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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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• (1400)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting No. 27 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, August 8, 2022, the committee is meeting on the subject of Airport Delays and Cancellations. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House Order of Thursday, June 23, 2022.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the raise hand function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can, and we appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

[*English*]

Members, today appearing before committee we have the Honourable Omar Alhabra, Minister of Transport, for the first half of our meeting.

For the second half of the meeting, we have, from the Department of Transport, Michael Keenan, deputy minister; Aaron McCrorie, associate assistant deputy minister, safety and security; Colin Stacey, director general, air policy; and Nicholas Robinson, director general, civil aviation.

From the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, we have Mike Saunders, president and chief executive officer; Nancy Fitchett, vice-president of corporate affairs and chief financial officer; and Neil Parry, vice-president, operations.

From the Canada Border Services Agency, we have Denis Vinette, vice-president, travellers branch.

From the Public Health Agency of Canada, we have Jennifer Lutfallah, vice-president, health security and regional operations branch.

We will now begin with the opening remarks from Minister Alhabra for five minutes.

Minister, thank you for joining us today. I turn the floor over to you.

Hon. Omar Alhabra (Minister of Transport): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Hello, everyone.

I am grateful that I was invited to come back to speak with you today on this important issue.

[*Translation*]

So thank you for inviting me to appear before you.

[*English*]

I am joining you virtually today from the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

I am pleased to be with representatives from Transport Canada, with whom you're familiar: Michael Keenan, deputy minister of transport; Colin Stacey, director general, air policy; Aaron McCrorie, associate assistant deputy minister, safety and security; and Nicholas Robinson, director general of civil aviation.

I want to start by saying that the delays we've been seeing at airports are frustratingly unacceptable.

It's also unacceptable to see travellers sleeping on airport floors because a flight was delayed or cancelled.

Today I want to give you an update on the progress made, but also acknowledge that there's still work to be done and share what we are doing to address this.

To begin, after a difficult two years for the aviation sector, where they lost almost 90% of their business and faced significant layoffs, we saw a massive surge in demand for air travel of 252%. This is the increase in daily passenger volumes between January and August 2022 in Canada. In comparison, in the U.S. the volume per day increased by 64%.

I want to be clear. That's not an excuse. It's a fact. The aviation sector is a highly integrated sector. Transport Canada has control over certain aspects of it, but it does not manage the operations of most of its components.

Having said that, from day one we decided to focus on action rather than blame. Canadians rightly expect their government to do everything it can to address congestion causes and work with partners to implement solutions.

• (1405)

[*Translation*]

We have taken action since the start and will continue.

[English]

For example, we've hired more than 1,700 CATSA officers since May. The result is that 87% of passengers departing from the four largest airports were screened by CATSA within 15 minutes over the second week of August, and that is up from 63% over the first week of May. There's still more to be done, and we continue to hire CATSA officers every day.

Over the past few months, we've also addressed several potential operational bottlenecks, including public health measures like mandatory random testing, which is now being done outside of airports. As we know, airport operations are extremely interconnected, and coordination between partners is essential.

To highlight a few, Transport Canada sets airport and airline safety standards. Airlines are responsible for transporting their customers, for dealing with flight plans and for passenger baggage. Airports manage the flow of planes and passengers on their premises. CATSA is responsible for security screening, while CBSA is responsible for welcoming and processing international arrivals. Each of our partners has an important role to play in Canada's air sector, and if there are issues in one area, that affects other areas.

Over the last few months, I've personally met with airlines and airports across the country, as well as other partners in the industry. I've travelled and visited 13 airports, big and small, to see the situation first-hand. I'm happy to see encouraging results, such as only 2% of flights planned for Canada's top four airports over the second week of August being cancelled—which is, by the way, closer to the traditional average. This is a drop from 5% over the first week of July.

I also want to touch on another important subject: Passengers have rights.

Our government was the first government in Canadian history to recognize that and do something about it, in 2017. Our government worked with the Canadian Transportation Agency, or CTA, which is an independent quasi-judicial tribunal and regulator of Canada's national transportation system, to create the air passenger protection regulations a few years ago. Airlines must respect travellers' rights and compensate travellers who are eligible. The CTA, like any other tribunal, is responsible for receiving and analyzing complaints from travellers who believe they are entitled to compensation in instances where airlines have not provided it. Our government has recently given the CTA an additional \$11 million to help them process the backlog. We're going to make sure that the CTA has the resources they need to fulfill their mandate under the air passenger protection regulations.

● (1410)

In closing, I want Canadians to know that their government has been actively working at addressing airport congestion caused by the surge in air travel demand. We are seeing encouraging results, but there's still more work to be done.

There are those who have a vested interest in embellishing reality and undermining confidence in our airline sector only to score political points. Our government, on the other hand, is focusing on tackling the real issues, working with partners and taking real ac-

tion. Our plan is to do everything possible to reduce delays. That's what we did, and that's what we will continue to do.

[Translation]

We will continue to do everything possible to fix the situation.

[English]

We know that we all need to work together to resolve the situation, and I invite members of this committee to also present solutions.

Mr. Chair, that concludes my opening remarks, and I'm looking forward to answering the questions of my colleagues.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

To begin the rounds of questioning today, we will go with Melissa Lantsman.

Ms. Lantsman, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'm glad to see your symptoms are mild.

I do appreciate the minister making time, but it is disappointing that he couldn't find two hours in the summer to appear in front of the transport committee, whereas his own party was part of a unanimous agreement for a two-hour appearance today.

More and more Canadians have seen for themselves that the problems experienced here in Canada are different and substantially worse than anywhere else in the world. We know that Pearson and Montreal have been ranked number one and number two of the worst airports in the world. That is an international embarrassment.

Among these delays and flight disruptions, there's a lot of finger pointing—airlines, airports and passengers themselves, as the minister alluded to in May—and we know that a lack of capacity, security agents, customs agents, navigation services and pandemic restrictions have all contributed to this chaos.

Does the minister believe that the government bears any responsibility in any way for what has transpired this summer, yes or no?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Minister. I believe you're on mute. Could you unmute, please?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: That is a fair point. I blame it on COVID.

Mr. Chair, speaking of COVID, Canadians know that over the last two years they've witnessed significant disruptions to our economy. As we are restarting our economy, they're seeing an imbalance in our economy. They're witnessing supply chain disruptions. They're witnessing private sector inability to provide services and products that customers are looking for. They're witnessing similar delays and phenomena across the world. I know that this is a time of uncertainty, and I know that, rightly so, Canadians expect their government to focus on mitigating these factors and doing everything it can to resolve this.

I want Canadians to see that from the beginning their government was focused on taking action to do everything we could to help Canadians. I hope that months from now Canadians will look back and see that their government was taking real action and doing everything we could to address the root causes of the issue. We are witnessing similar phenomena around the world—

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Minister, I'm just going to jump in here.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: I am committed to doing everything we can to address these issues.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thanks. I have a limited amount of time, and I hear that the answer is “no”.

Mr. Chair, this week alone, families returning from long-awaited vacations on a number of flights into the minister's home airport of Toronto, which is also mine, waited almost four hours for their bags. Does the minister think this is acceptable? How long should they have to wait? Is it 20 minutes? Is it two hours? Is it three hours? There is no standard. That's the point.

Would he agree that the federal government should enact a service standard for those elements of air travel under its jurisdiction so that we can meaningfully improve travel, which he doesn't think the government has any responsibility in, according to his last answer?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, let me just say that for decades, previous governments didn't do anything about passenger rights. It was our government that was the first government in Canadian history to put together regulations that protect passenger rights. I think this moment in history has exacerbated and exposed other areas that we can certainly work on together to improve.

I want to thank Ms. Lantsman, because this is constructive feedback. There will be a time when we're going to look back and look at what else we can do to strengthen our system and to make sure it's better. Baggage handling is the responsibility of the airlines. Having said that, can we do something to ensure that we have a higher standard? I think that's a good point to raise and a good question to ask. I look forward to working with members of the committee to improve our aviation sector.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I think Canadians at home are rightfully frustrated.

