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Chair: Mr. John Williamson



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• (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC)): I call the meeting to order. Good morning. I see we have a few people on Zoom as well.

Welcome to meeting number 22 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today to receive a briefing from the Auditor General and her team concerning the reports that were tabled in the House on Tuesday, May 31.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to the directive of the Board of Internal Economy of March 10, 2022, all those attending the meeting in person must wear a mask, except for members in their seats during parliamentary proceedings.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for witnesses and members to follow. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself and please keep your microphone muted when you are not speaking.

[*English*]

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I would remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

Members in the room who wish to speak must raise their hand. Members participating via Zoom must use the “raise hand” function.

The committee clerk and I will do our best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking. Thank you for your patience and your understanding.

[*English*]

We will be taking 15 minutes at the end of the meeting for some committee business in camera. I'll notify you of that when we hit that time on the clock.

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses—our guests—from the Office of the Auditor General. Of course, we have Karen Hogan, the Auditor General of Canada. It's nice to see you again. Actually, it's nice to see you all again.

We also have Carey Agnew, principal; Carol McCalla, principal; and Nicholas Swales, principal.

Ms. Hogan, you have the floor, and then we'll turn to questions. Thank you, again.

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wish to acknowledge the lands we are gathered on are part of the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I'm pleased to be here to discuss four performance audit reports that were tabled in the House of Commons on Tuesday. My reports also include copies of the special examination of Farm Credit Canada and the Federal Bridge Corporation Limited. These two reports were made public by the Crown corporations in February and May of this year.

I am accompanied today by Carey Agnew, Carol McCalla and Nicholas Swales, the principals who were responsible for the performance audits.

As I near the third year of my mandate, I'm feeling more frustrated than hopeful. As much as I'd like to report that government programs and services improve once weaknesses are identified, I find that is seldom the case.

[*Translation*]

For us, the story is too often familiar—over years of auditing, we report slow progress and results that are stagnant or worsening. Information that could help Canadians understand whether results are getting better or worse is at best incomplete. In many programs and departments, it seems that too often people run into barriers when accessing programs and services they are entitled to.

Let me turn first to our audit of systemic barriers in correctional services. We wanted to know whether Correctional Service Canada delivered interventions that reflect the ever growing diversity of the offender population. This included whether corrections staff had the cultural awareness and sensitivity to deliver programs that meet the diverse needs of offenders.

While we set out to look at whether the department was meeting the needs of its offender population, what we found were outcomes showing that certain groups of offenders were disadvantaged by systemic barriers that affected their timely access to parole. In particular, we found that indigenous and Black offenders experienced poorer outcomes than any other groups in the correctional system. They also faced greater barriers to a safe and gradual reintegration into society.

[English]

A systemic barrier results from seemingly neutral policies, procedures or practices that disadvantage one or more groups. We found not only systemic barriers, but also, in my view, systemic racism in certain instances where those seemingly neutral policies, procedures or practices have persisted and have resulted in disproportionately different treatment of some groups of racialized offenders.

Correctional Service Canada has failed to identify and eliminate the systemic barriers that persistently disadvantaged indigenous and Black offenders in custody. We raised similar issues in our audits in 2015, 2016 and 2017, yet the department has done little to change the policies, practices, tools and approaches that produce these differing outcomes.

We found that barriers were present from the moment offenders entered federal institutions. For example, indigenous and Black offenders were assigned to maximum security institutions by staff at twice the rate of other groups of offenders. They also remained in custody longer and at higher levels of security before their release.

• (1110)

[Translation]

We also found that timely access to correctional programs designed to prepare offenders for release and support their successful reintegration into the community had continued to decline over our three past audits.

By December 2021, with the additional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 6% of men offenders had accessed programs they needed before they were first eligible to apply for parole.

Different outcomes for certain groups of racialized and indigenous offenders have persisted for too long.

[English]

Correctional Service Canada must identify and remove systemic barriers to eliminate systemic racism in corrections, including meeting its own commitment to better reflect the diversity of the offender population in its workforce.

The department needs to address representation gaps, namely, indigenous representation across all institutions, gender representa-

tion in women's institutions and representation at institutions with a higher number of Black offenders.

Next I will turn to our audit of hard-to-reach populations. We wanted to know whether the federal government ensured that individuals in low-income groups could access the Canada child benefit, the Canada workers benefit, the guaranteed income supplement and the Canada learning bond.

[Translation]

The Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada know that not everyone who could receive these benefits is getting them. These individuals who may be unaware of benefits available to them include low-income groups who are not easily served through regular channels: indigenous persons, seniors, newcomers to Canada, and persons with disabilities. These hard-to-reach populations often face one or more barriers to access benefits. As such, they require more help from government.

The Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada lacked a clear and complete picture of the people who are not accessing benefits. The agency and the department also did not know whether most of their targeted outreach activities had helped to increase the benefit take-up rates for hard-to-reach populations.

[English]

We also found that the agency and the department overstated the rates of people accessing benefits because they did not always account for people who had not filed income tax returns, a requirement to access most benefits. Though the agency and the department have taken some action, they still lack a comprehensive plan to connect people with benefits. As a result, they are failing to improve the lives of some individuals and families who may need these benefits the most.

Our third audit focused on the processing of disability benefit claims for veterans from the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Overall, we found that veterans waited almost 10 months for a decision when first applying for benefits. Processing timelines were longer for francophones, women and RCMP veterans.

[Translation]

We also found that the department's data on how it processes benefits applications—and the organization of this data—were poor. Because of this, Veterans Affairs Canada was unable to determine whether its initiatives to improve the treatment of claims have sped up the process or made it worse.

We noted that both the funding and almost half of the employees on the team responsible for processing applications were temporary. The department also lacked a long-term staffing plan. The combined impact of these shortcomings means that veterans are waiting too long to receive benefits. They experience unacceptable delays that can significantly impact their and their families' well-being.

Our last report today is a follow-up on our 2015 audit on the use of gender-based analysis plus in government, or GBA+. This is an analysis tool to help reduce existing and potential inequalities based on gender and other intersecting identity factors.

● (1115)

Overall, our audit showed that the government does not know whether its actions are achieving better gender equality outcomes for diverse groups of people. In many cases, the analysis had been completed, but we did not see a concrete impact on outcomes.

[English]

We found long-standing challenges that we previously identified continue to hinder the full implementation of GBA+ across government. Although the lead organizations have addressed some of our recommendations from 2015, many others date back to our first audit of GBA in 2009.

Some of the challenges include gaps in the capacity to perform a gender-based analysis and the lack of data available on demographic factors. In addition, we found that the government doesn't know if GBA+ is achieving its goals, because its impacts have not been measured and reported on in a consistent and structured manner. The Privy Council Office, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Women and Gender Equality Canada need to better collaborate and ensure that all departments and agencies fully integrate GBA+ in a way that produces real results for all Canadians.

To sum it up, these audits point to long-standing problems and barriers across a broad range of government activities. These barriers are unacceptable, whether faced by indigenous and Black offenders or by low-income individuals and veterans accessing benefits.

As to the barriers that GBA+ is meant to break down, while there is a greater dialogue and awareness today of gender and identity factors, actions have yet to catch up with words.

[Translation]

The federal government must do better. All of Canada's people, no matter their gender, race, ability or geographical location, deserve better—much better.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening statement.

We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Because we're losing a bit of time at the end, I'm going to be quite vigilant on times today. This means members should be aware that the auditor and her team need to be given time to respond. I want to get through five rounds to ensure that we all have time. If you are cut off, you'll have to use later time to get the answer you seek.

On that, I will turn to MP Duncan.

You have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to everybody there in person.

