness. The remaining \$500 million was dedicated to projects in municipalities, provinces, indigenous governing bodies, as well as non-profit organizations.

The reason the timelines were a little tight was that we wanted to make sure the money got out quickly so that we could address the challenges on the ground with respect to people experiencing homelessness.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Next we have Ms. Gazan for six minutes, please.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

It's nice to see you today, Minister.

Recently, our community was funded for a 24-7 safe space for women, girls, 2SLGBTQQIA folks [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. In fact, I personally referred three women in crisis today, as a life-saving measure.

You spoke with your colleague about the need for investment in housing, particularly for women. I would agree with you on that, particularly in the riding I represent, which Minister Bennett called “ground zero” for MMIWG. We currently have projects on the go, waiting to be funded, for women, girls, 2SLGBTQQIA folks—some coming from refugee communities, who have had to flee their countries because of sexual orientation.

Is your government committed to dealing with this critical crisis, particularly in ridings such as Winnipeg Centre, where women continue to lose their lives, including two who lost their lives during this past month?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the honourable member for that really important question. I recognize how real the need is for safe and affordable housing in Winnipeg, especially in the member's constituency, and that this is a priority for her community. That is why we've already invested \$228 million in the city of Winnipeg, representing over 6,200 units.

Just last week I joined Mayor Bowman of Winnipeg in announcing \$22.8 million through our rental construction financing initiative for 87 new housing units; 29 of those units are deeply affordable.

To support those who are in dire need, we quickly provided over \$20 million [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] \$12.5 million through the rapid housing initiative just for Winnipeg, so that they may use it the way they see fit for rapid housing solutions.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, because we have a limited amount of time, I want to remind you that the PBO report just came out citing a shortage of 9,000 core housing units and indigenous families in core housing need. Although I appreciate the investments—I will take any investment, because we are in a crisis—we lost two other women the other week. It is a very pronounced crisis, and in fact the worst in the country.

I have another question in regard to that. For over 30 years, the federal government has promised to eradicate child poverty. Your government actually renewed this promise in 2018 and published a national poverty reduction strategy, with subsequent poverty reduction legislation in 2019.

Your strategy called for a human rights-based approach to poverty reduction, one that reflects principles that include universality, non-discrimination and equality. Yet the Canada child benefit, a crucial mechanism for reducing child poverty, excludes parents with precarious immigration status, even though many work in Canada legally and file personal income tax.

This is a very pronounced problem, certainly in my riding, where families are just struggling to get by because they do not qualify for that tax benefit. Is it normal for a human rights approach to poverty reduction to exclude refugee claimants and parents with undocumented immigration status?

• (1510)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I can speak, of course, to our government's ambition to eradicate child poverty and to make sure that we continue our investments in the Canada child benefit. You've seen, in the fall economic statement, our commitment to increase the Canada child benefit for families with children under the age of six. You saw in July 2020 that we increased the Canada child benefit permanently yet again. Then on May 20, 2020, we had a one-time payment of up to \$300 for each child receiving the Canada child benefit.

We'll continue to—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm sorry, Minister. Again, I appreciate those investments. This still doesn't respond to those who are being left behind, those with precarious immigration status.

I'm wondering whether, to ensure that families with precarious status receive access to the child benefit to support their children, your government would commit to acting immediately by repealing paragraph 122.6(e), which ties eligibility to immigration status.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I would say that our government is committed to eliminating child poverty and including as many families in the Canada child benefit as possible.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I ask this because families come to Canada, certainly with a great debt to come into Canada, struggling. We have many homes across the country, including in my riding, that are horribly overcrowded because of lack of financial support, knowing that child poverty is inexcusable. I ask this because I wonder how many high-income families accessed the one-time \$300 increase to the Canada child tax benefit in 2020.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll turn it over to Deputy Graham Flack for that answer.

Mr. Graham Flack (Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): We'd have to get back to you on the precise income distribution statistics for this.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack, and thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Next we're going to go to Mr. Tochor, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you very much.

This is to the minister, to start off. I'd like to give you the opportunity to commit to getting back to Mr. Vis in response to his last question.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm sorry, which question are you referring to?

Mr. Corey Tochor: It's Brad Vis's last question. Can you commit to getting back to him in writing?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I believe Mr. Siddall already committed to Mr. Vis.

Mr. Evan Siddall: I'm happy to confirm it.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Okay, great. I'll start my five minutes now.

As the seasons change, things can be quite predictable. The snow is melting, the Leafs are tanking now into the spring, and the Liberals must be planning a fall election, because they're bringing up the faulty idea of a national child care program.

I'd like to get the minister's comments on why, in the economic statement in 2020, your government said "Quebec can show us the way on child care" and promised that in budget 2021 you'll lay out a plan for national child care.

Minister, are you aware of some of the issues surrounding this campaign promise, which has been made for five elections and never implemented during a majority or minority Liberal government? Why would you say that we're going to follow Quebec's lead on this?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's because Quebec has achieved child care affordability and has closed the gap between men and women participating in the labour market. If you are opposed to that, that's fine, but—

Mr. Corey Tochor: You're aware of some of the issues though, Minister, are you not? Are you aware of some of the research?

• (1515)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: When we say that the Quebec system is the model, we will learn from both the successes as well as the challenges.

Mr. Corey Tochor: It's not the challenges, but some of the research that's coming out on the outcome, unfortunately, for these children.

One study is "Non-Cognitive Deficits and Young Adults Outcomes". Are you aware of that study?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: No, I am not.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Really? I'm surprised.

Just quickly, it's a study by professors from U of T, UBC and MIT—professors Baker, Milligan and Gruber. I'm just shocked that your officials didn't brief you on what they found.

Their report.... I'll just quote a little bit so that you have some background information on it:

...striking evidence that children are worse off in a variety of behavioural and health dimensions, ranging from aggression to motor-social skills to illness. Our analysis also suggests that the new childcare program led to more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships.

I'd like to point out that the work of these professors won the Canadian Economics Association 2009 Doug Purvis prize. This is not a Mickey Mouse study or questionable outcomes that have been exposed when looking at the actual outcome of the child.

Are you not aware of these issues that researchers have found?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I think, Mr. Chair, the honourable member is philosophically opposed to early learning and child care through public funding, and we'll just have to disagree on that, because I believe that—

Mr. Corey Tochor: Minister, I'm not opposed to the child care system, even in financial terms. We know that it would be expensive, and you guys love to spend money, but it still begs the question. You've fought five elections with the concept of national child care and have never implemented it.

You guys blow money on everything. I suspect it's not for a financial reason that you haven't done it. I believe that there are probably people in your department who know that unfortunately, the health outcomes and the issues that children face, if they—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Is there a question in there somewhere?

Mr. Corey Tochor: Yes. I'm just shocked that you would be blindly following one province with national child care without knowing some of the pitfalls. Do you not see some of the pitfalls? Are you not aware of any?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Every single jurisdiction in the world that has invested in high-quality and accessible child care has seen two benefits. One is a closing of the gap between men and women participating in the labour market. The second is better outcomes for children as a result of being exposed to high-quality, accessible and affordable early learning and child care.

This is not just a smart social policy—

Mr. Corey Tochor: Do you disagree with the research that has shown that there are questionable outcomes for children who have been cared for?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm happy to look at any research that you want me to look at, but I think we seem to have a disagreement philosophically about the benefits of early learning and child care for children.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Not at all. I believe—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Tochor.