I'm going to move on to something else, since we're not getting any kind of answer.

The mandatory use of the ArriveCAN app has been criticized by frontline border agents themselves. Those are folks who are part of the union, folks who work in the government. Mayors, tourism councils, chambers of commerce, our U.S. border partners.... Actually, it would be easier just to list those who support it. That's only the government, sir.

It is adding delays. It is quadrupling the time at customs. We know that. That's on record. People are being wrongfully put under house arrest because of a glitch. It functionally does not keep up with the political health restrictions. It has been cited as having privacy issues. The one-time secret exemption uncovered last week proves that it's not even about viral spread.

In the face of the overwhelming evidence of its problems and the criticism, why is the government not abandoning the mandatory use of ArriveCAN? Why are you instead making it permanent?

• (1415)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, Ms. Lantsman in January claimed that the vaccine mandate at our borders would lead to food shortages and empty shelves at our grocery stores. She was wrong. In May, she claimed that the transportation vaccine mandate was causing the congestion, and if we stopped it, it would solve the congestion problem. Once again she was wrong. So I can tell you...please forgive me if I'm skeptical about her assessment.

ArriveCAN is not contributing to the congestion. In fact, ArriveCAN is a useful tool that helps verify the vaccination status of an individual before they arrive at our borders. If we didn't have ArriveCAN, the processing of arrivals would take a longer time, because it would have to be done manually.

The Chair: You have 10 more seconds, Minister, please.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: ArriveCAN is actually helping to process arrivals much faster and helping to reduce congestions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, and thank you, Ms. Lantsman.

Next we have Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Koutrakis, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for agreeing to appear before the transport committee today. It's nice to see that your symptoms of COVID are very mild and that you're able to give us one hour from your busy schedule.

Earlier, we heard from Ms. Lantsman the criticism that you're appearing here for one hour instead of two. I just want to remind everyone who is watching us and listening that the standard for ministerial appearances at the transport committee is in fact an hour. During the entire Harper government, which was almost 10 years, none of his various transport ministers appeared for longer than an hour at transport committee meetings.

Minister Alghabra also answered questions about airports when he last appeared at TRAN, on May 30. The officials appeared on this topic at TRAN on June 16. Unfortunately, we never got a chance to ask our questions of the relevant officials because the opposition members of this committee preferred to deal with unrelated motions.

Last but not less important, a briefing was provided by officials on July 21 to members of both the transport committee and the TR-CM, at the Senate.

Minister, one of the main responsibilities of Transport Canada is security screening through CATSA. What concrete steps have you taken to improve CATSA screening times and what are the results we've seen so far?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you very much, Ms. Koutrakis, for your question.

As I've stated before, I'm always happy to come back and once again answer questions of committee members, as I have done in the past, if needed.

From the beginning, when we started seeing the surge in demand, we worked with CATSA. I know Mike Saunders is here today, and I'm sure he'll be happy to answer your questions, as will his team. I sat down with Mike in late April and we talked about the sense of urgency that is required to respond to the surge in demand we're seeing. To CATSA's credit, they put all hands on deck and worked with their partners on ensuring they intensified and accelerated their hiring.

Let me take a step back. Since the winter, we have worked with CATSA on providing them additional resources in preparation for the restart of the aviation sector. In fact, it was in the estimates prior to congestion, and CATSA was receiving additional funding to help them prepare for that.

To summarize, just in the last three months, CATSA has hired 1,700 people. This is in an environment of labour shortage. There's more work that needs to be done, and I'm not claiming that all the problems have been solved, but it's great to see a significant improvement in processing times. As I stated in my opening remarks, today, at the four largest airports, 87% of passengers are screened within 15 minutes or less.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: We are seeing similar flight delays and cancellations occurring all over the world. Is it reasonable to say that these all have knock-on effects in other countries? If so, what efforts, if any, are being made at the international level to better coordinate schedules to manage these effects?

• (1420)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Indeed, Ms. Koutrakis, we are seeing similar phenomena at many major airports around the world, from Heathrow to Amsterdam to many U.S. airports to Dublin, and the list goes on. This is an international phenomenon.

Again, at the heart of it is the surge in demand after the industry faced two years of significant reductions and layoffs. There is an imbalance between the desire of travellers to travel and the ability and labour available to provide those services. Undoubtedly, there needs to be better coordination among international partners to do

everything they can, but as you said, there are knock-on effects across the world. This is a highly integrated sector with a just-in-time delivery service model, and any kind of impact will have ramifications across the world.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I also want to dispel the comments of my colleague MP Lantsman, who referred to ArriveCAN and said people are being put under house arrest. I would like to clarify for the record that this has not been the case. No one has been placed on house arrest by having to use ArriveCAN.

What is the rationale for maintaining the ArriveCAN app, Minister, to the best of your knowledge? Why are we maintaining this app?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Canada, like several other countries around the world, continues to ask international arrivals to show their vaccination status. ArriveCAN enables travellers to provide verification of their vaccination status electronically so that they are processed a lot faster than they would be manually. It actually improves the efficiency of processing international arrivals. Without it, we would be adding several minutes to each passenger as they arrive at our borders, and we would be causing more congestion at our borders.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Do we have any evidence, Minister, that the ArriveCAN app is suppressing cross-border travel and tourism? Tourism is very important. We have a wonderful country, and our neighbours to the south want to visit our great nation. As far as you know, is there any evidence that this is being suppressed?

The Chair: Please give a 15-second response, Minister.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: There is no evidence, Ms. Koutrakis. However, I am aware that several border communities have been flagging this as an issue. We will continue to work with them on how we can increase the facilitation of international arrivals.

Let me just state this. At airports, international arrivals are currently at 99.5% compliance rates. That is almost 100%. There is no evidence whatsoever that ArriveCAN is causing any problems.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Ms. Koutrakis.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, the Liberals seem to be the only ones who think the ArriveCAN app is the greatest thing since sliced bread. However, the Customs and Immigration Union people tell us it slows them down, and airline representatives say it complicates their operations.

Travellers are threatened with \$5,000 fines if they don't use the app, and they contact our offices in a panic because they don't know how to use it. It's full of bugs and they get stuck.

We asked you to shelve the app until the errors could be corrected. Why didn't you do that?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you for the question.

Mr. Chair, as I stated just now, ArriveCAN enables CBSA and public health officers to ensure that international arrivals have their vaccination status accurately verified before entering Canada, as per public health measures that we have. Without ArriveCAN, the processing time for international arrivals would increase significantly.

Having said that, I know that there are those who have some concerns about ArriveCAN. CBSA, the Minister of Public Safety, Transport Canada and others are going to work with all of our stakeholders to ensure that the tool does its job as efficiently as possible. But I can assure you that if we suspend ArriveCAN today, it will add significant complications to the congestions we have at our airports today.

• (1425)

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: That's surprising. You're the only ones saying that the ArriveCAN app shortens delays, while Canada now leads the world in airport delays. We want to believe, but we're more skeptical for the moment.

My impression is that you're letting people deal with the problems and have introduced a program that isn't ready, that isn't final. That affects the lives of the people who are falsely told they have to quarantine when that isn't warranted. That causes stress because people can't get the app to work properly.

We feel that travellers are being treated like laboratory rats.

Do you think that's right?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, opposition members in the past claimed that the transportation vaccine mandate, which now has been suspended, was causing the congestion. They were wrong. I can tell you that they are wrong when they claim that ArriveCAN is causing congestions at our airports today.

I have explained, in all honesty and transparency, the root causes of these congestions. We are working with our partners to address them. We're seeing significant improvements over the last two months. Data can be provided to back it up. This is moving in the right direction. We will work with partners on ensuring that we can improve ArriveCAN. We address the concerns that people have, but it's not causing the congestions at our airports.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Minister, we feel you've come here to boast. I'm not sure ordinary citizens view the matter as you do.

People generally buy airline tickets several months ahead of time, not two days before departure. So it's possible to anticipate the situation. However, you've completely failed to do so. In a briefing note that was drafted in May and leaked to the media,

CATSA indicated that it had a 25% labour shortage. You were personally aware of that situation, which then worsened before slightly improving in August.