Ms. Hogan, thank you for the work you and your team do. I have always said that I value your work and the work of the Auditor General's office, especially now. I think your comments have been blunt and frank, and resemble what lots of Canadians are feeling when it comes to the details of these reports and the quality of work being done by the government in the past couple of years.

I note that yesterday you said, "It's very frustrating and discouraging for the government to know, for many years, that problems exist, that barriers exist, but that little action is taken". I think these reports are timely right now, because I know, as a member of Parliament with a constituency office, that customer service levels and response times are absolutely collapsing, frankly, as we come out of the pandemic. There were challenges accommodating and adjusting to the pandemic when it started, but as we come out of it and get back to a semblance of normalcy and return to normalcy.... I think of the services we deal with in our office: CRA, Service Canada, IRCC, Veterans Affairs, Passport Canada, NEXUS, the list goes on. We're seeing an absolute collapse and a total unpreparedness for trends and things that are going along.

Some of the observations that I have, just at the high level to your reports, which I appreciate, are how it backs up that spending money is not a result. I think you allude to this in your conclusions and observations in several of your reports. Very often we call for action from the government on addressing, for example, the backlogs for processing claims for veterans. They say that we're spending x number of millions of dollars to address this, and at the end of the day, the frank reality is that we're spending more and now getting less. The value for money and the per capita of this, frankly, is not matching the rhetoric or the responses that we get. We're not seeing leadership. We're not seeing good management, and we're not seeing innovation really happening. It needs to be happening in what we're doing here.

Frankly, I can foreshadow, Ms. Hogan...without prejudicing your future worker decisions on what to study. Look, for example, at NEXUS cards. It's been in the news recently. Our office is dealing with this. There are no plans, no timelines and 300,000 applications backlogged. There's absolute chaos, at three years into the pandemic—let alone adjusting to that type of program during the pandemic. As we return to normal, there's still literally no leadership or plan, or anything.

I want to focus my first round, perhaps, on your report on Veterans Affairs and processing disability claims for veterans. I want to quote here from this report. You mentioned in your press conference and in the report that you were “left with the conclusion that the government has failed to meet a promise that it made to our veterans, that it would take care of them if they were injured in service”. That's a pretty bold statement and, rightfully, an accurate and important statement to understand the context of this.

One of the things that were very frustrating was not only the details of the report confirming what we're hearing from veterans and from constituents across the country, but also the response from the minister and the Department of Veterans Affairs. There was a CBC News article report that said, “The department said it accepted the criticism and recommendations but also blamed delays on a 40 per cent increase in the number of applications across the board and 75 per cent increase in first-time applications.”

Here's what frustrates me, and I'd like to get your comments on this. When preparing and using data and trends when it comes to Veterans Affairs and applications, the federal government should be able to look, for example, at another department—the Department of National Defence—to know the number of Canadians who are serving, who have injuries, their ages and the demographics to understand and be able to prepare and predict when a surge in services is coming.

Could you speak a little bit about the department's ability? Are they doing anything in terms of looking at what future trends in service levels and volumes may be? Is there anything you saw in your work that would suggest they're planning ahead appropriately for this?

● (1120)

Ms. Karen Hogan: There was a lot there. Thank you. I will try to respond to that.

What I can tell you is that, when we looked at their data, we did find that there were some issues with the quality of the data, in that there was a lot of activity to try to increase processing times and reduce wait times, but the department was unable to demonstrate and didn't know for themselves if certain activities had actually reduced or slowed down the wait times.

In the end, as you say, it's not about spending more money but about spending it in a more intelligent or creative way that actually targets the barriers. To do that, you need the data to understand. I think all too often we see that there is a lack of willingness or desire to share data, sometimes within a department, or even across a department. It's a growing theme that I'm actually seeing across many audits. We saw it during some of the COVID-19 support programs, and we see it again here. There are long wait times to share that information or a willingness to not share the information.

When it comes to forward-looking trends and what they're doing to tackle some of that problem, I don't know if perhaps Mr. Swales could add something a little bit more pointed to your question at the end.

The Chair: Mr. Swales, I'm going to have to cut you off there, but I hope we will come back and get that answer from you.

Turning now to Mrs. Shanahan, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I, too, would like to echo the words of my colleague Mr. Duncan in acknowledging and thanking the Auditor General and her team for her work and for the bluntness of the work they do, because we need to hear it full, front and centre if we're going to get the work done that we need to do.

I am looking forward—and I know my colleagues on this side are looking forward—to studying each of the reports you have brought forward in greater detail with the departments involved because, yes, there are problems and, yes, we need to find out how, as members of the public accounts committee, we can help public servants do better.

Auditor General Hogan, I'm just reflecting. Members here know that I served on this committee from 2015 to 2018, when the previous Auditor General would bring forth themes—underlying themes, overarching themes—such as repeated gaps at indigenous services and gaps in data collection. Because I think we see a theme emerging here, if not two or three, I'd like to hear from you what you see as the overarching themes in the work you have done.

● (1125)

Ms. Karen Hogan: When I look at this group of audit reports that we've put together here, I would tell you that it's about individuals who are often forgotten, whether they be disabled veterans, incarcerated individuals or those who are the target of gender or other inequities. It's about the government always trying to apply the same recipe to every single individual. We're seeing that many programs are reaching a good portion of the people they are intended to reach, and now it's about time to reach those hard-to-reach individuals on the edge.

How can you change that recipe? I think you can change that with a good solid GBA+ analysis backed by some data.

It's not about only a new program but perhaps applying it to existing programs to see what inequities exist there that you're not aware of, but you need to gather information and do that analysis. I think the theme that previous Auditors General raised was about having data, having a good data strategy and knowing what you have, but then using it in a meaningful way.

I think this group of reports goes really well together and bundles that theme of figuring out how to identify a barrier that a group is facing, then using your information to target how to eliminate it and make the outcomes better. Let's not focus on process but focus on the progress of programs.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you for that, because I think I and members of our caucus are extremely frustrated with, I believe, it's "Report 4: Systemic Barriers—Correctional Service Canada". That is something that has the systemic racism that you identified in your report.

When you talk about GBA+, this has been an ongoing theme or approach that you mentioned has been recommended since 2009, I think. I remember a key report also in 2015-16. Are we getting there with the GBA+? I think some departments do better than others. It is an evolving tool.

Are you seeing those tools being developed and being shared across ministries and departments?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think the honest answer would be that it's a bit of a mixed bag. I am pleased to see an increased dialogue and awareness, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, about gender and other identity factors. Dialogue is a great place to start, but it's just the first step.

We see some departments or some programs that use a GBA+ analysis in a really useful way and have modified their delivery. There are other instances where it is almost seen as a requirement, a need to do it in order to get past a certain hurdle. Often we see data gathered, and then the data not used, or the data not gathered. It really is a bit of a hodgepodge. I don't know a better word to describe it.

It's about being a little bit more consistent. When you have a lead organization like Women and Gender Equality that has to summarize how this tool is materializing into concrete outcomes, but they don't have the information or the consistent reporting, they can't then demonstrate the actual outcomes the tool is producing.

Again, it comes back to good reporting and good data to tell people that activity is resulting in an outcome.

• (1130)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I understand.

I have just one last question if I have time, Chair.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: What is the role of the Auditor General's office in interacting with departments when you identify gaps?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Most of the really important recommendations will show up in our audit reports, but we don't shy away from

providing more informal comments to departments and agencies to help them improve. We made a commitment within our office to focus on the use of GBA+ as a tool, as well as on the SDGs. We've ramped up our own expertise and knowledge in that area, and we're going to try to mainstream it through most of our audits to see how equity, diversity and inclusion are factored in by the government on a day-to-day basis. We hope our mainstreaming will drive some change.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Many thanks to the witnesses for joining us, especially Ms. Hogan.