We're going to go now to Mr. Vaughan, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): Thank you.

I almost felt like getting Madame Chabot to answer that question instead of the minister, to defend Quebec's system, but I'll ask a couple of other questions.

On the rental housing construction financing that Mr. Vis talked about, part of the goal of that is to get affordable housing in place so that the Canada housing benefit can then move in to make it deeply affordable.

The other component is having a portable benefit achieve that, as opposed to a higher capital investment in rental housing. Say you get a job working on the Site C dam that the New Democrats approved in B.C., and then you get a job working at Fort St. John. If you get a rent subsidy that's portable, you can move from Vancouver to Fort St. John and keep your benefit while you establish a new career on that project. That's part of the way our housing strategy is aimed at working.

Is that not why we have the rental housing construction financing and the subsidy, to create the deeply affordable and mobile benefit to help people?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. In addition to that, the developer must maintain a portion of the units as deeply affordable for a minimum of 20 years.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: So the next person coming along also gets the benefit of the investment.

• (1520)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: So we help two people with one investment.

Okay.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: An example is the recent RCFI announcement in Winnipeg. It's for 87 units, and 29 of those units are deeply affordable—meaning 30% or less of the average household income in Winnipeg—and the remaining ones are 80% of the average market rent.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: If the Conservative government in Manitoba, which has received our federal dollars for the housing benefit, would start spending those dollars on the housing benefit, we could help low-income households access those apartments as a way of deepening the affordability and extending the range of affordability for people in Winnipeg, but it takes a willing provincial government in Manitoba to do that.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely, of course. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, the federal government will always bring the capital dollars and the Canada housing benefit dollars, as well as the investments in rapid housing and co-investment funds, but we do need the provinces to also step up, both to provide the wraparound supports but also to meet us halfway in terms of the housing benefit and make sure that the housing benefit goes to priority populations.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: On the rapid housing, if the provincial governments across the country—in Saskatchewan, in particular, we had some trouble—would add the Canada housing benefit to rapid housing initiative proposals, you would have more success, because that long-term support through the Canada housing benefit is what makes rapid housing on a long-term basis a much more successful program, not for the governments involved, but for the people it's trying to serve.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, and it would actually leverage the federal investments to create even more affordable housing units through the provision of supportive services and other incentives like land and—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: But you need governments to contribute.

Mr. Siddall, in terms of the rapid housing, I know you've asked for a lot of information. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] as we execute the agreements and get the dollars out the door very quickly. I know the announcements are coming shortly. The projects that are on hold, though, create a catalogue of real estate assets across the country that could be scooped up by anybody if we sent the list out publicly right now, because they're effectively distressed assets.

Is that one of the reasons we have to be careful about disclosure and making sure that, while we can list maybe applicants' names, we can't list the addresses, because that would trigger a run on the market that would take them away from the affordable sector?

Mr. Evan Siddall: We're also looking at the national housing co-investment fund and the availability of those dollars to help support additional projects. To the extent that we can help them with that pile of money, we actually expand the effectiveness of that RHI process.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of Quebec, the issue is just executing agreements [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] projects. We are, in fact, in conversation with everybody who's been approved in Quebec, to get those contracts executed within a matter of days.

Mr. Evan Siddall: As far as Quebec is concerned, we have committed \$178 million out of the Canada-Quebec RHI agreement. That's \$57 million for the City of Montreal, \$7 million for Quebec City, and \$115 million allocated under the project stream that's being administered by the Société d'habitation du Québec.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Because we work directly with the cities, those dollars were actually forwarded to the cities in December, ahead of the project stream.

Mr. Evan Siddall: Correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Working directly with cities, as a federal government, allowed us to get more dollars into Quebec faster and, more importantly, get to more Quebecers faster.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the projects that are on hold, that haven't been approved but have met the qualifying standards, are you familiar [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] if the opposition supports the budget that's upcoming?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, absolutely. I am hopeful, and determined to make the case to have additional dollars for what has proven to be not only a very successful program but also a program that is very much needed from coast to coast to coast.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: There are a significant number of projects on that list that a budget in four or five weeks, or whenever it is, we don't know.... A budget that comes sooner will allow us to get to those projects without a reapplication process, thereby reducing costs for the applicants. That's one of the goals we have as we move to end chronic homelessness in this country.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes. In fact, to answer the member's question, the number of applications, the number of viable projects that responded to the calls for proposals for the rapid housing initiative was simply incredible. It shows that the need is there, but it also shows that there are partners ready and able to put together shovel-ready projects, viable projects that are much needed.

I, along with the honourable member and others, believe that we should definitely try to find more money.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: But if you want to boost your projects, you have to get the provinces on board.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

My question is going to be about benefits and Service Canada.

As you said, Minister, there are many benefits that have been put in place to support workers or businesses. However, I want to bring to your attention the fact that many files stalled when workers applied for the Canada recovery benefit.

Service Canada would tell them that a file in their name was already open and that blocked their application. This happened to hundreds of thousands of people. There were delays of seven to eight weeks, even though people were entitled to benefits [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. On this issue, there are still documents that say the forms are not tailored to their reality. Asking a self-employed person if he's looking for a job may not be the right question to ask. They are looking for clients. There are no jobs, because businesses are closed. All of this makes for delays.

Can you assure us of smooth and timely services?

• (1525)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for your question. I will ask Ms. MacDonald to answer it.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you for your question.

[English]

I'll ask Cliff Groen to come in.

[Translation]

Mr. Cliff C. Groen (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Benefits and Integrated Services Branch, Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you for your question.

Up-to-date delivery of benefits is a very high priority for our department. That is why, since the employment insurance program was re-launched in October, more than 98% of all claims have already been processed and more than 94% were processed according to service standards.

On the other hand, we know that clients have sent applications to Service Canada and then to the Canada Revenue Agency. We need to work out a number of details with these clients, before we can determine if they can apply to the agency. The Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada have a process in place to handle these applications on a priority basis.

We are committed to addressing this issue.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Groen and Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Finally, we have Ms. Gazan for two and a half minutes, and then we're going to meet your hard stop, Minister.

Ms. Gazan, go ahead, please.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

I have often said, Minister, that the Manitoba provincial government has become the grandest excuse for the feds not to get around. I just want to remind you that this government gave Imperial Oil \$120 million for workers, and handed [Technical difficulty—Editor] to their shareholders. Again, to me that is not an acceptable excuse when people are losing lives.

We know that the federal government has released funds here and there, and that's certainly been appreciated. I have a question about the urban, rural and northern indigenous housing strategy with indigenous-led governance structure and capital funding. When is this going to be released?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the honourable member for that really important question.

We have made significant investments in a distinctions-based housing strategy with the three national indigenous organizations. We continue to invest immensely in urban indigenous housing projects.

There is an effort now to consult and co-develop an urban, rural and northern housing strategy, but while we are doing that, the investments continue. As you have heard from Mr. Siddall, under the rapid housing initiative there are a substantial number of successful projects in indigenous communities.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, thank you.

That doesn't answer my question, though. We know that even in the city of Winnipeg, as I mentioned, 9,000 indigenous families are in core housing need. We know [Technical difficulty—Editor] throughout the country, from frontline organizations and indigenous organizations, that we need an urban, rural and northern indigenous housing strategy now.

When will that be released?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I couldn't agree more with the honourable member.