The problem was clearly caused by you, but you decided to blame the airports and airlines rather than take action. Why?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: The report that my honourable colleague is referring to is exactly what I am noting right now. There is a labour shortage issue.

In May, all agencies, companies and airports had a massive labour shortage compared with the surge in demand that occurred then. We acted quickly. We were preparing for it, but the surge ended up being beyond what was expected. This is good news for the sector, but every player in the sector had to catch up.

Significant improvements are taking place. I'm not here to applaud our government's action. I'm here to applaud those who work on the front lines in responding to the surge in demand. Let's recognize the progress that is taking place. Let's build confidence in our sector and acknowledge that there's still work to be done. Let's not dismiss the progress that has taken place over the last few weeks.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Minister, on June 16, the parliamentary secretary informed the committee that dealing with the chaos in the airports would mean “micromanag[ing] these kinds of [day-to-day] operational decisions”. That's one way to wash one's hands of the matter.

Today you tell us about your actions and boast that the situation's improving. My sense is that you've since changed your tune.

Would you say you failed miserably and ultimately tried to wash your hands of the situation before it blew up in your face?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: I've been consistent since May. A labour shortage is the root cause of airport congestion—the labour shortage at airports, the labour shortage at airlines and the labour shortage at other agencies. There is an imbalance between the appetite of people who want to travel and the ability to service those who want to travel.

Significant progress has taken place over the last few weeks, and we're seeing similar phenomena around the world. This is not just unique to Canada. This is part of the recovery from the COVID public health measures that the world has witnessed over the last two years. This is not an excuse; these are the facts.

I am here to reaffirm our commitment to continue to work with our partners to ensure that we build on the successes that have taken place and continue to focus on addressing the remaining issues.

• (1430)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Next we have Mr. Taylor Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today despite your illness. It's much appreciated because the topic we're discussing is one that affects thousands, if not millions, of Canadians.

You mentioned in your opening remarks the extraordinary circumstances that we've seen over the past number of years. That is indeed true. Obviously, there's been a global pandemic, a surge in travel, and staffing shortages, and all of that has had an impact.

However, within that context, the treatment of air passengers has been atrocious. You mentioned people sleeping on the floors of our airports. The cancellations, the delays and the ways air passengers have been treated, both by the government and by the major airlines, have been nothing short of shameful. I think everyone in this meeting has seen this first-hand when travelling through Canada's major airports.

Your government brought in with great fanfare the air passenger bill of rights, or the APPR, which was supposed to have air passengers' backs. Can you tell me with a straight face that those regulations have protected air passengers over the past year?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Let me thank all of my colleagues for their well wishes. I can say—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, I only have six minutes. I have a lot of questions for you, so if you could—

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Well, I'm glad you have a lot of questions. That's why I'm here, Mr. Bachrach.

Look, as I said, governments for decades didn't do anything about passenger rights. We did something; we took action. These regulations protect passenger rights. Currently, the CTA is going through thousands of complaints that passengers have submitted.

Let me state unequivocally that it's unacceptable to see passengers sleep on the floor at airports. While I want to avoid speaking about specific cases, as you can imagine, because I leave it up to the CTA to examine the merits of each case, it's unacceptable. There are standards that make sure airlines fulfill their end of the bargain, and the CTA is responsible for going through these complaints and adjudicating them. I am confident that they will do everything they can to uphold these regulations to ensure that airlines fulfill their end of the bargain.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, what is the current backlog of complaints submitted to the CTA?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: I am not 100% sure, but I think it's about maybe 15,000.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: The last time we checked, it was 18,000.

The service standard for the CTA is 20 days to resolve a complaint. How long is it currently taking the CTA to resolve a passenger complaint?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Bachrach, the recent budget in April included an additional \$11 million to the CTA to help them deal with their backlog. Now, the backlog has also increased; I recognize that. I can assure you that my personal commitment, and our government's commitment, is to continue to work with the CTA so they have the resources they need to address the backlog.

The work the CTA does is incredibly important for confidence in our aviation sector and for protecting passenger rights, and we provided additional resources. I know that we need to continue working with the CTA at ensuring that they have the resources they need to address and clear the backlog.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, let's say there's a backlog of roughly 18,000 complaints before the CTA. How many complaints has the CTA resolved over the past year?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: I don't know the answer. Maybe I'll ask our deputy minister or someone on our team if they can answer that question.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: We can see Mr. Keenan getting ready there, but we're going to have the officials during the next hour, so I'll save that question for then.

The CTA is also able to issue fines in situations of non-compliance, fines to the airlines of up to \$25,000. Are you aware of any fines being issued under the APPR directly related to the passenger bill of rights?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Again, I need to look back. I think there were. I don't know if they're always made public, but, again, I'll defer to officials to provide that information, whatever is at least publicly available.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Maybe, Minister, I'll ask you this. All these questions have been about the CTA's area of jurisdiction. You brought to this meeting a number of officials from different agencies. Why didn't you bring anyone from the CTA?

• (1435)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Look, Mr. Bachrach, the committee can invite whomever they want to.

The CTA is a quasi-judicial, independent body that adjudicates complaints independently. It is really important that the government supports the work of the CTA but also avoids prejudging the outcomes of their decisions and does not appear to be dictating to the CTA how to decide on the complaints they have before them.

It is really important to respect the independence of the CTA, while supporting them in fulfilling their mandate.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, do you agree with me that the treatment of air passengers over the past year has been inappropriate, has been atrocious?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Bachrach, I said clearly that there have been examples that were reported on in the media that were unacceptable and should not be tolerated. Again, I want to avoid speaking about a specific issue and not prejudge the outcomes of CTA examinations, but there have been horrific stories in the media that have been unacceptable.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Like—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Next, for the second round, we have Mr. Barrett for five minutes.

Mr. Barrett, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, if there was no scientific basis for mandates, as has been indicated by officials, why would your government institute a policy that infringed on Canadians' rights, that didn't have scientific basis, and then call a snap election a couple of days later?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Do you mean the non-scientific mandates that were implemented by municipal governments? Do you mean the non-scientific mandates that were implemented by provincial governments? Do you mean the non-scientific mandates implemented by the private sector without requirements from government? Do you mean the non-scientific mandates that were implemented by universities? Do you mean the non-scientific mandates that were—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, I'm talking about the mandates implemented by the federal government at airports—

Hon. Omar Alhabra: —implemented by governments around the world?

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'd like to quote one of your officials in court documents that were reported on by Rupa Subramanya. One of those officials is on the call today. Let me quote from an email: "To the extent that updated data exists or that there is clearer evidence of the safety benefit of vaccination on the users or other stakeholders of the transportation system, it would be helpful to assist Transport Canada supporting its measures". That's a quote from ADM McCrorie.

Now, the mandates were set to be implemented, but your department didn't even have the information that indicated it was necessary or based in science.

To just circle back to your question about the science that's being followed by municipalities and provinces, they have all eliminated their mandates since, yet you have not. If you're following the same science they are, why have they all lifted their mandates but you have not?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, let me start out by saying that vaccines have proven to have saved lives and continue to save lives. At a moment in time when our public health system is under a lot of pressure, vaccines continue to be an incredible tool in sav-

ing lives and protecting the health and safety of Canadians and our health care system.

The federal government has suspended most of our mandates. The only mandate we have is at our borders, as in many countries around the world. It is done to ensure that we minimize the importation of the virus and to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

Let me point out to my honourable colleague—on top of all the studies that have been done over the last two years—two different studies, just in the last two months. One was done by the Canadian Medical Association. One was done by the University of British Columbia, which demonstrated that these public health measures, including mandates, protect health and safety and have saved upwards of 60,000 lives and prevented the importation of the virus tenfold at our borders.

There is ample evidence that I'm happy to table with the committee that provides justification for these vaccines.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much. We look forward to your tabling that information.

Over 60 countries around the world have abandoned all of their air travel pandemic restrictions, including most of our European allies. PHAC's internal reports suggest that air travel had almost no impact on COVID community spread—less than 1%—so it is questionable why those would still be in place.