Ms. Hogan, thank you for your statement, which was very clear, as my colleagues previously pointed out. At the outset, you said you were more frustrated than hopeful. That first sentence is especially important, as it reflects the state of mind of many people in Canada, in Quebec, and even here, in committee. We realize that, in many cases, the government has not followed up and, more importantly, it has not taken public interest into account. It is showing a lack of desire or willingness to improve and provide Canadians with better services.

I want to remind everyone that your work is fundamental to a healthy democracy. You said it was important to have a government that takes care of those who are the most vulnerable, and I think my colleagues share this opinion. However, your reports unfortunately show the government's serious inadequacies in that area.

I would like to talk specifically about the treatment of veterans, which you have already discussed.

At a meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans, my colleague Mr. Desilets pointed out that there was an abysmal discrepancy between the processing of francophone applications and the processing of anglophone applications. In other words, it takes much longer to process francophone applications than anglophone applications.

Have you noted those kinds of cases in the past? Have you noticed that discrepancy?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes. In our audit on disability benefits applications, we looked at all of the department's data on the processing of those applications. As we said, we noted that the processing of an application took about 39 weeks. That is how long a veteran has to wait to receive a response to their application. When we separated the data, we realized that some groups waited for a response even longer than that, and they were francophones, women and Royal Canadian Mounted Police veterans. The reasons for that discrepancy vary from one group to another.

Your question was about francophones' applications, so I will talk about that.

A 2018 report from the Office of the Veterans Ombudsman notes that francophones wait longer than anglophones for a response to their application. Changes were made in the wake of that report. In 2018, Veterans Canada opened an office in Montreal to process francophones' applications. In 2020, the department also created a bilingual group to process the applications. The number of francophone applications has increased so much that the group cannot process them quickly. That is why francophones wait 46 weeks on average for a response to their benefits application, compared to 39 weeks for anglophone veterans.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: According to the figures I have on hand from a Library of Parliament briefing note, the delays are now huge. According to the data from July to September 2021, francophones waited 76 weeks to receive a response, while the wait time for anglophones was 20 weeks. I am well aware that there are more applications from francophones. We already have the numbers on veterans. With more francophones joining the army, it would be normal for the quality of services they receive to be at least proportional to their numbers.

I find it surprising that francophones are considered a more vulnerable group. There is no reason for those who are considered a founding people of Canada to have to wait longer to obtain the same service. That is what is happening in departments and across nearly all areas of government, not to mention populations that are more vulnerable for other reasons, including systemic racism, as you mentioned. For example, members of first nations are treated differently, be it in prison or, in this case, in departments.

It is really important that you are pointing this out. I would like to know what you have seen when it comes to systemic racism. It would be very helpful if you told us more about that.

• (1135)

Ms. Karen Hogan: If I understand correctly, your question is about systemic racism in correctional services.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Exactly. You can also talk to us about any systemic racism you have noted in other departments or reports.

Ms. Karen Hogan: In correctional services, we have really noted that outcomes were different for some offenders based on their race or ethnicity. We have noted that indigenous offenders faced obstacles practically at every step when they arrived in a federal institution. We could be talking about the tool used for security classification, to determine whether inmates should be in a minimum, medium or maximum security institution.

We noted that indigenous and Black offenders were incarcerated in higher security institutions twice as often as all other offenders, and for women, it was three times as often. The results of the tool could be modified. We saw that they were modified in 53% of cases for indigenous women, so that they would be incarcerated in higher security institution. We saw that, as a result, indigenous people were spending about two months longer in federal institutions.

Those were really disproportionate outcomes based on race or ethnicity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Desjarlais, go ahead for six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being present with us today.

What we see here are four very damning reports that I think our ministries and the government have known about. You said that in your opening statement. They've known about these issues persisting. What I have to say is that, in many ways, the people who are experiencing this discrimination have known about it for far longer. People with disabilities and the indigenous community members have been saying this for decades and decades.

This level of systemic discrimination is overt. It's dangerous and it's killing people. I know this. In my community in Edmonton Griesbach, and I'm sure in every single constituency here, we have people in our communities, every single one of us, who are being impacted by the systemic problems that continue to plague our public service. It's literally killing people.

I want to thank you, Auditor General, for outlining what I think is a terrible process and a lack of accountability in our systems. On the fact that you've had to table these multiple times, I can feel your level of frustration. I understand that level of frustration deeply from my own experience of interacting with these systems. We can even just look around this room and know that a GBA+ analysis is probably warranted in every single ministry. Understanding what that looks like and ways to actually improve it are things that I'm concerned about.

The fact that these issues persist and they continue to persist is eroding our trust in these public institutions. I'm concerned about how we regain that trust with the community members who are cited in these reports, in particular indigenous and Black community members and persons with disabilities. We know, not just from these reports but from their own experiences, that these issues persist.

When I looked at some of these reports, I couldn't help but feel that we've more than failed these populations. Our government has, and subsequent governments since as early as 2009. It breaks my heart to think that we could have done so much more in those times. These recommendations could have helped people in those times from 2009 to today, which is a long period of time. We're talking about people's lives at the end of the day here and about how we can actually make them better.

I'm concerned with the fact that oftentimes, especially in my short and limited time in this place, I've already found that there's an incredible amount of information but so little action. There is so little action that it makes me incredibly frustrated.

I can only sympathize with you, Ms. Hogan, and understand that your role in this is incredibly difficult, knowing that you'll be coming to this committee, like many times before in the last three years, and you'll likely be facing the same answer: We hear you. We're going to shelve this report. We're going to look at it real good. It's going to be awesome. We can't wait for your next one.

That's 99% likely what's going to happen here, but that's not what should happen here. That's the problem. I challenge my colleagues and the government to really take seriously what these reports really mean. I'm going to work with you folks to make these things better. We're all standing ready to work with you to make this better, but why aren't they getting better?

That's my question to you, Ms. Hogan: How can we actually enforce some of this? Canadians don't deserve this. People with disabilities shouldn't have to go through extraordinary hoops and hurdles to get the basic services they're entitled to. Indigenous peoples should not be incarcerated at the rate they are by folks who have obviously learned the language of GBA+ but are not acting on that information. I'm wondering how we actually enforce change in these institutions, because it's near criminal.

• (1140)

Ms. Karen Hogan: I wish I had a good answer to tell you how to resolve this.

If I look at some of the work that we've done in the last two years, when there's a focus on the actual outcome of an individual, and we saw that very often during COVID relief programs, we see the concrete impact that it has on Canadians in a direct way. What I find all too often happens, and these reports are examples of that, is that there is a lot of focus on the machinery, on the process, instead of the outcome. It's almost like too much attention is put to all the steps to get somewhere and we forget about where we were going.

I think that if the attention we saw, the shift that we saw during the pandemic to really focus in on outcomes, is applied with a GBA+ lens and a real desire to understand that the way we did perhaps shouldn't be the way we should continue to do, it would hopefully drive some meaningful change. But I'm not the only one who can help drive that change.

All of Parliament plays a role in continuing to apply pressure to government to take action to demonstrate that their actions actually result in outcomes, and all of Canadians can. I agree with your statements. I expect better from the government and I believe all Canadians expect better from their government.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have 10 seconds for a statement, but I see you waved back to me.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'm going to give it to you.

The Chair: I'll put that in my pocket, so thank you.

Turning now to our second round, Mr. Patzer, you have the floor for five minutes please.

Mr. Jeremy Patzer (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you very much.

I'm just going to pick up on a theme that's developing here. There are four reports here. This binder is just full of reports. All of them say the same thing. You have recommendations. The department responds. They say, agreed, agreed, agreed. Nothing happens. We do a report on the report. There are more recommendations, and agreed, agreed, agreed. Nothing happens.