We've made significant investments to support urban indigenous housing proponents, and we want to make sure that we continue those investments from the budget 2017 commitment of \$225 million for the national housing strategy. We prioritized projects for indigenous communities across the housing spectrum—

• (1530)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, Minister, and I do—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Minister, we've reached the end of the appointed hour.

We want to thank you, Minister. We know your initial appearance on the supplementary and main estimates was sidetracked by a matter that was referred to us by the House. We appreciate your making yourself available during a constituency week to come in and make sure that we got in under the deadline for reporting, so thank you for being with us.

We realize you're going on to something else right away. I am sure we'll be seeing you again before long.

I know many of your officials are going to be staying on to accompany Ms. Qualtrough, but for those who are leaving, thanks again for your support, and thank you for what you do.

We are going to suspend for two or three minutes while we do sound checks for the incoming panel.

Thanks, again, Minister. Have a good day.

• (1530)

(Pause)

• (1534)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Today the committee is meeting on its study of supplementary estimates (C) 2020-21, and the main estimates 2021-22.

• (1535)

[Translation]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses to the continuation of our discussion.

They will have five minutes to make their opening statements, which will be followed by questions.

[English]

We are pleased [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion.

She is joined by Mark Perlman, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister; and Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister at Employment and Social Development and chief operating officer for Service Canada.

Minister, welcome back to the committee. It's good to see you again.

You have five minutes for your opening statement, starting now.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to join you again today.

[English]

Today, as was said, I'll be speaking to the supplementary estimates (C) for 2020-21, and the main estimates for 2021-22 for Employment and Social Development Canada.

The supplementary estimates (C) for 2020-21 request an additional \$225 million in voted authorities, offset by a decrease of \$708 million in statutory authorities. This decrease is due primarily to updated forecasts for the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada emergency student benefit.

The 2021-22 main estimates present planned expenditures of \$82.4 billion, which is an increase of \$13.8 billion from the original planned budgetary expenditures for 2020-21.

Let me explain.

[Translation]

Since the beginning of the pandemic, our government has provided significant support to Canadians. In the Fall 2020 Economic Statement, we outlined our plan to enable a strong recovery in Canada. The requested funding will help us put that plan into action.

[English]

The main estimates include funding for our Canada recovery benefits. The supplementary estimates (C) include funding to support students, to improve youth programming and to improve gen-

der and diversity outcomes and skills programming. They also include funding for Canadians with disabilities.

Let me provide you with more details.

Within weeks of the first lockdown, we set up the CERB, a key-stone piece of economic support that helped more than eight million Canadians.

[Translation]

This past summer and fall, we outlined our plan to continue to support the nation's workforce throughout the pandemic. We transitioned the CERB to a simplified employment insurance program and introduced the Canada Recovery Benefit to provide income support to workers still affected by COVID-19.

[English]

For Canadians who didn't qualify for EI, like the self-employed and those in the gig economy, we introduced a complementary new suite of recovery benefits: the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery sickness benefit, and the Canada recovery caregiving benefit.

At the time, we said we would monitor labour market changes and make adjustments as needed. We've done that and are following through on our commitment to continue to provide certainty for workers.

[Translation]

That is why, on February 20, we introduced Bill C-24 to temporarily increase the maximum number of weeks available for regular EI benefits. We also plan to increase the number of weeks available for the Canada Recovery Benefit through regulation.

[English]

Today, through the main estimates, we are requesting an increase totalling \$10.3 billion for the three temporary recovery benefits so that we can continue to support workers.

Next, I'd like to speak to the impact the pandemic has had on Canada's young people. Many have faced financial hardships and lost employment opportunities. As a government, we stepped up to support them. One of the first things we did was to put a pause on student loan repayments. We then introduced a comprehensive emergency package for students and young Canadians, which included boosts to job programs, direct income support, and increased financial assistance through grants and loans.

[Translation]

We know how important education is. Students have told us loud and clear that they want more financial support.

[English]

Now let's talk about job creation. We are committed to creating a million jobs, restoring employment to pre-pandemic levels, making the largest training investment in Canadian history and creating opportunities for young people. We are focused on strengthening workers' futures by ensuring they have the skills they need for the changing nature of work and the labour market.

• (1540)

[Translation]

We will do this by using several tools, including immediate training to allow workers to gain skills quickly. We also plan to enhance youth programs and improve gender equality outcomes, as well as diversify skills development programs. For example, we will significantly expand the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy to provide more paid employment opportunities for young Canadians who face barriers to entering the labour market.

[English]

This year, the Canada summer jobs program is aiming to have a total of 120,000 jobs for students. That's 50% more than last year.

For persons with disabilities, the pandemic has been particularly difficult and has exacerbated barriers to inclusion. We've taken a disability-inclusive approach to our pandemic response from the start to ensure that whatever we do will help persons with disabilities. The supplementary estimates (C) provide funding for a targeted one-time payment of up to \$600 to help Canadians with disabilities with the extra expenses incurred during the pandemic.

[Translation]

There's still a lot to do. That's where our plan for inclusion of people with disabilities comes in.

[English]

We're working on a plan that will include a new disability benefit modelled after the GIS for seniors, a robust employment strategy and a better process to determine eligibility for government disability programs and benefits.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you for your attention to these estimates. I'd also like to take the opportunity to thank you all for your and your respective party's support and consent in the House during the most challenging times of the crisis, times when Canadians have needed help the most and we have come together.

[Translation]

Together, we can give Canadians the support they need to get through the pandemic.

I would be happy to answer your questions now.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We're going to proceed with questions, beginning with Ms. Dancho, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I want to ask you about the CELA and NNELS funding. As you know, I raised this with you in the House of Commons as well. Your department provides \$4 million annually to these organizations to provide reading materials for those who have visual disabilities, those who have blindness, those who have cerebral palsy and the like. They alerted me two weeks ago that you were planning to phase out that funding by \$1 million annually.

I see today that you've put out a news release, just within the hour, I believe, concerning these funding cuts, but I'm not clear on whether you're committing to a \$1-million one-time bump in their funding and whether you're committing to not cutting this funding next budget year and beyond. If you can clarify that, it would be great.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question.

I had the opportunity, as I had forecast to all of you, to meet with NNELS and CELA yesterday to talk about our mutual objective to transition the accessible publishing to make books accessible from the start. In recognition of the fact that this transition has stalled as a result of the pandemic, I was able to provide the organization with assurances that they will be receiving \$1 million more for the 2021-22 fiscal year in order to bring their amount back up to \$4 million, as it has been previously.

We agreed that the long-term vision for accessible publishing is to transfer to the publishing industry the responsibility for making materials accessible, that it shouldn't be incumbent on non-profits to continue to do this, and that we should have accessible publishing, but that this will take time.

Over the next month, we're going to work with them to see what funding level should stay in the future and, in fact, where that funding should come from. Should the relationship with ESDC, for example, peter out so there is a new relationship with the Canada book fund or with the publishing industry directly?

That was an excellent conversation yesterday, and we're on the same page.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That's great. Thank you for that.

It's not a new funding bump, then; it's just a maintenance of their \$4 million in funding. I'm encouraged to hear that you're maintaining that funding this year, but it sounds like the commitment for years following is still up in the air. I appreciate your response.

I wanted to ask you about the Canada training benefit. This was announced, as I'm sure you remember, in the 2019 federal budget. It was a program that was going to provide a non-taxable Canadian training credit of \$250 a year. It was going to provide EI support of 55% of the wage for four weeks for folks to take off and go and seek training. It was also going to provide a leave provision for folks to secure their employment while they go and seek further training.