Minister, you're talking about science. The CDC in the United States, with whom we share a border, says that it makes the most sense not to differentiate between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated and that sub-jurisdictions don't need to start making mandates.

Minister, let's talk about the mandates you still have in place. What are the current regulations for air and train travel in Canada with respect to COVID-19?

• (1440)

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Chair, there are still many countries around the world that require proof of vaccination for international travel—

Mr. Michael Barrett: I asked about your mandates, Minister. I have less than a minute.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Second, currently, the Canadian government has suspended our vaccine mandate for our transportation sector, so there is no requirement for domestic or international travel for people who are leaving the country, whether they want to get on a plane or a train.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, do you have to wear a mask on the train or the plane, and if someone does not, what should be the consequence for that person?

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Currently, we maintain a mask-wearing policy for federally regulated air or train sectors. It is scientifically proven that masks reduce transmission upwards of 80%. We're doing everything we can to protect the health and safety of Canadians, and it is the prudent thing. In fact, it's the kind thing to do—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ten seconds, please, Minister....

Hon. Omar Alghabra: —to protect those sitting next to you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Minister, your Prime Minister was seen not wearing a mask on a train just mere weeks ago. Was that not prudent or kind of the Prime Minister?

The Chair: Thank you. You can follow up on that question in the next round, Mr. Barrett, or perhaps one of your colleagues can.

Thank you, Mr. Barrett. Thank you, Minister.

Next we have Mr. Iacono.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Good day, colleagues.

Good day, Minister. I'm glad to see that the COVID symptoms have not been too harsh with you. I guess you are fully vaccinated, and it shows.

Travelling post-COVID is like time travel. You really don't know what to expect. We will probably be able to write a postpandemic manual soon, but it sure doesn't exist yet. Is that right, Minister?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you very much, Mr. Iacono, for your question and well wishes.

Indeed, when COVID arrived, it did not arrive with an instruction manual. Governments around the world grappled with doing everything they could to protect the health and safety of their citizens.

We are now going through a different phase of the pandemic as we are restarting our economy and certainly witnessing unprecedented phenomena. We need to, first of all, do everything we can to focus on addressing congestion causes and other types of disruption to minimize the impact on our citizens and our economy.

I also think it's an opportunity for us to learn from this phase that we're going through. There will be a time to look back and write a manual, as you call it, Mr. Iacono, so that we can learn from what we went through and make sure we improve our systems for the future.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

What steps were taken to prepare for the anticipated return of traveller volumes.

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

First of all, let me just say that during COVID, when, as I explained, 90% of customers in the aviation sector disappeared, we did everything we could to ensure that we maintained a resilient sector. We made sure that we provided access to wage subsidies so that employers could retain as many of their employees as possible. We provided financial supports to airports. We provided financial supports to airlines. We provided rent deferrals and infrastructure

funding to help airports prepare and to help airlines remain resilient during an unprecedented time.

Then, as we were planning for the restart, we ensured that we worked with government agencies like CBSA, CATSA and others, and the CTA, to prepare them for what we predicted would be an increase in demand. As everyone knows today, the surge in demand far exceeded many predictions, but we did everything we could to prepare for it. We are seeing that the private sector, the public sector and all the sectors of our economy have been grappling with this restart, with the surge in demand, and we've been working on ensuring that the labour shortage we're experiencing is addressed as quickly as possible.

• (1445)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

Why did Pearson and Pierre-Elliott-Trudeau airports in particular do such a poor job with flight delays in July?

Have we seen any signs of improvement since then?

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Indeed, Monsieur Iacono, we've been seeing significant signs of improvement. I highlighted some of them in my opening remarks.

Having said that, first of all, we're seeing delays across the world, but Canada is somewhat unique in the fact that the hole that the airline sector and the aviation sector are coming out of was deeper than in many other countries. I gave the example that Canada's increase in travel between January and August was 252%, compared with the 63% we saw in the United States. While Canadian airports and airlines have gone through experiences of labour shortages that are similar to those around the world, the hole that they were coming out of was deeper. Therefore, the acceleration out of it was faster, and we saw significant delays.

There's now evidence that we are moving in the right direction. Credit goes to those who work in the airports, airlines and government agencies who have been working really hard at addressing these causes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

The problems at airports often seem to occur at peak hours. What is being done to avoid the large number of arrivals and departures occurring at the same time?

The Chair: We need a 10-second response, please, Minister.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: We are seeing airports and airlines work together to address these scheduling issues. We saw airlines make the difficult but right decision to cut back on some of their scheduled flights to ensure that they're able to service the demand. Several important steps have been taken to manage the peak, but again, we need to continue to observe and monitor the situation and respond to ensure that we address all of these issues.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister and Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, the Bloc Québécois has proposed that the airline passenger bill of rights also apply to the federal government and its agencies. That would make it possible to compensate travellers when their flights are cancelled or delayed as a result of federal government mismanagement or incompetence.

That would put an end to the kind of culture of impunity we're seeing since the government suffers no consequences when it fails to solve the problem and let's things go awry.

Do you intend to apply the travellers bill of rights to the federal government?

[English]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, these regulations are done to protect passengers who enter into a commercial agreement with airlines to receive a service that they paid for. Citizens are always able to hold governments accountable through their members of Parliament, through elections, through various means, but passengers for the longest time had no recourse to ensure that airlines they paid money to were able to provide them the service they paid for. That's the intention of these regulations.

Is there an opportunity for us to continue to improve it? Sure. I'm happy to work with my colleagues on figuring out how we can improve these regulations, but they're intended to protect passengers who enter into a commercial contract with airlines so they receive the service they paid for.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Minister.

On the one hand, I find it curious that consumers have no recourse when the government causes their flights to be delayed or cancelled. On the other hand, we set rules and standards for businesses that the government doesn't impose on itself. There's a lack of consistency here.

Furthermore, with regard to the Canadian Transportation Agency, I'm thinking of the documents that were leaked and that prove that Air Canada knowingly asked its staff to lie to travellers about the reasons why flights were cancelled to avoid being assessed penalties.

We have to assume there are no consequences for that. Even if consumers file a complaint with the agency, there's a backlog of 18,000 complaints. So that complaint won't be processed for a month of Sundays. Consumer associations now suggest that people circumvent the agency and go straight to the courts.

Don't you think that's a disgrace, Minister?

What's it like for you to see how the Canadian Transportation Agency, which is supposed to be the watchdog for travellers' rights, is utterly ineffective.

• (1450)

The Chair: I would ask you to answer briefly, Minister.

[English]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: The CTA is an independent, quasi-judicial body that is adjudicating these complaints independently. I can assure you that I have confidence in their ability to do their work and that our government will continue to assist them to ensure they have the resources they need to protect passengers.

I understand that recently the CTA issued a ruling that the labour shortage could not be claimed as a safety matter. The CTA looks at individual complaints and adjudicates them based on the circumstances and evidence before it.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister and Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, I'll pick up where my colleague left off.

On December 29, Air Canada issued an internal memo stating, "Effective immediately, flight cancellations due to crew are considered as Within Carrier Control—For Safety", and, further, that passengers "will no longer be eligible for APPR claims/monetary compensation".

Does this reflect your understanding of the spirit of the air passenger protection regulations?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Bachrach, the CTA is responsible for adjudicating the complaints, and they will look at each complaint independently and objectively. As you can imagine, I want to avoid prejudging individual complaints. Having said that—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister—

Hon. Omar Alghabra: —I do not feel that labour issues, in spirit, can be used as a justification for safety standards.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you for that, Minister.

You've repeatedly said that the CTA is an independent body, yet cabinet and you as Minister of Transport are ultimately accountable. You created the legislation, you created the regulations and you're responsible for the CTA.