You alluded to it in Blake's round of questioning, but how can we break the cycle? That's where this is at. You alluded to it, but maybe just elaborate and expand on that.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think you raise a little different angle: The federal government is excellent at creating an action plan, but it's the actual implementation of that action plan. It's not just the step of the implementation of the action plan, but it's thinking a little bit further ahead to know how I will be able to demonstrate that the actions that I took resulted in a concrete change for Canadians.

Maybe they need to step back and understand that maybe they should take a little bit longer to prepare this action plan, that it shouldn't just be on the process or the tool or the item that was highlighted as having a weakness or being a barrier, but really on the intended outcome.

I go back to a statement I made earlier about applying the same recipe. If we look at outreach to vulnerable populations, a good portion of the country are accessing the benefits that are available to them, but if you want to get that edge, it's about doing it a little differently. The same recipe, the same way, isn't working, and a GBA+ lens or a different angle to doing things is a way to change that recipe. I really do think it's about changing how we've been functioning over time.

I would encourage you to challenge departments to not just always do the status quo going forward, and perhaps that will come up with a different outcome for Canadians.

• (1145)

Mr. Jeremy Patzer: Thank you for that insight.

Yesterday the Minister of Veterans Affairs claimed they had taken significant action to reduce wait times and painted a picture very different from the one though that you've given us here today. How do you respond to that? Do you believe that this is just another example of the government not taking an issue seriously enough and just saying they're doing something, developing an action plan, but not actually really addressing the problem?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I believe they were talking about addressing a backlog and the actions that they took to reduce the backlog of files, but reducing the backlog isn't necessarily reducing the wait time. There is a backlog. Our report highlights a little over 40,000 files in a backlog for different reasons. About 50,000 or so files in the last year were processed. That isn't measuring the outcome against not only your service standard but the expectations of the veteran. There's a commitment to provide a decision within 16 weeks or approximately four months. Even though you've reduced the backlog, if the average wait time is still 39 weeks or 10 months, you haven't met that promise to the veterans. The indicator that you have on your website to give them a sense of how long they should expect to wait isn't very useful for them if it's so far off. It isn't just about addressing the backlog.

I do consider it a success for every file that's closed and a veteran gets a decision, but it should also be about reducing how long it takes for them to have to wait for that decision.

Mr. Jeremy Patzer: Yes. I had veterans pre-pandemic who were waiting over two years, sometimes, to get a decision, to get what they were applying for and what they were told they would be receiving. Giving them that would be really good.

For the Veterans Affairs staff who are processing applications, you said half were temporary and that there was no long-term staffing plan. I think it would be helpful for us to hear from you and your team in a bit more detail about the findings and recommendations around that.

Ms. Karen Hogan: We found that, as you mentioned, about half of the staff who processed these benefit claims are temporary. There is a repeat request for temporary funding and temporary staffing to address the backlog, but that isn't a long-term solution to actually reduce the outcome, which is the overall wait time. That's why we recommended to Veterans Affairs Canada that they should put in place a long-term resourcing plan and ask for more stable, predictable funding.

Temporary individuals turn over often. You spend a lot of time training them and just as you start to enjoy their productivity, they'll leave for a job that's more secure or permanent. That's not a way to reduce the overall wait time, in our view.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Bradford, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I believe you just answered a lot of the questions that I was about to ask, as Jeremy asked them.

I had the benefit of hearing your embargoed presentation on Monday. We have four reports here and they're unfortunately—

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Bradford. Would you be able to remove your mask? It helps for translation and clarity on the floor.

Thank you.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Unfortunately, there's an overwhelming recurring theme across all four reports, even though they're on very different subject matter. Nothing changes. The same things are identified and nothing changes.

For the record, can you summarize for me the period of time each of these reports covered?

• (1150)

Ms. Karen Hogan: Absolutely, I can.

The period that we audited for systemic barriers in Correctional Service Canada covered January 2020, all the way to June 2021. In all of our reports, we look at times for information before that, but all of our testing and sampling ended in June 2021.

For processing disability benefits for veterans, the period that we targeted to look at files and statistics was from April 1, 2020, to September 30, 2021. The period for the access to benefits for hard-to-reach populations audit was from April 1, 2019, until August 31, 2021. Our follow-up audit on gender-based analysis plus covered a period from April 2016 until the end of January 2022.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: It is possible that there may have been some improvements made subsequent to when you made your report. Is that correct?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I would imagine it's possible. It's a question that you should ask the individual departments. I would hope that they started to act on our findings, even while we were auditing. I would like to think that there has been some improvement.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Right.

What I wanted to know is what the procedure is for follow-ups. As we go through these reports and see the recommendations and what they agreed to, they'll give a date when they're going to accomplish a plan or whatever by a certain date.

Do they automatically report back to you, or do you need to follow up? Are they diarized for follow-up by the OAG? How does this follow-up process work?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's a tentacle to answer. There are many ways that the department would be subject to follow up.

I will start with our office, and then I will go to their departmental audit committee, and I will actually speak about the public accounts committee. Our office often will turn back and look at audits in which we found the results to be so significant that they warranted our going back. For example, today you're looking at audits that involved repeat subjects.

We also recognize that we can't necessarily devote all of the resources to follow-ups if there are so many other aspects of government operations that we would like to audit, so we have launched a new product called the results measurement follow-up. It's an online product that's on our website. We are trying slowly but surely to add more departments and more results, but it is our intention to start following up just on specific measures or specific recommendations over time. That would be one way for us to keep applying pressure.

The departmental audit committees of all departments and agencies are required under a Treasury Board standard to follow up on any recommendations that the department receives, whether they be from internal audits or external audits including ours, so their departmental audit committee should be following up on the progress that management is making on their commitments and their action plans.

As well, the public accounts committee and the environment committee recently adopted the same motion you have, stating that every entity that comes here is required to provide a detailed action plan in response to our recommendations.

Following up, perhaps, on those action plans on a regular basis might be another way to keep applying pressure on departments to demonstrate whether or not they are taking action, but I will caution that we're seeing in these reports that taking action doesn't always translate into better positive outcomes for Canadians. The focus of the follow-ups should really be on improved outcomes and not just on whether or not processes were changed or modified.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes. I remember reading one of the reports about how, I think, they measured only two out of maybe 17, and with those two they couldn't really determine whether the processes in place had actually made a difference. There generally seems to be an accountability issue with things being identified, and it's a revolving wheel. I can appreciate your frustration.

The Chair: I'm afraid that is time for your round.

We will now turn to Madame Sinclair-Desgagné.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, the last element you discussed was about how follow-ups work, and I found that especially worthy of attention.

Leaving aside the amazing action plan that has been developed, can you give us the most flagrant examples that have disappointed you in terms of lack of action, lack of follow-up and, most importantly, lack of results?

Can you give us concrete examples of what you have seen in that respect?

• (1155)

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes, absolutely.

My examples will also include the reports we are discussing today.

Systemic obstacles in correctional services are the first example of inaction and unacceptable results. The second example is the processing of veterans' applications.

I will now go into the past to talk about measures the government committed to take following the H1N1 pandemic: be better prepared for a new pandemic, change the process for sharing health information across the country and be in a better position to respond to a pandemic. But during our audit, we found that nothing had changed and that the change was happening during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I would also like to bring up the government's inaction in improving access to clean and safe water in indigenous communities.

It is very important to change this cycle of temporary measures or measures whose progress is slow. That is why I said that, after only two years, I am more frustrated.

I still hope that the government will change the way it does things, but it is frustrating to keep bringing up the same issues, important issues that affect people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Desjarlais, once again you have the floor for two minutes, sir.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin this round in reference to specific calls to action in the reports. In one particular report related to the criminal justice system, they are also found in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. I think that's another report that is in many ways similar in the sense that it provides very clear evidence as to the issues. It provides very clear recommendations as to what's possible and what's needed from our government in order to remedy or accommodate some of the extreme overrepresentation of indigenous and Black community members in our correctional system.