We've heard a lot about this in the last 12 months with COVID and the COVID experience—that people need reskilling. My understanding from this 2019 budgetary announcement was that this was supposed to be launched late in 2020, but to my knowledge, it has not been launched. Are you planning to relaunch or reimagine this program?

• (1545)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's a little bit of both, to be honest with you. The training environment has changed so significantly with COVID. In the fall economic statement, we made a commitment to make the largest investment in training, so right now we're working with stakeholders to understand the best way to support workers needing upskilling, different skills or transitional skills, including what the training benefit could do for a broader number of Canadians.

As you said, it was originally conceived to be available for people who were working and were able to take time off to upskill or retrain, but right now we are also very focused on the people who aren't working and who aren't necessarily in the EI system.

We definitely think there's a role to play for the training benefit, and we are working on a comprehensive approach to training, working with the provinces and territories. A component of that will be the training benefit, but there are no details yet to share beyond that. I apologize.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Can you provide an estimated timeline of when we would see something comparable to the Canada training benefit?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll get Graham to talk about the elements of the training benefit that are in play right now, but of course with not being able to share the approximate timing of the budget, we will have to wait and see. I'm sorry.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, I understand. That's fine. It sounds as though there's something coming in the budget about that. We'll be looking keenly for that. Thank you, Minister.

I don't have too much time left in my first round, so I'm just going to jump a little bit all over the place here. Can you tell me when you're planning to reopen the Service Canada locations? They've been closed, as we know, for almost 12 months now.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll get Lori to give the exact details on openings. I believe some are already open.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you very much for the question, Mr. Chair.

In fact, we have 317 Service Canada centres; 309 of them have opened. We were closed from March 27 until the first week of July. We've incrementally opened all of our Service Canada centres [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] put in to reach people in their homes so they did not have to come into our Service Canada centres.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay, but that's not what I'm hearing from my constituents. I'll have to check on the ground to make sure our Kildonan—St. Paul one [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] except we were lacking a lot of services in that regard. I'm very encouraged to hear that you're actively making sure these are all open across the country.

Minister, with my remaining time, I just want to circle back to....

Well, actually, we'll have to wait until the next time. I have only 10 seconds left. I'm going to ask you about a recent announcement for Manitoba. Thanks.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Next we're going to go to Mr. Turnbull.

Go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister. It's great to have you here. Thanks to you and your officials for all your hard work during this pandemic. It's always great to have you at committee.

I have two lines of questioning. One is in regard to supports for people with disabilities, and then I will have more questions on youth employment and the skills strategy. Having heard the voices of people who are impacted by policy decisions, I know it is important to our government and I know it's important to you. We've talked about that before.

Can you tell us how you are ensuring that we are taking a disability-inclusive approach to our response to the pandemic?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question.

It was really exciting and beneficial to have the Accessible Canada Act as the backdrop or as the foundation of the work we could do in our pandemic response to ensure that it was disability-inclusive. We immediately struck what we call the COVID disability advisory group, or CDAG, which really advised our government on pandemic response and how our decisions could or would be impacting people on the ground with lived experience with disabilities. They were just invaluable in terms of the advice they gave and the issues we were able to address.

In partnership with the disability community, they provided advice and expertise to other government departments, such as Public Health, Public Safety, VAC, and ESDC. For example, they identified provincial issues, and that let me and other cabinet colleagues bring forward these issues to our PT colleagues.

We signed a UN statement saying that we would take a disability-inclusive approach, which was signed by over 100 countries. Of course, their effort and their advice resulted in the one-time payment of \$600 to over 1.6 million Canadians. They said we needed more employment supports as people transitioned to working at home, so we created the workplace accessibility stream of the opportunities fund. Quite frankly, across the board we were able to understand the impacts that anything we were doing would have on this particularly vulnerable population.

I think, quite frankly, that the way we handled the pandemic will be a baseline for emergency response in the future. No government of Canada will ever go back to not being disability-inclusive.

• (1550)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you for that. I really appreciate the commitment to building lived experience into everything we're doing and seeing how a disability-inclusive approach can cut across all programming and all supports and all services as a lens that we look through. I really appreciate your leadership on that.

I've heard from constituents, and I certainly agree with them—and I'm sure you agree—that we need to do more to support persons with disabilities. As you know, Minister, in my riding I have the world-renowned Abilities Centre, which is a massive organization that sees itself as an inclusion incubator. They're doing all kinds of great work right here in Whitby.

The government has committed to a disability inclusion plan. Can you tell us how the plan will address certain challenges that persons with disabilities have faced, and particularly those that they've faced during the pandemic?

I really feel passionate about this. I know my constituents do, too, so any more information on that would be helpful.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question. I give a big shout-out to the Abilities Centre in Whitby. It's a fantastic organization and facility.

Again, with the Accessible Canada Act as a backdrop, and now having the experience of the pandemic and the CDAG, we're moving very quickly to act. That's why we did announce that we would be creating this disability inclusion action plan, because we know that many Canadians with disabilities live in poverty, are unemployed or precariously employed, and lack the supports they need.

It will include, as I said in my opening remarks, a robust employment strategy, meaning we'll support workers and entrepreneurs with disabilities. We'll work with employers to be more disability-inclusive and confident and to understand the business case for disability inclusion.

It will also include the Canada disability benefit, which is a direct income supplement for low-income working-age Canadians with disabilities, modelled after the GIS, aimed at improving financial independence and security.

Finally, and perhaps most generationally impactful, it will include a modernization of how the Government of Canada assesses eligibility for disability-related programs so that we ensure that the challenges we faced in delivering the one-time COVID payment do not occur again. Honestly, it's well overdue to have a more dignified way of assessing disability and to be able to communicate directly with Canadians with disabilities.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: It's very exciting. Thank you for that update.

I'll shift with my last minute or so to a question about the Canada summer jobs program. I met with an organization in my riding today called Nova's Ark. They're doing programming for children, youth and adults with exceptionalities. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] offer really great outdoor programming, including animal therapy and all kinds of “out of the box” programming, as they call it. It's a wonderful space and facility. They rely heavily on the Canada summer jobs program, and they've said that they really believe in this program and how much it supports them, but they really want to see the flexibilities in that program that we introduced during COVID-19 continue.

Is there any plan for those flexibilities to be continued?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: The quick answer is yes. In fact, we've kept the flexibilities, recognizing how helpful and how much more adaptive they could make these employment experiences if they could make them part-time, if the number of weeks could be longer. Some of the jobs we're funding to 100%, which is really important.

As I said in my remarks, we're kind of doubling down. Last year we funded 80,000 jobs. This year we're funding 120,000 jobs. It is a real cornerstone piece of our youth employment and skills strategy. Employers love it. Young people love it. MPs love it. It really has a great track record.

• (1555)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Definitely. Thank you so much, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

Good afternoon, Madam Minister. It's good to see you again. You've made yourself very available to the committee. I commend you for that.

You won't be surprised that I want to talk to you about employment insurance. You talked about the many measures that have been put in place—I won't list them all—to meet the needs of workers. Now, we know that all of these measures are temporary and that they will end in September, in six months.

With respect to the 2021-22 budget, how did you plan your requests for additional appropriations to accommodate this? On what basis did you make your requests? Are these permanent measures starting in September? Will there be enhanced employment insurance measures, measures that take into account the fact that sickness benefits will be increased?