Section 43 of the Canada Transportation Act empowers you and cabinet to issue policy directives to the CTA. Will you use this, in light of what has happened to air passengers over the past year and in light of the fact that airlines continue to treat passengers in atrocious ways when it comes to delays and cancellations? Will you use this policy directive to strengthen the APPR?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Bachrach, to use your point and give you an example of how our government and the Minister of Transport utilize that ability, we actually issued a directive to the CTA, given the lessons we learned from COVID, about areas outside the control of airlines. We issued a directive so they could reform the regulation, and it's now strengthened. In fact, as of September 8, a new set of rules will take effect to improve the regulations.

Moving forward, I think there's an opportunity for us to work together on looking at what else we can do to continue to improve and build on the regulations we have. I'm happy to work with you and other colleagues on figuring out what else can be done.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach, and thank you, Minister.

Next we have Mr. Baldinelli.

Mr. Baldinelli, you have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli (Niagara Falls, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

Minister, a Canadian traveller recently left this public comment on Tripadvisor: "Just got back from a trip to Nevada flying out of Buffalo, and I am from Ontario, the airport is a dream, no line ups, quick through TSA check points, the airport is super clean.... Quick drive over to the airport. No Covid testing required! Crossing across the U.S. border is easy, they only ask if you are vaccinated and do not ask to see your test (I have crossed three times in the past two months, same thing every time) coming back across the border at the Rainbow [bridge] there were about 10 cars in front of us and it took for ever to get to the booth. So anyone thinking of ditching Pearson Airport and travelling down to Buffalo, do it—its worth it".

Minister, Niagara Falls is the number one tourism, leisure destination in all of Canada, yet every taxpayer dollar that Destination Canada spends in international markets, including our prime market, the United States, for our border communities is being wasted by headlines that continually hit the press talking about Pearson Airport being the worst airport in the world.

My colleague just mentioned this. Sixty countries around the world have abandoned all air travel pandemic restrictions, including most of our European allies. Why does the government continue to cling to these restrictions, which only do a disservice and disincentivize travel to this country?

• (1455)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, it helps no one to undermine confidence in our aviation sector and in our institutions. I acknowledge the fact that, in Canadian airports and airlines, we've witnessed and continue to witness some congestion similar to what we're seeing around the world, including in the United States.

I also acknowledge that currently the only public health measure we have at our borders is requiring proof of vaccination—by the way, just like the U.S. and many countries around the world.

Work is being done on a daily basis to address these congestion issues, and the evidence proves that things are getting better. More work is needed, but things are getting better.

I want to ask my honourable colleague why, if he really cares about the fluidity of our borders, did he and his colleagues support these blockaders who blocked our borders for weeks, preventing Canadians and others from—

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Minister, the question period is to me now. If you had done your job, Minister, and spoken to stakeholders, including the federal bridge that you regulate in Fort Erie, the Fort Erie Peace Bridge authority.... You appoint members of that commission. They can tell you about the border delays and about traffic being down 50%, Minister. Wait times are up almost two hours, yet you've done nothing. Minister, you have a hard time responding to correspondence from them, and it's your commission that you regulate. Why are you continuing to put in disincentives to travel to this country?

There are 40,000 people in my community who work in the tourism sector, and they're being impacted. We've lost two tourism years because of COVID. This year, if we lose it, it's self-inflicted, and there's nobody to blame but the Liberal government. When are you going to take action?

Who told you, Minister, that ArriveCAN is not having any impact on wait times?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, setting aside the bluster there, we continue to do everything we can to protect the health and safety of Canadians and facilitating smooth border crossings for all travellers. We have had all hands on deck, whether it is at airports or land borders. My colleagues and I have been working with border communities to ensure that they have the tools they need to facilitate safe and efficient border crossings.

Mr. Chair, the public health measures we have—

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Whom have you spoken to, Minister? Have you spoken to the stakeholders? Have you spoken to the bridge commissions? Have you spoken to the tourism stakeholders?

My understanding is that the Liberal caucus was meeting recently in Niagara Falls, the Ontario caucus. Did they meet with any stakeholders to hear from them directly about the impact it's having on my community, yes or no?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Chair, I know my colleague Vance Badawey is here and a member of the committee. He's been a proud and vocal advocate on behalf of the Niagara region, a champion for the Great Lakes, a champion for the communities who has been working—

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Then why aren't you listening to him?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: —collaboratively with our ministers, who have been working collaboratively with stakeholders. I have met with stakeholders. I've met with experts in tourism—

The Chair: You have 10 more seconds, please, Minister.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: —and we will continue to do everything we can to ensure—

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Why does it take you months to respond to your own government agency that reports to you?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: —safe and efficient travel.

It's unfortunate the Conservatives have never taken COVID seriously. It's unfortunate the Conservatives supported these illegal blockades that blocked our borders and had a massive impact on border communities, and have not apologized for it to this day.

We, on the other hand, are focused—

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Minister, they're going to hold a parade in Buffalo for you. Their chamber of commerce is going to hold a parade for you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Baldinelli.

Thank you, Minister.

The last five minutes of the first hour will go to Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Badawey, the floor is yours.

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's an interesting meeting.

Minister, thank you, first of all, for being here today. It's good that you're trying to implement the business of good government versus the business of good politics, as we're seeing on the other side of the floor.

With that said, Minister, I know you have limited time left, but I do want to ask you one question with respect to flight delays. We are seeing similar flight delays, as mentioned earlier by a colleague, as well as cancellations occurring all over the world as well as here in Canada. Is it reasonable to say that these all have what we call knock-on effects on other countries? If so, what efforts, if any, are being made at the international level to better coordinate schedules to manage these very effects?

• (1500)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Indeed, the industry is highly integrated. As you stated, we are seeing similar phenomena around the world. When one corner of the world is experiencing congestion, other connected areas feel the impact. We also know that other airports are feeling similar challenges of labour shortages as we are recovering from COVID, and similar congestions.

To answer your point, yes, there are opportunities for us to work with international partners. By the way, Canada is the host of ICAO, the International Civil Aviation Organization, where there will be a meeting happening this fall, hosted in Montreal. We are all proud of the work that we're doing in hosting such a body. This would be one opportunity for us to work together with our international partners on learning together, sharing best practices, learning lessons, and working together on how we can improve the standards that the industry has around the world.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Minister.

I want to attach my next question to some of the comments from Mr. Baldinelli, which are somewhat radical in nature, but I do want to be very specific and more in tune with what the reality of what's happening here in Niagara actually is, in particular as it relates to the efforts that you and Minister Mendicino, as well as Minister Boissonnault, have made in the last few months in meeting with stakeholders here in Niagara to hear first the facts—not the rhetoric or the perception by some members of Parliament, but the facts.

To that, can you tell us what you've heard, for example, from Ron Rienas, the general manager of the Peace Bridge authority, from Tim Clutterbuck, the chair of the board of the Peace Bridge authority, as well as other stakeholders throughout Niagara Falls, Niagara Centre—my riding—as well as West Niagara and into St. Catharines? What have you heard and what are some of the efforts that you and other members of cabinet are making on behalf of those who express their concerns to you?

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Mr. Badawey, let me say that I read the emails that you send me on a regular basis. That provides me the information coming from the bridge on traffic and performance. It's great that we're seeing traffic continue to improve and increases in traffic at our border crossings, including the Peace Bridge and other international borders.

Second, I know that the community has been flagging the concern that they have. There are still some issues of awareness of ArriveCAN for many land border travellers, which are different than for air travellers. I have been taking that input, examining it on a regular basis, and working with our colleagues on making sure that we figure out what else can be done to improve the efficiency and the fluidity of these land border crossings.

I'm grateful for your work. I'm grateful to those who are on the front line. I recognize that there are some questions, and we continue to be more than willing to work with you and others on responding to these questions and figuring out what else we can do to improve the travellers' experience.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

That concludes the first hour of questioning.

Minister, on behalf of all members, I want to thank you once again for your appearance, particularly given what you're battling right now. We wish you the best of health in the days and weeks ahead.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thanks, everyone.

The Chair: Colleagues, if it's okay with you, we will move directly to questioning, seeing as there are no opening remarks.

We will begin the second hour of questioning with Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Barrett, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much, Chair.

Thanks to the officials for being here today.

Has ArriveCAN caused delays?