I really do appreciate your office's attention to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It's an important document in our nation's understanding of our systems, but more so, it's an opportunity to rebuild trust and to rebuild our relations with my relatives and indigenous nations across the country. Of course, the risk is that our failure as a country to actually to do these things will continue to erode that process.

In response to Mrs. Shanahan's question, you mentioned that you were working, in some sense, on ways to enforce some of this. You mentioned that at times you don't shy away in your informal recommendations or informal advice to departments and folks who are truly responsible for this ongoing crisis. You mentioned that you've contacted several of them, but my question is specific to CSC and the commissioner's own acceptance of the fact that this is continuing to happen.

Have you talked to the commissioner or CSC at all to motivate or to demonstrate that these are simply unacceptable rates of continued violence against indigenous people, that it's unacceptable that they haven't applied a GBA+ analysis and that it's unacceptable that they continue to disproportionately hire non-indigenous, non-Black correctional officers in these facilities?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I can assure you that, while the period covered by the audit started in January of 2020, the audit team has been having very many conversations over many months with individuals at Correctional Service Canada. I had several conversations during this audit with the commissioner as well. I did share with her our concern over the findings. We've talked through the recommendations.

You highlighted exactly an item coming out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and many of the recommendations that came out of that report. One of those was actually a change to the corrections act that required that indigenous social history be considered when looking at the security classification of an indigenous offender.

We actually targeted a certain group of files where indigenous offenders had their security classification increased after the initial rating done by the tool. We found that there was no evidence of the indigenous social history being considered in that security classification. We did not see whether or not other alternative restorative options like healing lodges or more time with elders had been considered as a way to reduce the risk for that offender.

We do have a recommendation linked to that because it's a requirement in an act. We included that recommendation not only because of that, but because it's the right thing to do.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Desjarlais, you more than earned your 12 seconds back.

Turning now to our third round, Mr. Duncan has the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hogan, I appreciate your echoing my first round of questions about the context of spending more and getting less, the value for money and the premise of that, which is much appreciated.

I share the frustration, and we see this constantly through these reports on not sharing data, data trends and data information. It particularly hits home for the "Processing Disability Benefits for Veterans" report. This shows a culture and mindset where the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada aren't sharing information on those who are enlisting or those who have injuries and the age and demographics in order to understand these future trends.

This uptick in demand and applications should not be a surprise at all. The data should be there to know staffing levels and all this information, the number of veterans, when they're leaving, all these types of things. It's completely ignored and, as you alluded to, there's a hesitancy to share information. Frankly, it's almost a culture of lack of respect or compassion between the two departments that this is not shared.

I want to go specifically in my time here to report number 2 on veterans disability claims. There was a part that was really disturbing to me. I'll be a bit blunt in the question I'm asking, but in section 2.35, it says, "We also found that Veterans Affairs Canada did not always calculate its performance against its service standard

consistently and accurately." It goes on to say, "For the end date, the department used the date that the benefits decision was made", but in some cases they didn't talk about the assessment step and other steps that go after the end date for the veteran—to your point—being successfully concluded and having their case done.

I'm going to ask you a blunt question, if I could, Ms. Hogan. Do you believe that is data manipulation? Do you believe it's unethical for the department's report to use an "end date" when they know very well that's not the actual end date for the veteran getting the service?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I will address your first comment first, and then I will get to your question.

One item I want to highlight about the lack or hesitancy of willingness to share information is that, oftentimes in these reports and in other previous reports, we hear privacy concerns as a reason the information isn't shared. I can appreciate that it's complex, but as a Canadian, if you sit back, you believe that you are interacting with your government and you would hope that there would be a way for the government to perhaps solve some of those issues.

When it comes to the end date, I do not believe that it was intentional manipulation of a date to deceive individuals. I believe that it was more of a focus on process. The start date doesn't start until all the information is gathered, so a veteran may have submitted their application and there may be weeks that go into a back-and-forth between the department and the veteran to make sure that the file is complete. Then you have to wait a little bit for some medical information. Then the clock starts ticking but, for the veteran, that application has already been in the queue, in their minds, for quite some time.

The same then happens at the end as you wait for the payment of the funds or the confirmation of the type of injury that was being classified. It's about giving the veteran a realistic picture of how long they're going to wait, instead of a service standard that hasn't been met in seven years.

It's about being more transparent, perhaps, about all the steps and the processes that would help a veteran better understand.

The Chair: You have one minute, Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Eric Duncan: That's noted.

I would argue that they need to change the term "end date" because, when I hear "end date", I think it's the end and that the veteran is getting a payment for the benefit for which he or she applied.

As was alluded in your report, it found in some cases that it didn't include the assessment step and the step to determine the severity including the impact. The end date also did not include the time it took for the veteran to receive it, which meant the veterans were waiting longer than the department had reported publicly. Perhaps calling it an end date, which is when the decision was made on the benefit.... The actual end date, I would argue, of when it concluded is when the veterans get the compensation they are entitled to.

My last question is this: Why were the processing times for critical injury benefits not reviewed in this audit? Are they not subject or assessed by the same officials that are reviewing VAC disability claims?

• (1205)

Ms. Karen Hogan: If I may, Mr. Chair, I'll ask Mr. Swales to answer that one.

The Chair: I'm afraid the answer time is going to be short.

Mr. Nicholas Swales (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We didn't look at that because our focus was on the main disability benefit, which was the issue that had been brought to our attention by veterans' groups in the past as being their primary concern. That's where we looked in this work.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor for five minutes, please. It's over to you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the Auditor General and staff for coming today.

Auditor General, I want to read to you key recommendations—at least in my mind—from various reports in the time that I have allotted and get your thoughts on implementation based on your expertise.

The first report I'll point to is report 1, appropriately called "Access to Benefits for Hard-to-Reach Populations". The recommendation that is especially highlighted is as follows:

To better understand the effectiveness of outreach approaches, the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada should develop and implement consistent results-based performance measures for targeted outreach to hard-to-reach populations.

What would these results-based performance measures look like, exactly? As important, how would they best be tailored to hard-to-reach populations? What would be some suggestions there, zeroing in on and delving into that question of hard-to-reach populations that the report focuses on?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm going to attempt it, and I might turn to Mr. Swales to add.

We found that the departments were measuring the number of activities. For example, they would visit indigenous communities in the hopes of making individuals aware that, if they filed their tax returns, they could receive the Canada child benefit. They measured the quantity of visits, but didn't actually measure whether or

not those visits ended up in individuals filing a tax return and, therefore, getting access to the Canada child benefit.

To me, that is not targeted to that group. As we've seen from statistics, many individuals on reserve are not accessing the Canada child benefit. Perhaps it is because they are unwilling or unable to file a tax return. Finding another way to ensure that an indigenous family can access a benefit they are entitled to would be a targeted outreach activity.

Sometimes there are individuals who need help filling out a form. Filling out the form might be the first step, but if they then also need to deal with a different department, they're on their own. There isn't an end-to-end service model that is focused on the individual and their barriers to accessing these benefits.

That's why we encourage the government to think differently about how they try to reach hard-to-reach people who are not accessing the benefits in the traditional way that everyone else is.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I suppose that's my question. Do you have advice or thoughts, based on your expertise, on how exactly this could move forward? For example, what are best practices or where has it worked internationally in other G7 countries? Do you have any thoughts there?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'll leave some time for Nick to perhaps add to this. I believe what we're not seeing is a focus on the actual barrier that needs to be addressed.

We're really seeing the focus on having the hard-to-reach populations understand that this is the traditional access point to get these benefits and helping them get through that access point, instead of actually understanding the barrier.