How have you prepared your credits for this reality?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for your question, which is very important.

Employment insurance appropriations and planning are very complicated. It's very important to have the exact amounts.

So I will ask Mr. Flack or Mr. Perlman to give you the exact amounts.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, with all due respect, I am not looking for the amounts, but rather for the basis on which you prepared them.

More clearly, have you estimated that as of September 2021, it will be the status quo EI rules that will apply?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm sorry. I understand now.

We will use the amounts and the flexibility until September, and then we will go back to the pre-pandemic system. We have not yet decided to change the system in September. At least that is my understanding, and I would like Mr. Perlman to correct me if I don't have the correct information. We have not made a decision on what to do next.

Mr. Graham Flack: I can do it, Minister.

It's just that the estimated numbers that are in front of you reflect decisions that have already been made by the government [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. They don't take into account decisions that might be made in a subsequent budget. The numbers before you do not take into account potential additional measures.

Ms. Louise Chabot: If I understand correctly, as of September 25, it will be the pre-pandemic system for both the sickness benefits that were to be increased and the regular benefits. That's clear. Everything has to be done by September 25.

My second question is going to be about the Canada summer jobs program. Since this is a very important program, do you have any additional money or appropriations or indexing of money from previous years for this program?

I'll tell you why. We are already seeing an increase in applications among applicant agencies for a very simple reason. Because of the health measures and rules that they have to respect, it takes more people to meet the same needs, whether it is for festivals, summer day camps or youth activities in community groups. Consequently, the Canada summer jobs budget would have to be increased significantly. Is this planned?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes. We have decided to provide more jobs for young people. Mr. Perlman can verify that as well, but I believe we earmarked \$420,900,000 in 2021-22. Is that correct, Mr. Perlman?

Ms. Louise Chabot: So—

Mr. Graham Flack: I can answer that, Minister—

Ms. Louise Chabot: Is this different from last year?

• (1600)

Mr. Graham Flack: I just want to clarify that this is the \$447 million announced in the economic statement last fall. It is before you in Parliament in Bill C-14. Before any spending is committed, Parliament will obviously have to make a decision, but these amounts were announced in the fall 2020 economic statement.

Ms. Louise Chabot: If I understand correctly, there is additional money for Canada summer jobs, as compared to the previous year.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: For people with disabilities, this is concerning, Minister.

We know that they have been particularly hard hit. In fact, there is a Statistics Canada study on this. They have suffered losses of work hours, job losses, they have difficulty receiving promotions, they have a high unemployment rate. Are there any substantial measures, other than the one and only amount announced, to support the reality of people with disabilities?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We are putting more money into the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities. We will create an employment strategy for people with disabilities. We plan to change the Government of Canada's internal process for eligibility of people with disabilities for Government of Canada services and programs. We are working hard on this. In these documents today, there is additional money, particularly for the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities. Once we complete the plan, there will be additional money.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for being here today, Minister.

You know that many Canadians live in very deep poverty. Being able to access the CERB was a matter of life and death for many low-income Canadians, many of whom are also from BIPOC communities and from disabled communities.

I know that you spoke about the \$600 one-time benefit. That is not adequate. We know that many disabled persons didn't even qualify, so I hesitate to celebrate the continued discrimination against disabled persons in this country.

Yet, in December, while we knew all of this, some 441,000 Canadians were told that their CERB eligibility was under review and that they might have to repay their benefit. Your office has even gone on record, Minister, to say that no one will face penalties or interest as a result of their CERB review and that repayment will be flexible and sensitive to individual circumstances, but that's not enough.

The fact of the matter is that low-income people cannot afford to make even small repayments and they need CERB repayment amnesty to avoid falling into deeper poverty. Ten dollars is a lot when you're living in poverty.

My question, Minister, is this: How many low-income Canadians are under review for their CERB eligibility?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question.

I think it's important to start from the place CRA was at in December in terms of sending out these letters, which was to work with Canadians to get their 2019 taxes filed, to provide proof of income—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, my question—

The Chair: Ms. Gazan, you took a minute and a half to ask the question. She's entitled to a minute and a half to attempt to answer it.

Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: —with the hope that many of those would actually be eligible for CERB. You are correct that we are committed to working with those who may have financial obligation to repay, but not right now. Nobody is required to do that right now. There won't be any penalties or interest. We've announced that anybody who might owe taxes on CERB has a year to pay those taxes without any interest accruing as a result of that obligation.

You're right. It's really tough, and we know it's tough. We are working very hard with many Canadians to chart a course for them that works for them, however little those payments may be.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, I think it's easy for us with very well-paid jobs to talk about how tough things are, but my question is, can you tell us why your government is set on sending tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Canadians into poverty by refusing to grant CERB repayment amnesty? I ask that because this will make the difference between people staying housed or becoming unsheltered.

• (1605)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I appreciate that perspective, and I am indeed sensitive to the lived experience, particularly as I've heard from people with disabilities across the country about how tough it is and how tough it's been. I can't give you an exact figure, because we are still working with people to determine eligibility. The win is to get as many people as possible to be eligible for this and to work with them on their income sources and the combination of the best 12 months.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Minister. My goal is to keep people off the streets.

I just want to switch gears a little bit with a question around the 15-week attachment leave for adopted kinship and [*Technical difficulties—Editor*]. The 2019 mandate letter includes the introduction of a 15-week leave for adoptive parents, including LGBTQ2S families.

When will we see the introduction of this 15-week leave, and can you commit to ensuring that it will include kinship and customary care families?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for bringing this up.

I met recently with an organization representing adoptive parents across the country, who are indeed eager to see this as part of a modernized EI program. I committed to them, and can commit to you, that indeed it will be part of the way forward, as we said it would be and, quite frankly, as it might already have been had we not been mired in a pandemic over the past year.

I don't know enough about the relationships of the particular family types you're talking about, but the idea, to my mind, is that it would be as inclusive as possible and reflect the way families are.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Just with the limits on my time, Minister, it was in your mandate letter—

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I know.

Ms. Leah Gazan: —so if you could follow up with my office with a response....

On the student loan repayment moratorium, we know that industries that employ young people have been hard hit during the pandemic. The service industry is one example. Young people currently have fewer job options, and those that are available are often low-paying jobs and put them at higher risk for COVID-19.

On November 25, the House unanimously adopted a motion to extend the pause on federal student loan repayments. Why have we not seen action on this? When will you pause federal student loan repayments?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Helping to provide relief for students' debt obligations was, as you know, one of the first things we did when the pandemic hit. In the fall economic statement, we have committed—I think it was around \$329 million, but I'll confirm—to provide immediate relief to all student loan borrowers through a one-year interest waiver, which I guess is the best way to describe it.

Again, we're looking at the way forward through our budget preparations, and I will have more to say on additional supports for students in the coming months.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Thank you, Minister.

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

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I mentioned, Minister Qualtrough, I would like to ask you a bit about the recent \$47-million announcement for training in Manitoba that you made I believe last week or the week prior.

As I'm sure you're aware, about a third of Manitoba's food and service hotel jobs were wiped out, which is about 13,200 jobs that we've lost, and a lot of these jobs, as was mentioned on this panel previously, are dominated by women, newcomers and young people.

Did you put that lens on that \$47 million? Has this funding changed from previous pre-pandemic funding agreements? I'm wondering if we have adapted our funding model to suit the new world.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Absolutely. It's a great question. Thank you.