The Chair: Mr. Keenan, I think you're trying to speak, if I'm not mistaken, but we can't hear you.

• (1505)

Mr. Aaron McCrorie (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security, Department of Transport): Apologies, Mr. Chair. Deputy Keenan's mike isn't working.

He was going to suggest that perhaps Denis Vinette from the Canada Border Services Agency could take this question.

The Chair: Mr. Vinette, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Keenan (Deputy Minister, Department of Transport): Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes. We can now.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Okay. Thanks. I made a small technical adjustment to my computer.

Mr. Chair, I would still stand with the suggestion that Denis Vinette from CBSA answer this question.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Vinette.

Mr. Denis Vinette (Vice-President, Travellers Branch, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you for the question.

Mr. Chair, the ArriveCAN app is actually the vehicle for the provision of the medical information and public health information mandated through the order in council as issued by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Without the use of ArriveCAN, for which we receive the information 99.5% of the time in advance in air and in marine, and just over 90% in land, that information would need to be collected either by paper submission or orally for capture and input by a CBSA officer.

Without ArriveCAN, it would take a far greater time to process individuals than it currently takes. You can recall a period of time back in March and April 2020 when this was being captured on paper and we had significant delays at Canadian airports and land borders. It's been a very efficient tool to allow for the capture of that public health information.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks for the response. I think that's a contrast from the experience that folks have. That's a contrast with what I'm hearing from frontline officers with CBSA in my community. That's a contrast with what we're hearing from our international partners, that this has dramatically increased wait times at the border for a supposed public health measure that is not keeping Canadians safe. If the purpose is simply to verify vaccination, and

we're matching that of our American partners, they don't ask for a demonstration of proof. They simply ask the question.

I'm wondering if the officials would be prepared to table documents related to the continued use of ArriveCAN. I referenced in my questions to the minister the justification that was requested in the summer of 2021. I'm wondering if they could agree to table with the committee the justification for its continued use.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, is my audio coming through?

The Chair: It is indeed, Mr. Keenan.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Great.

I would repeat one point that my colleague from the CBSA made, which is that ArriveCAN is a tool for efficiently collecting information that the Government of Canada requires travellers to submit as part of its ongoing COVID protection measures under the interim order under the Quarantine Act administered by the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The second point is that we'd be happy to provide additional documentation. There's a lot of documentation on those orders, the rationale and how ArriveCAN contributes to operationalizing the high volume of people crossing the border.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

I would just say, through you, Mr. Chair, that it's very efficient; I've crossed into the United States several times. I'm asked by Homeland Security agents if I'm vaccinated, I say "yes", and that's the end. It's still an offence to lie, so it seems excessive and redundant at best.

I referenced some documents, some court documents that had been reported on and that quoted one of the officials we have at our meeting today. I'm wondering if he's able to speak to whether it is standard practice for the government to create a policy and then ask for the supporting evidence for that policy after the policy has been created, on the eve of its implementation. Is that standard?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, I'd like to start off with a key point on the premise of that question and then turn it over to Mr. McCrorie to further elaborate.

A really important point here is that I think the member is referring to media reports about the information filed by Transport Canada in a court case on the vaccine mandate. What the media failed to report was that Transport Canada tabled and provided extensive scientific evidence on the rationale for the vaccine mandate. That was not in the media report, but it was in the testimony, in the filings of Transport Canada.

We would be happy, if it would serve the committee, to provide a copy of that information, which was actually presented by Transport Canada in court.

The second point of context I'd like to provide is that throughout the two-plus years of COVID, COVID has not stood still. We have been evolving and adjusting the health measures at the border and in the transportation system throughout. In that process, we constantly seek updated information from the Public Health Agency of Canada. There's an ongoing process of pulling information in from the Public Health Agency of Canada as part of our work and using their expertise in health measures to guide the development of our measures.

• (1510)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks for that reply, Mr. Keenan.

In tabling that information with the committee, it would be important for you to note if that evidence was provided to Transport Canada before the policy was made, or if the policy was made before the evidence was provided.

Mr. Michael Keenan: I can answer that for you now.

Significant health evidence was provided to Transport Canada throughout the entire period of COVID, for months and months before the vaccine mandate, as well as after.

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

I have a quick note about the audio. I am hearing from our clerk that you have not selected your microphone. I think that's the only step we have left.

Mr. Michael Keenan: I apologize. I recognize how important this is.

The Chair: It's not a worry at all. We'll give you a couple of seconds to clear that up, and then we'll move on to Mr. Chahal.

Mr. Michael Keenan: How about now?

The Chair: Perfect.

Thank you so much, Mr. Keenan.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, thank you for your patience on this. I apologize.

The Chair: No worries at all, Mr. Keenan.

Next we have Mr. Chahal.

Mr. Chahal, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. George Chahal (Calgary Skyview, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for joining us today, and the minister for taking time out of his schedule to do so as well. I hope he is feeling better and wish him a quick recovery.

I've been to a number of airports over the last few months, and some have been busy. Maybe I haven't had the same experiences as others. My experience has been great at all the airports I've been through.

I went through Toronto Pearson just last week. I was telling friends and family, as they thought I was going to be delayed, that I was through the lineups and security in under five minutes. I was really impressed with the great work that officials were doing there at security helping to process travellers through. My experience was great, quick and efficient.

I know other airports across the country have had challenges. My travels mostly go through the Calgary airport and I've never had to wait very long. As there are some particular problems at some of our major airports, how have the Calgary and Edmonton airports been doing when it comes to traffic and passenger movement?

Mr. Keenan, maybe you would like to answer this.

Mr. Michael Keenan: Sure. I'd say two things.

In terms of Calgary, first, interestingly enough, Calgary has had a really strong rebound in traffic. The Canadian air travel system has gone from a very low level, as the minister indicated, to 81% of what you would normally see in a busy summer. As of last week, Calgary was up to 86%, so it was a little heavy.

In terms of security screening at the Calgary airport, as the minister indicated, there were challenges in security screening and other areas adjusting to the rapid growth. Calgary shared in that experience but actually its numbers were pretty good.

I'd turn it over to our CATSA colleagues, and the CBSA may wish to comment on this, but both on CBSA processing on arrivals and on security screening, Calgary is doing a little better than the average of the top four airports. There is variation airport by airport, but Calgary tends to be on the positive side.

• (1515)

Mr. George Chahal: Thank you for that.

Maybe I'll jump to the CBSA and Mr. Vinette for comment. We've had this conversation, but please add to what Mr. Keenan has just stated. A lot of the challenges I've been hearing are about staffing shortages at the U.S. customs and border security, on that end. Can you tell me and the committee what you've observed and how that's affecting operations at our airports?

Mr. Denis Vinette: Regrettably, I can't speak to the U.S. pre-clearance operations. I know Public Safety is heavily engaged with their Department of Homeland Security counterparts, as well as Transport Canada, and the CBSA to a much lesser extent, just to speak to the interest and what we have seen in terms of the capacity being sought in restoring air transportation.

This is a question for either our Transport Canada colleagues or our Public Safety colleagues, who aren't here today. My apologies.

Mr. Michael Keenan: If I could add briefly to what Denis just said, it's exactly that. We've seen that all airports and all agencies around the world have been struggling to adjust to this big increase in traffic. The sharp increase in Canada has CBSA struggling to adjust. They've had some amazing progress at Pearson, and we now have the customs hall at Pearson flowing much better than it was a month or two ago.

CBP and the pre-clearance in Montreal and Toronto.... There are some issues with backups, particularly in early morning flights going out of those two airports into the U.S., in terms of the CBP's processing capacity. You see that it has even affected the CATSA numbers in Toronto and Montreal. The longest waits you see at CATSA are actually for those pre-clearance lines, because CATSA has to slow down to avoid putting too many people into the waiting room of the U.S. CBP.

We are working with our American counterparts and colleagues. They're engaged with us, and we're working together to seek solutions so we can get the throughput through CBP and the pre-clearance in Toronto and Montreal higher, consistent with the demand to travel between Canada and the U.S.