Nick, would you like to add something about other countries?

• (1210)

Mr. Nicholas Swales: Mr. Chair, I could just add a couple of quick points.

In terms of your initial question about measurement, a key issue from our perspective is disaggregation. It's getting down into the community levels and collecting information there on what the take-up rates are and seeing whether the initiatives they're undertaking are having an impact at that level, instead of just leaving it to the country as a whole where the large numbers tend to obscure what's happening in those communities.

There is a report the British do. They produce a report on take-up rates every couple of years, which is based on some sophisticated ways of thinking about this problem. They do some modelling and some additional surveys. That is certainly an example we think could be looked at more closely.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Certainly there's always room for improvement.

The Canada child benefit has been mentioned here. I think it would inform the committee. I think most members will know this already, but it's important to put on the record the 300,000-plus children who have been lifted out of poverty because of that program, not to mention so many families right across the country that benefit each month. The means-based approach is central to that. As I say, we can always get your thoughts on how to do it better. That's just one example.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, I'm afraid that is your time.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Okay. Very good.

The Chair: Well said.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

In answer to my last question, you brought up three flagrant cases of lack of follow-up on serious issues you had raised.

Those issues were processing delays for veterans, the preparation for a pandemic after H1N1 and the huge discrepancies between the conditions of different populations in Canadian prisons.

It appears that the federal government still has a lot of work to do on certain aspects, including systemic racism.

Ms. Hogan, do you think the federal government has a lot of work to do over the coming months and years?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think that Canadians face a lot of barriers every day in terms of access to programs and benefits the government has implemented to support them on a daily basis.

There is a great deal of work to do to determine what the barriers are and to find a solution for reducing them. The solution can often not be found in a vacuum. For instance, there must be collaboration with indigenous communities or with community organizations to support the populations that are the most vulnerable and difficult to reach. This is not an easy problem to solve, and a lot of work does need to be done.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you.

I am saying this now, but I think the federal government really has its work cut out for it and has enough to do within its own institutions to fight the systemic racism that has been shown and quantified in the auditor general's reports.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: The federal government should not target provincial laws that are supported by the vast majority of Quebecers. I think the federal government has enough on its plate.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for two and a half minutes. Thank you.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just want to begin by addressing my Liberal colleague's comment on room to improve. I think this room is far greater than that comment provides. This is, I think, a very serious situation that's provided by the government, and it has mounted. This is really a situation in which the whole house, not just one room, needs to be improved. This is an extreme situation.

Our country's most disadvantaged, as you mentioned, are being left alone to deal with these kinds of violences and barriers by themselves. The core of what this committee and our work here provide must be showing the government with urgency how this must seize their attention immediately.

We can't continue to disadvantage these groups for so long. I don't want to have to sit here for another decade and have to talk about the same thing Ms. Hogan mentioned. Some of these issues have persisted since 2009. That's just not acceptable.

I think that comment diminishes in many ways the reality of the severity of this and the people who are being left behind.

My riding is one of the largest in terms of its urban indigenous population. It's also plagued by a massive amount of poverty. Community members in my city have done extraordinary work to actually do this work on the ground level without the government. They've provided for themselves and tried their best to survive. They're literally selling bottles and doing what they can to feed themselves.

• (1215)

This is the condition in which we're seeing people in my community suffering right now. Without community members supporting each other, we wouldn't have a community where I'm from. It's really because of each other that it's happening.

Your report says really clearly that the outreach activities that ESDC conducted with indigenous communities were inadequate. Those were largely for rural communities. I just want to ask, given the fact that a majority of indigenous people now live in urban centres, how are they being consulted and did your report look at the condition of those populations as hard to reach?

Ms. Karen Hogan: In our report on hard-to-reach individuals, I don't believe we disaggregated whether communities were rural or in a more populous area. We just looked at the group of indigenous communities as a whole when we identified them and tried to disaggregate some data.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's all the time.

We'll turn now to our next round.

Mr. Patzer, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Jeremy Patzer: Thank you once again, Mr. Chair.

I think I want to keep down this one path here, and that's talking about things like efficiencies. A theme that could be part of this report is that there are a lot of inefficiencies in government as well. My colleague Eric in his first round was talking about how there's more being spent but less service actually being delivered. By definition, that's inefficient.

When you're doing your audits, are you making recommendations that are specific to how the government can be more efficient without having to spend millions and billions more dollars, focusing instead on how they can be more efficient with taxpayers' dollars? Perhaps you would like to elaborate on that.

Ms. Karen Hogan: In many of these reports, as you characterize accurately, it's not necessarily about spending more. In some instances there likely is a need to provide permanent funding to Veterans Affairs Canada so that they have a long-term stable workforce. In the case of access to safe drinking water, again, it's likely that there's some more funding needed there. In some instances it is more funding, and in other instances—you're right—it is about more efficiently or effectively spending that money.

To return to a statement I made earlier, it isn't just about the process. It's about the outcome, and that, to me, is a way to spend more effectively. We do try to look at that in some of our audits. Sometimes it's really hard to zone in on why things aren't happening. That's why in some instances we will talk about the ineffective or inefficient processes that are resulting in a lack of outcome. I believe one of the good ways to sort of target more effective processes would be to actually have a lot more disaggregated data to understand, really and truly, the barriers faced by the groups you're trying to target.

Mr. Jeremy Patzer: Yes. That's exactly right. I think we need to talk about hard-to-reach populations as well, which you look at from many different perspectives. You touched on many of them here, such as serving a very large rural community, for example. That can sometimes be and quite often is forgotten as one of the harder-to-reach areas, just because of the fact that the distance between places is so vast and becomes problematic. Again, I think there are ways we can be more efficient in how government operates without it being more expensive, for sure.

Building on that point, then, and looking at how the government works with hard-to-reach populations, I think it's fair to say.... I guess we touched already on the different groups, but it's also the case that anyone in a rural area generally has a harder time with accessing or navigating the services. Can you elaborate on the process for rural communities and how that could be more efficient or be better dealt with?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'll start, and then, if I may, Madam Chair, I'll see if Mr. Swales would like to add to that.

I agree with you that a lot of the programs were accessed online before the pandemic, and the pandemic actually accelerated how so many more programs are accessed online. That does present a barrier for certain rural communities.

Mr. Swales, would you like to add something to that?

• (1220)

Mr. Nicholas Swales: Thank you.

I think part of the issue is that the government plays a role in reaching out. We talk a little bit about that in our report. Some of the activities they have undertaken in aboriginal communities more recently involve doing that kind of thing and taking a more proactive stance. That could be part of a way of helping rural communities and more remote communities as well.

Mr. Jeremy Patzer: Yes. Service Canada and all these different outfits quite often tend to be in the larger urban centres. Logistically it makes more sense, but sometimes the participation is a bit of a problem or a factor in terms of reaching out. Not everybody is going to go looking through a Government of Canada website to try to find where the feedback link is on a program or how to make something better.

What more should be done? Do the audits reflect on what should be done in terms of improving that outreach to make sure that these disadvantaged communities are more adequately serviced?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's a bit of a difficult question. I think that's something that the government needs to ponder on its own. There are so many different factors to consider, and we really just targeted four programs that were meant to help lift low-income families out of poverty and support them in their day-to-day lives. You can tackle any program, and there's likely a different need or a different response that might be needed. I think it's about acknowledging that you now need to actually touch the edges. The most vulnerable are those who really need the programs the most. Recognizing that the traditional way is likely not going to reach them, how do you change that to reach those who the program was also meant to support and might need it most?

The Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes the round.

Mr. Dong, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses as well for coming today. As a new member to the committee in this session, I think these reports are eye-openers, to say the least.