As part of the \$1.5 billion we announced to go directly to provinces and territories to beef up access to training for workers, we made sure that the terms and conditions of those agreements focused on workers who are most in need. The reality is that many workers could benefit from training, and much more investment needs to be made in this country into training, whether it's upskilling, reskilling, transitioning from one job to another and, absolutely, we're really focused on the groups of individuals who are the most vulnerable and the furthest away from employment.

● (1610)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Are you able to make any of those terms available to the committee in terms of that funding agreement?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Graham, is it possible to make a kind of a standard set of terms and conditions available?

Mr. Graham Flack: I'll check, Minister. I think so.

There are two different streams. There are the streams of federal funding; those have our own terms and conditions, and indeed we can make those available. There has been a focus on those most distant from the workforce and those most impacted. Then there are the federal-provincial agreements themselves, including the safe restart agreement and the \$1.5 billion after that. That was made public, a broad set of agreements—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Right. Pardon me, Mr. Flack. I'm looking to see whether they have changed from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic, so if you can provide the ones that you have done before the pandemic and now, I would like to see how our federal government has adapted these agreements, given the new economy we're living in now.

I did want to ask a bit, Minister, about funding for women specifically. I know this is a theme of today's HUMA committee.

In Manitoba specifically, we have 7.1% of women unemployed, compared to 1.5% of men, so it is impacting us quite significantly. We know that 1.5 million women were immediately laid off at the onset of the pandemic; 500,000 remain unemployed and 100,000 have left the workforce altogether because there are no jobs available to them. I'm quite concerned about this, as you know. In the last 30 years—my lifespan—all of those gains for women in employment have been wiped out.

I was encouraged but then discouraged by a recent announcement by your government to formulate an 18-woman task force to inform your government on how to handle this. It's a women-led task force, which I appreciate, but I was disappointed to see that none of the industries that have been hardest hit and are particularly dominated by women—we're talking service industry, retail, accommodations and personal services jobs—have voices at that table.

Did you have input in this task force? Are you disappointed that none of these industries dominated by women and dominated by the employment losses are represented in this task force?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

From the beginning, we have put a gender lens on the decision-making we've done and on the benefits and supports we've provided, and we have also, as you have, clearly watched how women have been both frontlined and sidelined by this pandemic. I am deeply concerned and share your concern on this.

We have committed to creating an action plan for women in the economy, which will be guided by the task force that you're talking about, and we have attempted to have broad representation in this group. I was not the lead on this, but I did provide some input.

I'd be happy to perhaps work with you offline to see if we can maybe bolster the gaps you've identified. I'd be happy to do that, for sure, again with the understanding that I'm not the lead. I'd be happy to facilitate that.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I know that your department, as you well know, provides the bulk of the supports for those who have been laid off. I know you're very aware that those are women-dominated and that these are the industries they come from, so I was just surprised that this task force that was announced to quite a bit of fanfare, I have to say, did not include any representation from women-led industries that have been hardest impacted.

I want to encourage you very strongly to reach out to the deputy prime minister and perhaps recommend that she ensure there is representation from these industries. I am very concerned about women-led industries.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I will definitely follow up. I give you that commitment.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Next we have Mr. Long.

Go ahead, please, for five minutes.

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

Good afternoon, colleagues.

Thank you, Minister, again for your regular availability to this committee. We really appreciate it.

Minister, I want to say it's refreshing to work with somebody like you who is so passionate about her portfolio. It was a pleasure to work with you on the Accessible Canada Act, Bill C-81, in the last Parliament. I know it's transformational legislation. Again, thank you for your commitment.

Minister, I do want [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] to talk about CERB. I know MP Gazan talked about CERB with respect to poverty, and I think we all know that without CERB hundreds of thousands of Canadians would have fallen into poverty.

Minister, my question is this. When the Canadian economy shut down due to the pandemic, it was evident that the employment insurance system would not be able to handle the volume of claimants who would be applying. I think all of us MPs could certainly attest to that, given the calls we were getting into our offices as our government launched the Canada emergency response benefit, the CERB, to support Canadians who were unable to work. This benefit ended up providing direct financial support to more than eight million Canadians, ensuring they had the help they needed to pay their bills and support their families.

I will be blunt. It was shocking to me to hear, especially from Conservative members, comments about the CERB being too generous. What would have happened if our government had not taken action to create the CERB?

Thank you, Minister.

• (1615)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's a great question. Absolutely, the EI system wasn't set up to respond quickly or to the number of workers we wanted to help, which is where the birth of the CERB came from. We were there for over eight million people, workers, who

weren't able to work because of COVID-19, to ensure they had income support.

COVID, we knew, would impact workers who lost their jobs. We knew it would impact workers whose child care or day program options weren't available. We knew it would impact workers who got sick or who had to self-isolate or quarantine, and those were the guiding principles for the CERB. Those were the impacts we wanted to lessen for working Canadians. They didn't have work, but they still had bills to pay. They still had to pay mortgages and rent and pay for food and medicine.

We felt that our government was better positioned to carry the weight of this non-discretionary debt that would be incurred, because if we didn't, Canadians would use their credit cards and their lines of credit, and we would see more bankruptcies, more mortgage foreclosures, etc. The financial pressure and insecurity would weigh heavily on families, who were already living in isolation and uncertainty. We chose to incur this debt so Canadians wouldn't have to. That was key to ensuring that when the economy came back, Canadians would be able to fully participate.

I could never be convinced that the CERB was too generous. Judging by the number of times I heard—and you probably heard—the CERB called a lifeline, I believe Canadians were incredibly grateful for this support.

Mr. Wayne Long: Minister, certainly I'll echo that. Certainly in my constituency office here in Saint John-Rothesay, I got calls from people who simply didn't qualify for EI or whose benefits were running out, and to think that the other party was saying it was too generous.... These were people who literally couldn't afford to buy groceries, to pay their rent and so on. I think we can all agree that the CERB was a lifeline for really, as you say, eight million Canadians.

Minister, I want to switch to the CRB. When the CERB ended, a large portion of recipients were transitioned to a simplified EI program. Some were ineligible for EI benefits, and again all of us had those calls at the office.

As a result, our government created three Canada recovery benefits to support Canadians during the transition. How many Canadians in total have been helped by the recovery benefits?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Oh my goodness. The CRB is at about 1.75 million Canadians as of February 27. The sickness benefit is at around 411,000. The caregiving benefit is at around 343,000. It's a significant number. That's not including the millions on EI.

Mr. Wayne Long: Right, and I think we can all realize what would have happened without the extension of those benefits. We all got calls. I got calls into my office from people who were certainly desperate. Their EI was running out. They didn't have other options.

Again, these benefits were a lifeline to Canadians. That's what a good government does. A good government delivers benefits that Canadians need, certainly in times of crisis, so thank you for that, Minister, and—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

[Translation]

I now yield the floor to Ms. Chabot.

You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Minister, you mentioned earlier the importance of training, skills, and so on.

I would like to point out to you that in the main estimates, there is a \$20-million decrease in contributions to not-for-profit, for-profit, aboriginal or government organizations at all levels for adult learning, literacy and essential skills.

I think that in this case, you are not walking the talk.

What could possibly explain this \$20-million cut? It's huge.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's because during the pandemic, some organizations didn't use the money we gave them. Perhaps Mr. Perlman could explain how we decided to give it to them from now on. That said, I hope I understood your question correctly.