Mr. George Chahal: Thank you for clarifying that. I think that's helpful for everybody listening today, as many of those challenges are in working with our neighbours in clearance and pre-clearance when going to the U.S.

For the next question, I want to go to Ms. Lutfallah from PHAC.

My question is about masking. Does the rationale for masking still apply? Could you provide some comments on that? We've seen over the last number of years a conversation on masking. We saw, early on in Alberta, a lack of action by many prominent Conservatives on the issue of implementing masking, and cities taking it into their own hands to do so to protect their citizens.

I want to know, from a public health perspective, the rationale for requiring masking. Does it still apply?

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah (Vice-President, Health Security and Regional Operations Branch, Public Health Agency of Canada): Are you referring to masking within the context of flights?

Mr. George Chahal: Yes.

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: Okay. I'm going to pass this on to my Transport Canada colleagues, but I would point out that we have assessed masking, and obviously it is a public health measure that would protect you as an individual, as well as people around you, by creating a barrier for any exchange of fluids in conversations and so forth.

With respect to the regulatory regime for airlines, that would be for Transport Canada.

Mr. George Chahal: Do you still believe that it protects folks from transmission—

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: Yes.

Mr. George Chahal: —and that we should continue having masking as a protection for folks who are travelling?

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: According to the advice that has been.... I'm sorry, but I'm getting a lot of feedback. Can you hear me?

• (1520)

The Chair: We can. Unfortunately, there isn't time left, however, for the response.

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: I'm sorry.

The Chair: No, that's okay.

Thank you, Mr. Chahal.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Keenan, I imagine that data is compiled on ArriveCAN app use. You mentioned that 97% or 99% of people use it.

Do you also compile data on bugs, issues and the nature of those bugs and issues? Do you have any data indicating whether those issues are being resolved, how much time that takes and the impact of those issues?

If those data do exist, I think it would be appropriate to forward them to the committee.

Mr. Michael Keenan: I'm going to let my Canadian Border Services Agency colleague answer that question.

Mr. Denis Vinette: Thank you for your question, sir.

Since the app was first released, it has gone through more than 80 versions to improve its usability and reflect public safety measures, which change with the various orders made.

We always ensure we conduct checks and tests with Google and Apple so everything is in order before the app is updated and made available to travellers.

We've kept a set of logs of issues that needed to be corrected following updates or recommendations regarding the app's usability.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I just want to confirm what you're telling me, Mr. Vinette. There have been 80 versions of the app as a result of changes in government policies or bugs that have been detected.

Is that correct?

Mr. Denis Vinette: That's correct.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: So you can't give us any figures or data. I think it would be useful for us to have them. Then we could determine, for example, whether there were 1,000 bugs at the start and 5 bugs in August.

Can you estimate that? Do you have any data on it?

Mr. Denis Vinette: I don't have any data with me. According to the most recent numbers reported in the media, one bug affected roughly 10,000 persons who used an Apple phone from June 28 to July 20.

It took six days to correct that problem. The individuals concerned received emails directing them to quarantine. We identified those cases and forwarded the information to our friends at the Public Health Agency of Canada, or PHAC, which contacted the people affected. So that situation has since been corrected.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: People also tell us they're told they face \$5,000 fines if they fail to comply with the directive. Earlier we saw that a directive has been introduced under which that fine would not necessarily be imposed for a first offence.

Do you have any information on the number and amounts of fines that have been assessed?

Mr. Denis Vinette: I'm going to ask my colleague Ms. Lutfallah to discuss fines.

However, I can tell you that we're collecting implementation information that should have been forwarded through ArriveCAN. People aren't required to quarantine for 14 days for failing to submit their information via the ArriveCAN app. According to the data we have, 80% to 90% of people who have been informed that they are required to use the app will do so on their next trip.

[English]

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: In terms of non-compliance with ArriveCAN and the potential monetary penalties that could be imposed on individuals, I want to point out that our officers at the airports as well as land borders try to bring people into compliance rather than writing a ticket as a first measure. We're playing a much more facilitative role. A ticket is not the first option that is exercised by our officers to bring compliance with the ArriveCAN app.

Since the inception or since ArriveCAN was made mandatory for both land and air—I think it was in 2020 for air and 2021 for land—there have been only 190 tickets with respect to ArriveCAN non-compliance. In those cases—and they're very limited cases when you consider the overall number of travellers coming into our country—those individuals are repeat offenders or simply will not comply with giving us a paper submission, which we offer when they are referred over to PHAC, or they just don't want to comply with the public health measures.

I want to underscore that the number of tickets that have been issued for ArriveCAN non-compliance is extremely low, because our officers play a very facilitative role. Generally, they are very successful in bringing people back into compliance with the law.

• (1525)

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Vinette, but it could also be directed to another witness.

When quarantines were made mandatory during the pandemic, there were many questions and much indignation about the way follow-up was done, and even whether follow-up was in fact being conducted because some people observed that it was not.

I'd like to know whether quarantine verification is still in effect. If so, how is it being done?

Mr. Denis Vinette: That's a question for my colleague Ms. Lutfallah.

[English]

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: There's a multipronged approach that's being used for quarantine follow-up. Quarantine is generally ap-

plied for individuals who are unvaccinated or deemed unvaccinated because they were unable to provide us vaccine credentials.

We at the Public Health Agency have an escalation protocol, if you want to call it that, where we will start with phone calls. There will be reminders sent through ArriveCAN to remind individuals of their quarantine as well as their testing obligations. We also have callers who will contact these individuals directly to make sure they maintain their compliance with their quarantine requirements. These callers will also call individuals who test positive to ensure that they meet the isolation requirements—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Lutfallah. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to cut you off there.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin my questioning with the officials who are here from CATSA. At past meetings, I've asked about the summer attendance incentive program, which is a program that CATSA's contractors have put in place using public money to offer a financial incentive to screening officers and other CATSA employees who don't take their booked summer holidays and don't take any sick time over the summer months.

In my past questioning, the response from CATSA has been that this was put in place to address absenteeism. I wonder if the officials from CATSA could define absenteeism for me.

Mr. Mike Saunders (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Air Transport Security Authority): Thank you very much for the question.

I'll make one clarification. The incentive program was not offered to CATSA employees; it was offered to the screening contractors, to the screening officers across the country.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Sure, that's fair enough, but these employees wear CATSA badges on their shoulders, so you'll forgive me if we conflate the two. These are employees working for CATSA contractors, and this program uses public money through CATSA in order to provide the incentive to address absenteeism.

How do you define absenteeism?

Mr. Mike Saunders: Absenteeism is.... Actually, I think I would defer to my colleague Neil Parry to define absenteeism as per this program. I believe he's responded to you, not on that particular element of this program but on other elements of it.

Mr. Neil Parry (Vice-President, Operations, Canadian Air Transport Security Authority): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd be happy to respond to that.

There are different types of absenteeism, and I'll make a clarification, as I did at my last appearance, of what the incentive is intended to achieve. We want to incent screening officers to come in to work for their scheduled shift when they are not sick and when they are not on vacation.

There are different types of absenteeism, as you point out. There's absenteeism when you're sick, and we trust our screening officers to act professionally, as they've done throughout the pandemic, and not come to work when they're sick. They demonstrated for over two years during the pandemic that they would stay home and be responsible.

When they have planned vacation, we encourage them to take it because, as you've talked about for almost two hours now, it is an extremely busy environment, and they have done a noble job under these circumstances, under these pressures.

However, there is the occurrence from time to time at different locations where, for a scheduled shift, there is something called book-offs. We're trying to reduce that by offering our contractors the opportunity to bill us for their programs. Those programs allow that, if you are sick for a couple of days, you are not disqualified from the incentive program. For the further weeks throughout the summer, you can earn up to \$200 per cycle for coming in for your scheduled shift.

• (1530)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Parry, what you've just said contradicts the documents that we've seen from CATSA contractors, which very clearly indicate that, if workers take sick time, they are disqualified from receiving the bonus for the week in which they took that time.

Are you aware of this?