To the Auditor General, I'm going to start off with a question on the hard-to-reach populations when it comes to government programs. You mentioned there's one category of the population who are newcomers, including refugees. In your findings, did you see any collaboration among various ministries, whether it's CRA or employment services, with IRCC through the settlement programs, so that the community organizations can go out proactively and inform and assist these populations with government benefits?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Mr. Chair, if you will permit me, I will ask Mr. Swales to add onto this issue, but I do think newcomers to Canada face many barriers. Oftentimes it's the language of the form or their hesitancy to interact with a government, depending on where they may be coming from. They face those unique barriers as well.

I will turn to Nick to comment on the collaboration and the program that you mentioned. Thank you.

Mr. Nicholas Swales: Thank you.

We did speak with IRCC, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, as part of our work. Certainly there is some collaboration. We're talking about measuring and identifying the communities and getting a better understanding of the take-up rates among them. That was one of the groupings where we thought there was an opportunity for improvement. Certainly there is more work that could be done there.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

In my constituency work I came across a very niche population. They are waiting for a decision on their status, whether they are asylum seekers or previously undocumented workers, but they have Canadian-born children. These are Canadian kids. Because of the way the program is set up, they won't be able to access, say, the Canada child benefit in that case. Do you think there should be some modifications or perhaps increased eligibility from...? I'm not talking about the policy side. I just want to get your thoughts on this. Should there be a way to include these Canadian kids when it comes to the Canada child benefit?

• (1225)

Ms. Karen Hogan: Mr. Chair, honestly that is a very large policy question as to who should be scoped into the programs. I'm not sure that I actually have a view or perspective on it.

I do know that we issued a report on the Canada child benefit program, and we found that, when someone had submitted an application, the government was really effective at providing those payments to individuals. Now it's about identifying those people who aren't aware or are incapable, or who have different barriers to accessing them, but your question is much more specific about a policy angle, which I'll defer to the policy-makers to comment on.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

I looked at the chart that you mentioned previously. I'm talking about the Veterans Affairs issue. In exhibit 2.1, you talked about the backlog numbers. In 2019, it was 40,305. In 2020, it was 49,216. In 2021, it was 43,227. I see that these numbers have a lot to do with incomplete applications and the need for more information. We saw the same number increase by almost 10,000 from 2019 to 2020.

Would you comment quickly on that? What is the largest contributor to the backlog? Is it because somehow the ministry is not communicating well with the applicants to get the information needed to process these applications?

Ms. Karen Hogan: The exhibit that you refer to, I think, really just identifies that there is an issue with the management of files at Veterans Affairs. With some of these files, we're waiting for applications. With others, we're waiting for them to be assigned to an adjudicator to start processing them.

There is, I think, a variety of reasons why items are sitting in the waiting or backlog file, and I'm not sure that I would attribute it more to one classification than another. I would chalk it up to needing better file management.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to return to one of the topics already raised. I am referring to your report on gender-based analysis. It appears that the government is really trying, in good faith, to improve the treatment of various people, various Canadians, regardless of gender. Yet there does not seem to be much improvement. Can you explain why?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Using gender-based analysis plus, or GBA+, we have identified persistent shortcomings. I will outline the three main shortcomings. The first is the inability to conduct analysis owing to a lack of time, availability, or even the required expertise.

The second is the lack of availability or use of the data. As I said before, in some cases, the data is not gathered. So it is difficult to conduct an analysis if basic information is missing.

The third main shortcoming is really the lack of focus on intersectionality. There is a lot of information about genders and about how men and women access programs and are served, but there is definitely room for improvement in the "plus" part of GBA+. We must be able to determine, for instance, how a woman with a disability can access a program or not. That is what we are missing.

There are about 43 elements of intersectionality, and a lot of information is missing to determine whether there is real progress in eliminating the existing shortcomings and barriers.

• (1230)

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Is it a problem with the data or the process?

Ms. Karen Hogan: A bit of both. I would add that we have to know what to do with the data and the process.

So we recently recommended that Women and Gender Equality Canada increase its visibility. The department has a very important role to play in providing education and training within government in order to increase the focus on aspects of GBA+ in program design. GBA+ is in addition to the existing program.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Mr. Desjarlais, it's back to you again, for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to follow up on a similar topic that I addressed previously. To remind everyone, it's about access to services, particularly the hard-to-reach-populations portion. There are many kinds of ways people can face barriers. There are racial barriers, but there are also persons with disabilities. Sometimes there are both or multiple barriers. There can also be gender inequities present in that.

Considering that, I'm thinking of community members in my city. We have 3,200 houseless folks. It's a massive population that is completely unserved. When I go and talk to these folks, they often don't have ID. They don't have some of the basic things that these programs often demand in order to provide support.

Thinking about how we can do better to service these populations, I think of some of the models that have been employed by Indigenous Services Canada, such as going to hard-to-reach, remote communities in person, for example, and saying, "Here are some programs". However, that's not very successful, considering the mistrust that's often there between the government and community members. However, that's an aside to my question.

For those who may be experiencing very real barriers to access to these services, such as persons with disabilities, is there a specific process that the departments take, if any, in order to better consult or to better inform those people—who may be living with a disability—about these programs?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I believe that's one area that we highlighted in our report on hard-to-reach people where there's a large opportunity for improvement. What we found is that a lot of the outreach actually didn't have that sort of hands-on, tailored approach for an individual who might be experiencing multiple barriers in order to access the program. You highlighted those who are housing insecure or those who are disabled. I would argue it could be someone who might be living in a shelter who is fleeing an abusive situation and may not have a permanent address and an inability to file a tax return and to access some of the programs that they might absolutely need on a day-to-day basis.

It goes back to that comment about needing to understand the barriers that these hard-to-reach populations are facing, and then how to break them down. The traditional route of filing a tax return might not be what best serves them.

I understand that these programs we looked at are mostly income-based, so the guaranteed income supplement program is actually piloting other ways to demonstrate income, other than filing

your income tax return. There are individuals who are hesitant to file them, but not necessarily unwilling.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hogan.

Turning now to our final and last round, Mr. Aboultaif, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Ms. Hogan and your team. I don't think you could be clearer over examining and highlighting the problems that we're facing.

The government, the public sector, has increased by I think 12% since 2015. We see a lack of outcome, less productivity, and that begs the question: Are we too bureaucratic? Are we outdated? Do you think that we need a serious strategy to restructure the whole governmental sector for the next 10 years, for example?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That's a very large question.

I do believe, based on a lot of the work we've seen, that at times the focus on process is much greater or on the machinery of government is much greater than the focus on outcome. That results in slow progress, slow activity and slow action.

I do caution the reverse, though, of eliminating all of it. We saw that with some of the pandemic relief programs. There needs to be a balance between the right amount of controls, the right amount of vetting, but also a speeding up of the process. The focus, again, shouldn't just be on the process. I think that's the key element. Adding value is looking at the outcomes for individuals, such as actually accessing the benefits and not necessarily just the activity to make them aware of the benefits.

I think it's about having the right focus, but also finding a better balance on the right level of controls and bureaucratic process to achieve the outcome.

• (1235)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Don't you agree that we need some kind of strategy in the next five or 10 years to even deal with the process? I agree. I hear from veterans for example. I had four cases in my office and they told me at the end, "It looks like the government is waiting for us to die before the application gets processed." With that sentiment, I told the minister that this is what I've been hearing from our veterans, and that's in addition to other problems with social services, with CRA, with IRCC and every single department.

I think the problem is not just in one or two departments. You've highlighted a few things, but beyond that I think this is a problem across the board. I believe that maybe you are in a position to push for some kind of serious strategy, and maybe the restructuring of the whole governmental sector, to be able to improve. Otherwise, we are falling behind.