• (1620)

Ms. Louise Chabot: The issue is that there is a \$20-million cut.

I have advocated for adult literacy organizations before when federal grants were being cut.

Yet it is critical to develop skills in adults. We see what's happening now. They need to develop those skills so they can get back on track, requalify, or regain [Technical difficulty—Editor].

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I agree with you completely.

However, I don't know the exact answer to your question, so I will commit to following up with you after the meeting.

Ms. Louise Chabot: So I can ask you another question.

On page 202 of the main estimates, there are special health benefits that fall under EI. You answered a question earlier from my NDP colleague about the 15 weeks for adoption. Since you have no decisions to announce to us with respect to the two very specific issues that were in your mandate, we can expect anything, really.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Absolutely—

The Chair: Please give a brief response.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: This will be in the plan for the future of EI, but we haven't made the specific decisions as to when to implement it. We have decided to do it, but we don't know when. It depends on systems, money and other things.

We haven't decided when.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot and Madam Minister.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair, and thank you again, Minister.

In the Speech from the Throne, your government committed to building a more inclusive tax filing system to make it easier for Canadians to receive the benefits they need. The problem is that this approach actually excludes the most vulnerable people in Canada, who don't file personal income taxes due to various reasons or various barriers, such as a lack of identification, a SIN, immigration or citizenship status, a CRA account, or a fixed address. This is a major problem that leaves people in deep poverty.

Campaign 2000, in its 2020 report card on child and family poverty in Canada, calls on the federal government to “research and develop a parallel community-based benefit eligibility and delivery system for low-income, marginalized non-taxfilers”, as many jurisdictions have done around the world.

Minister, will your government commit to developing such a parallel system?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I think the purpose behind the commitment to make the tax system more straightforward was to address some of the barriers you talked about. As you can appreciate, CRA is not my lead, but I have heard from many people with disabilities and advocacy organizations about the barriers to tax filing and the consequences for them in terms of their eligibility for benefits and support. We have been working very closely with disability organizations to assist in getting taxes filed.

As we have the system we have, we've been trying to make it more accessible and inclusive, including the efforts that were made to bolster the access for the DTC related to the one-time payment. I was quite pleased with the uptake for that, because that opens the door right now for a number of projects.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, Minister, but Campaign 2000 has indicated that it still has a lot of barriers.

Moving on, how many Canadians were shut out of the federal government's benefit delivery system during the pandemic because they didn't file a personal income tax? How many?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm not sure I understand, because the benefits I was responsible for were not predicated on having filed your taxes. You could, through attestation, access those benefits.

• (1625)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Well, how many people who—

The Chair: That's your time.

If you want to finish your answer, go ahead, Minister. We don't have time for another question.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: No, that's all I had to say. I'm sorry.

Thank you.

The Chair: It's all good.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Next we will go to Mrs. Falk, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I do want to mention and get on the record that if the Liberal government, your government, truly cared about the experiences of Canadians and the most vulnerable in this country, this government would have rejected the Senate amendment on Bill C-7 that expanded MAID to those who have or struggle with mental illness. I think history will teach us down the road that this government wasn't there for the most vulnerable.

Speaking in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that it has exacerbated the staffing crisis in our long-term care homes. It has also exposed to a greater degree the shortage of health care professionals specializing in care homes for seniors. With an aging population, the health care demand will only grow. Without immediate and short-term action, that gap will continue to grow.

Minister, your updated mandate letter prioritized direct investments in the social sector as well as training and incentives to grow sectors in the economy and to restore jobs. Can you clarify how your department's spending is addressing the health care staffing crisis in seniors supports, if at all?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We absolutely have heard about the health care human resource challenge; I don't know a stronger word than “challenge”. One of the first things we did last fall was to invest in the training of personal support workers. I think 4,000 people across the country will be trained as personal support workers to help provide some of that bench support to the long-term care and health care sectors.

It's certainly not enough. Certainly, as we invest in training moving forward, that will be one of the priority sectors for our sectoral investments. The Minister of Health and her provincial colleagues are working on a path forward that of course I will be supporting through our training investments.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Do you have an update on that program in terms of what has happened thus far?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Can you give us an update, Graham?

Mr. Graham Flack: In terms of exactly how many have been trained, I think we're getting reports back, so I think we'd have to get back to the committee with the details on the latest.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Perfect. Will you get back to us with that information?

Mr. Graham Flack: Yes.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We'll make sure of that, yes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

What metrics will be used to measure the success of this program in particular?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Again, for accuracy, let me get back to you with those details.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay.

Are you guys also able to get back to us on the enrolment regionally across Canada and on whether there are differences regionally?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: For sure.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Perfect.

There's another thing I would like to mention, Minister. When you were in committee to speak to supplementary estimates (B), discussing your government's commitment to train the new workers, you mentioned at that time, in response to one of the committee members, that you were hoping to professionalize these personal support workers. I know from conversations with the Canadian Support Workers Association that this is a priority for them. There would be many, many benefits to the professionalization of these workers, including improving the standard of care that our seniors would receive.

Minister, is there any work under way to provide professional recognition to support workers in Canada?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: My understanding is that the Minister of Seniors and the Minister of Health are indeed working with the sector to create standardized credentials acknowledgement. There's a massive amount of work under way. It's not top of mind for me, but again, Graham could tell you about it in more detail if that would interest you.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes, please.

Mr. Graham Flack: Again, Minister, we're going to have to get back on the details because Health is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: For sure, and thank you, Mr. Flack.

Minister, are you having any conversations at all with provincial counterparts regarding the professionalization of personal support workers?

• (1630)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: One of the positive results of this pandemic has been the number of times we talk amongst federal and provincial colleagues. I talk to my employment colleagues regularly. The topic of the professionalization and the depth of field, the bench support we need to build in this country around personal support workers, is definitely a topic.

As we talk about training, we talk about specific sectors that would benefit from direct investments. We talk about different jobs that will be needed more in the future as our population ages. We talk a lot about a lot of these things.

Part of the investment in training for provinces is that they have the proven track record of understanding what's going on in their regions and are able to respond more nimbly to the realities on the ground. I guess that's the best way of putting it.

Absolutely, we are having those conversations. We've been having them for months, in terms of understanding the complexities of what's ahead of us to bolster this sector.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk. Thank you, Minister.

The last round of questions goes to Mr. Vaughan, who's going to lower his mike down in front of his mouth and take five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That wasn't my 15-year-old crying in the background about the Leafs.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's why I was giggling. Sorry, Adam.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That's all right.

I have just a couple of quick questions around the Service Canada sites that were raised. I just want to confirm that the Service Canada site in Kildonan—St. Paul, which I believe is at the corner of Red River Boulevard and Main.... I think this is a picture of it. Can you confirm that this Service Canada site is in fact open today?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Lori?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I can confirm that this Service Canada site is open. I haven't called there today; however, I believe it is. There are days when we do have closures due to people calling in ill.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: To my understanding, people are walking in and out all day. It's across the street from another office at Red River Boulevard and Main. I believe MP Dancho's constituency office is right close to the Rivergrove Shopping Centre. Is that the same site we're all talking about here that is open? She can see it from her constituency office. It has been in fact operating since the fall.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: All right. It hasn't been closed today. I just wanted to confirm that.

In terms of the disability pension....