I do believe that at some point we were ahead of the world, but now we seem to be falling behind.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I believe my role is to highlight for you areas where I see weaknesses and barriers. Then it is up to the policy-makers to decide if a fundamental change is needed to the structure of the government. We also often see siloed thinking, lack of sharing of information and slow progress with a focus on process.

I highlighted those over many years. I believe my office has highlighted those over decades. How best now do we do it differently? That's why I mentioned in my opening remarks that I was pleased to see an increased dialogue about gender and equality and diversity and inclusion. It is time now for actions to catch up with all those words.

Mr. Ziad Aboutaif: The government or the politicians can talk about this, but who has to actually do the job? It's the people who work in those different departments. These people remain in the system. It doesn't matter if governments change.

Do the bureaucrats, if I may call them that, believe we have a problem? Are they willing and open to talk about this and to really put solutions in place, or, again, are they having the same fever and are also falling behind on their own? How did you see that throughout your research?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'll be really honest with you and say that I believe there is an incredible desire and willingness in the public service to do right by Canadians and to improve outcomes, absolutely, but there is a constant tension. It is a healthy tension, but there is a constant tension between the short-term nature of a government.... Our government turns over every four years or less, typically, and that short-term focus sometimes takes away from that need to think long term.

We see it, I believe, in some of the lack of activity. Spending on preparedness, stocking a national emergency stockpile for a potential issue down the road, isn't a short-term issue. It's a long-term issue. You have to—

The Chair: Thank you very much on that point.

Thank you, all. We will turn now to the Liberal bench. I believe it's Mrs. Shanahan.

Are you splitting your time, or is it your turn?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: I'll take the five minutes, if that's all right with my colleagues.

The Chair: Wonderful. Very good.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you so much.

There are two things I want to say right off the bat. I share Ms. Hogan's assessment of the public service. I think the goodwill and the desire to do better is definitely there, but it's part of all of our jobs to help that happen.

• (1240)

[*Translation*]

I would simply add that it was encouraging to hear the term “systemic racism” a number of times today. Unfortunately, it is not something we hear often.

It must be recognized that systemic racism is more than merely calling someone rude names. Systemic racism is truly rooted in our institutions, laws, regulations, processes, and so forth. GBA+ is a tool that allows us to uncover it.

[*English*]

I want to go to the report that is a follow-up on the gender-based analysis plus tool.

Through you, Chair, I'd like to get Ms. Hogan's assessment of where we are with that tool, which has been evolving over at least 20 to 25 years plus. Canada may have come a little later to the game, but how are we doing in relation to our peers in the OECD, for example?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I may ask Carey Agnew to add some thoughts on this.

As you mentioned, the Government of Canada has made commitments that date back 25 years on gender-based analysis and more recently gender-based analysis plus. I was disappointed to see that there wasn't more concrete proof that all the activity has resulted in better outcomes across different intersectional lines.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: If I may, can I just break in there? Measurement is always an issue, but you do note in your report that progress has accelerated over the five years. In terms of measurement, for example, we had an initiative to increase the number of women in leadership positions. We know that the number of women on corporate boards has increased approximately 2.5% each year since 2016. Is that an example of a measure that's both efficient and effective?

There are also the investments we've made in gender-based violence. We do have statistics that show that the homicide rate has decreased by 33% in cases of gender-based violence. In pay equity and pay transparency, the pay gap has indeed narrowed three cents since 2015, when we began that policy.

I just want to have your feedback on measures like that. Is that what you're looking for?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We're definitely looking for targets that are measurable and specific. You need to monitor and measure progress over time. At times we are seeing that. You raised a few, but we're not seeing it across the board, the completeness of it.

Earlier on when we talked about this tool I said it is a mixed bag of results. When you sit back and try to get a global picture, you realize that's not simple when the reporting is inconsistent or when not everyone sets a measurable or specific target.

If you like, we can talk about what other countries are doing. I could ask Carey perhaps to add something.

Ms. Carey Agnew (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you.

Just to go back to the measurable and specific targets, they really do drive the achievement of gender equality and beyond. More so it needs really to be the right type of data for the indicators to be able to monitor the intersectional impacts and the process.

In our exhibit 3.4, disaggregated data is not available for those indicators, and there's no plan to change that yet. This is why we recommended that Women and Gender Equality Canada, in collaboration with others, develop more specific and more measurable targets for the gender results framework, and for any other framework it contributes to, and that the development and implementation of a plan to monitor these results will "improve the availability of data for the intersectional identity factors relevant to all indicators...in related frameworks."

• (1245)

Ms. Brenda Shanahan: Very good. I look forward to studying that report. Better is always possible, Chair.

The Chair: I'm afraid that's the time, because I want to squeeze everyone in here.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sinclair-Desgagné, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to talk about something that is mostly overlooked, namely, the government's treatment of seniors. We try to talk about it as much as possible, but we do not always achieve the desired results, unfortunately.

Can you tell us more about the vulnerability of people who already apply for the guaranteed income supplement, or GIS?

Ms. Karen Hogan: That is a more specific question.

If I may, Mr. Chair, I will ask Mr. Swales to comment on this.

Mr. Nicholas Swales: This is what I would say in relation to our report. We found that when the government measures its success in relation to this population, it does not always include those who have not filed a tax return.

In our opinion, the entire population has to be considered. This benefit is not intended solely for those who apply for it; it is intended for the entire population. So we need data about the entire population.

Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné: Very well.

A lot of people who apply for the GIS are already very vulnerable and face many obstacles, including applying for the GIS and filing a tax return. What do you think about automatic enrolment for the GIS?

People would not necessarily have to apply for it. Those who need the GIS would already be identified as vulnerable individuals and would thus be automatically enrolled.

Ms. Karen Hogan: There are other seniors' benefits for which enrolment is automatic. I think that is a question for the policy-makers. That said, this is one way of managing the access issue.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That was an excellent answer as well—as was expected, I should say.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, I want to thank the witnesses for being present.

I know that this is our final round. We don't often have the pleasure of seeing all of you, so it means a lot that you're present today on what I think is really an important set of work. I think the theme, if we could summarize it in some way, Mr. Chair, is that of the overt systemic barriers that continue to plague our public service and continue to create irreparable harm to Canadians across the country, particularly those who are the most vulnerable.

On behalf of the folks who are watching this, of course, and all the people who are experiencing this, it's only fair, I believe, that your reports have tabled recommendations that call on the government to do better in a whole swath of regions. My only hope, and my challenge, in many ways, is that we actually get this done.

I've mentioned in my previous statements how I believe it's overwhelmingly likely that the reports will be put on a shelf somewhere, but I hope to be proven wrong on that. That's the reality. That's just the truth of how these reports have been treated in the past. I don't want to see that.

I believe that your office and your institution have an incredibly important role in our country, and when we do not heed the advice of your office, which is independent of our partisanship... It's important that we all listen and that we take seriously how important those recommendations are, and that we don't defend the fact that we have these other data points like the three cents—with all due respect to Ms. Shanahan. That's important, of course, but the reality is present to us that it's not working. It's not enough. We need to have stronger data points. We actually need to have follow-up, and we actually need to have accountability. That is what's important here to me.

I really thank you for being present. I don't know how much more time I have, but I wanted to relay that, if there are any other comments that you or any of your colleagues want to make mention of, I'll yield my time to you and your colleagues.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I thank you for giving me time.

I agree. I think this group of reports is really about programs that are meant to target not just the mass part of the population, but the entire population. I hope they highlight barriers that need to be addressed by the government so that no one is left behind by the government.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you for coming and appearing before us again today. It was good to see you the other day as well to get a preview of your office's work. We appreciate it.

I'm going to suspend the meeting now and excuse the witnesses and any guests who are in the room, so that we can turn to our committee business very quickly as well.

Thank you again for appearing.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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