I'm sorry. How much time do I have left? I don't want to be cut off here.

The Chair: You have about four minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Okay. I had about three minutes and 52 seconds. I'm just making sure we're on the same time here.

I just want to inquire about the structure and the challenge we've had in accessing a database of people with disabilities. Prior to COVID, there was no single database of people with disabilities that was under the control of any one department at the federal government. Am I correct in that understanding?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's absolutely correct, and there still isn't.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Right, but through COVID, we've managed to start to build that database. That's the platform from which we may be able to strengthen support for people with disabilities through CPP or other pension supports. Is that the platform you're now working with?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Absolutely. Yes, that's it.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the challenge with enrolling people in that database, the best system we have is still the CRA, the Income Tax Act process, because that has the strongest computer system but also the widest coverage in terms of Canadians.

What are we doing to make sure that people who don't file their taxes, people who don't think they need to file their taxes or who for principled reasons don't, in terms of their treaty rights and responsibilities...? We've worked very hard in the Canada child benefit to enrol this community. What are we doing to make sure our database is as complete, as broad and as effective as possible?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's a great question, and it's really important.

We're working with disability organizations—a good example would be the British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society, BCANDS, which is kind of the lead in B.C.—to really reach out to organizations and encourage and support applying for the DTC. For families who have kids with disabilities, if they apply for the DTC for their child, they'll have access to CCB for disability.

As you said, it's the best system we have. It is highly problematic in terms of its outreach, but for now, we've really tried hard to get deep into communities through community organizations and other relationships and partnerships, even non-traditional ones, in order to get people help to apply for the DTC, because of how many doors it opens up for people federally, regardless of whether or not they actually have sufficient income to benefit directly from the benefit or the tax credit.

• (1635)

Mr. Adam Vaughan: How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The next question is around the disability process. During the rollout of CERB, one of the things we saw was that some governments—B.C. is an example and so is Ontario—clawed back their disability pensions to low-income Canadians even though they knew they had disabilities and even though they knew they experienced challenges.

As we move forward, how confident are you that governments that don't want us to spend money supporting Canadians but would rather provide tax credits to people who have already earned dollars—the sort of boutique tax credit that we saw define a previous government in Canada...? How confident are you that we can get the provincial governments to still support people with disabilities as we move forward with stronger investments to both alleviate poverty and, more importantly, give people the platform in their lives to succeed and thrive as Canadians, despite the fact that they have been marginalized through no fault of their own?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks for the question.

Absolutely, we were frustrated by the behaviour of some provinces that chose to claw back the CERB so that consequently people didn't see any kind of increase in their monthly income. We made efforts, and some provinces moved on this—including my own, actually, B.C.—to not claw it back.

A guiding principle moving forward with the disability benefit would be, hopefully, to build upon the success of the Canada child benefit.

This will be tough. This will be the most difficult and complex negotiation related to this benefit in working with provinces and territories to ensure that people are better off because of the supplement and that people's access to services, programs and supports isn't in any way negatively impacted. I don't want to be in a position of giving someone a benefit that consequently causes them to lose their health care or pharmacare. We're very alive to that.

A lot of work is being done behind the scenes to work with provinces to understand the interplay of our systems, but this will be the most important aspect, in my opinion, of the CDB negotiations—the conversations we have with the provinces. I'm cautiously optimistic—that tends to be my personality—but it will be a very tough conversation, and we're going to have to get quite creative to ensure that people are better off because of this.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I can't think of a better minister to be on the job.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Minister, that concludes the questions for today. I know that you would be keen to receive more, but we'll have you back for those.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I understand that I will be coming back soon to talk about the future of EI. I look forward to it.

The Chair: Minister, we appreciate your making yourself available during the constituency week. It wasn't something that was

foreseen, but it was necessary, given the matter referred to us by the House that we dealt with last week.

Thanks to you and your team for being with us and for handling the questions on supplementary and main estimates. We'll see you again soon in connection with the EI study.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you, Chair.

I will endeavour to get you the answers to those questions, the information that we committed to providing, as soon as possible.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thanks to your team.

Colleagues, I'd like you, please, to stick around. We actually have yet to vote on the estimates.

To the officials, you're welcome to stay, but you're free to leave. Thank you, once again, for being with us. We'll see you again soon, no doubt.

Before we wrap, folks, there are a couple of things we need to do. First of all, with respect to the supplementary estimates, the parliamentary schedule indicates that we're going to have the last three allotted days the week we come back. The deadline for reporting the supplementary estimates, based on the schedule at present, is therefore Monday, which presents a bit of a problem for us because we have Minister Schulte coming before us on the supplementary estimates on Tuesday.

This isn't insurmountable, but what I need from the committee is an agreement that we will report the supplementary estimates on Monday and leave the invitation for Minister Schulte outstanding so that she can come in and speak to the supplementary estimates as a subject matter study even though they have already been reported.

We will not report the main estimates, because we don't have to, until May 31. Even though we've heard from two ministers on the main estimates, we may still want to hear from Minister Tassi and we'll hear from Minister Schulte on the main estimates.

If the committee agrees with this approach, I would suggest that we proceed to vote now on the supplementary estimates, that we report them on Monday, that we hear from Minister Schulte as a subject matter study on Tuesday, and that we report the main estimates before the deadline of May 31.

Is there any need for clarification, any discussion or any concern with that suggested approach? Excellent.

That being the case—

● (1640)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Mr. Chair, I have had my hand up for a few minutes.

The Chair: Oh, my bad. Go ahead, Ms. Dancho. You have the floor.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I have a couple of things. The Conservatives are fine to report the supplementary estimates to the House. That's fine on our end. I can't speak for the other opposition parties.

I also wanted to thank you, Chair, for arranging this during a break week. I know there wasn't agreement before from all parties to do that. I really appreciate your making the effort to make sure it happened this week to accommodate the very tight schedules of ministers and the House. I just wanted to say thank you.

The Chair: I appreciate that very much. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] full co-operation. Thanks to everyone, and most certainly to the ministers who helped to ensure that this happened as well.

Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

I believe we have consensus to proceed as I had suggested. That being the case, we will now move to decisions on supplementary estimates (C).

CANADA MORTGAGE AND HOUSING CORPORATION
 Vote 1c—Reimbursement under the provisions of the National Housing Act and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Act.....\$19,118,985

(Vote 1c agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
 Vote 1c—Operating expenditures.....\$29,331,656
 Vote 5c—Grants and contributions.....\$8,000,000
 Vote 10c—Debt write-off—Government Annuities Account.....\$1
 Vote 15c—Debt write-off—Canada Student Loans.....\$188,099,201

(Votes 1c, 5c, 10c and 15c agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes on supplementary estimates (C) 2020-21 to the House?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'd like a recorded vote on that.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, we have a recorded vote on whether I am to report the votes on the supplementary estimates to the House.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, we've had so much great co-operation on this committee that I would just encourage you, when you report these estimates, to say how well all political parties on the HUMA committee are working well together. The Liberal rhetoric just doesn't stand up to the great co-operation we have on this standing committee.

Thank you, sir; great job today.

Mr. Han Dong: Brad, should we all take a screen shot and attach it to the report?

Voices: Oh, oh!

An hon. member: I love the positivity.

● (1645)

The Chair: All right. We need people to get on with their day.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Don't tempt me.

The Chair: Is it the pleasure of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We are adjourned. Thank you, colleagues.

Thank you, Mr. Vis.

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