Mr. Neil Parry: I am aware of this, and that doesn't contradict what I just said. What I said was, if they are sick or away that week, they qualify for the other weeks in which they show up for their scheduled shift, so they continue to be eligible. They are not disqualified from the program.

I am aware of the documents. I've seen all of the memos issued by our contractors. Some of them have been amended since. I believe the copy that you had at our last meeting... There are further clarifications within those when those memos talk about what's eligible.

This is a program that was rolled out quickly. We worked with our contractors. There were a number of questions that they received from their union representatives. We went back with them to clarify that we don't want to see people disqualified. We want to ensure that they can take their vacation and, if they are sick, we want them to stay well, but we also want them to continue to be eligible for those weeks and to show up for their shift when they're not sick or on vacation.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: To be clear, Mr. Parry, if I am working for a CATSA contractor and I wake up with a sore throat and stay

home to protect my co-workers and the travelling public, do I still qualify for the \$200-a-week bonus for that week in which I stayed home sick for one day?

Mr. Neil Parry: For that week you do not, but you qualify for your paid sick leave. Your normal benefits and compensation apply, but the incentive program, which is 12 separate increments, is available for whichever increments those officers can avail themselves of.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Parry, can you not see how this puts workers in a very difficult situation? Essentially, you wake up with a sore throat and you're making that decision about whether to go into work and there's \$200 on the line. Is this not an incentive to go to work sick?

Mr. Neil Parry: We don't see it as an incentive to go to work sick, because screening officers, without this incentive, are entitled to all of their base compensation, which includes their hourly wage, their health and dental benefits, paid sick leave, paid holidays. This is supernumerary to that compensation, so they're not out-of-pocket in any capacity.

The incentive program is an additional bonus structure that they can avail themselves of when it's the best opportunity for them.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I think you know where I'm going with this. They would get \$200 if they went in sick with a sore throat. They lose the \$200 bonus if they stay home.

Have the unions conveyed concern about this program directly to CATSA?

Mr. Neil Parry: I'd have to verify that. Generally, the unions convey their concerns directly to their employers.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Am I clear to understand, then, that CATSA has no issues with the way this program is currently being rolled out?

Mr. Neil Parry: I would say that the program is showing that it is working, that it is effective, and that our absenteeism throughout the country has been down over the summer.

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

Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach.

Next we have Ms. Lantsman.

Ms. Lantsman, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Thanks very much.

Thanks for coming.

I'm going to go back to ArriveCAN. Given the experience and the major criticism by almost every stakeholder across the industry, from travel to tourism to those concerned with privacy, I'd like to know if the department has spoken to anyone outside of itself who supports it. Can you name anyone you've consulted with regarding ArriveCAN?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, I don't know which department the honourable member is referring to, but I could offer one comment on this, and perhaps my colleagues at CBSA would like to comment.

It's an important point of context that ArriveCAN operates at the land border and the air border. Here we're talking about air congestion. One of the very challenging situations we had in air congestion was getting people fast enough through the customs hall at Pearson. As the minister has indicated, earlier in this ramp-up of travel we saw some significant incidents of planes being held at the gate and the metering of passengers into the customs hall.

We have an airport operations recovery group with the airports and airlines—all the partners, including Transport, CBSA, PHAC, CATSA—and a lot of work was done to try to work through how to fix that. A number of changes were made that have proven to be very successful because the number of holds for international arrivals has dropped 90%. It was like 300 per week in May, when we were at about 65,000 people arriving a day. It's now down to like 40 a week, even though we have 90,000 people arriving per day.

A number of changes were made in the management of the customs hall. Colleagues in CBSA—

• (1535)

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: Sorry, I had a question. I'm going to pipe in here because I have only a couple of minutes.

I'm going to ask it in a different way.

Everybody here on this call has implied that the app is only necessary due to the mandates. If the government removes the mandates one day, if it decides to do that, would the department's view be that there is no need for ArriveCAN?

Mr. Michael Keenan: To answer the first question, in that work, we worked with all of the partners and managed to get the ArriveCAN completion rate up much higher for international arriving passengers. That was the work with the entire industry. There was a lot of engagement with the industry on this. They worked with us. That was one of the key success factors in declogging the customs hall. There has been extensive discussion with our operating partners on ArriveCAN. The fact that a lot fewer people are arriving at the customs hall with it incomplete has been a key success factor in getting people through.

On your second question, I think I would.... It's difficult to speculate on the second question simply because, given the policy the government has today in terms of the information that is being required from passengers to ensure safe international travel, the completion of ArriveCAN is a major force in the gains in efficiency in the airport we're seeing now.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman: I'm going to go back to where you said there was a 99% compliance rate with ArriveCAN; that's what we heard, or 99%-plus compliance with ArriveCAN. I'm going to turn your attention to somebody named Mark Webber. He's the president of the Customs and Immigration Union representing border agents. He says it's that high because of the assistance in filling out ArriveCAN. He says the number is more like 70%.

So which number is true? In terms of looking at that 99%, are you being misled on the compliance rate? There's a very big difference between those who come ready with it done and CBSA agents being taken away from their work to help people do it, because that's what we're hearing.

Mr. Michael Keenan: I would say one thing on this—and then quickly turn it over to Mr. Vinette—and agree on the premise of your question. In fact, a lot of work was done in the context of international arrivals in air to get passengers to complete ArriveCAN before they went to the customs hall. If they went into the customs hall without ArriveCAN done, it clogged up an extremely busy part of Pearson airport. Getting that rate of completion up before they go in the hall is one of the key reasons that we've been able to make such progress in the flow of international arrivals at Pearson.

In terms of the statistics, I would turn it over to my colleague at CBSA to comment further.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we don't have time.

[*Translation*]

I'm sorry, Mr. Vinette.

[*English*]

We will now go to Mr. McDonald.

Mr. McDonald, you have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say a big thank you to my colleague, the MP for Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, for asking me to fill in for him at this committee meeting today.

We've heard a lot today about one topic in particular, and that's the airline passenger bill of rights. That was pushed by a good friend of mine, a man by the name of Woodrow French, who lives not too far from my home. We live in the same town. He was at it for years. Finally a government listened, and that government was the Liberal government. I think it was Minister Garneau at the time.

To the officials, does the airline passenger bill of rights do what it was intended to do when it comes to protecting airline passengers? Should it be tweaked if it's not doing its intended end-of-the-day product, protection for anyone using our airlines, whether domestically or commercially?

• (1540)

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, I think the answer to the question is that, as the member indicated, the airline passenger protection, the airline passenger rights regime that Minister Garneau brought in several years ago, came in just before the pandemic. It has made a significant difference in terms of how passengers are treated, but it also is the first time we've had a comprehensive set of passenger rights in Canada.

In the context of COVID, we've discovered that it actually does need changes. In fact, one area where it needed an adjustment is that the system hadn't contemplated a massive disruption of air travel on the scale of what we saw with COVID in March 2020. That's the reason the Minister of Transport brought forth regulations to strengthen the requirements for refunds in situations where there is major disruption and an airline is incapable of completing a journey. That enhancement in passenger rights is actually coming into force on September 8.

Mr. Ken McDonald: Thank you for that.

Next, we hear a lot about mandates, whether it's vaccination mandates or masking mandates or anything else, from the Conservative side, who never, ever supported the introduction of any mandates whatsoever, whether it be masking or vaccination or travel restrictions. Do you believe that the mandates were necessary programs to bring in when COVID first struck our area here in Canada and any of the provinces? Do you think that because of the mandates we've managed to save thousands and thousands of lives? There are people still dying from COVID, but of course, as we know, when it first came to our country and exploded in many provinces, many people did die from the disease—probably people who shouldn't have died or wouldn't have died, only for COVID, which was the main contributor to it.

Do you think we should still pay attention to the public health officials who are recommending that we do this or we do that, or that it's time to drop this or drop that—in essence, I guess, at the end of the day, protecting Canadians' lives, whether they're coming from abroad, or travelling from province to province, or using any entity for travel, whether it be ferries, trains or planes?

Mr. Michael Keenan: In terms of the overall impact of mandates on the protection of the population, I would have to defer to colleagues with PHAC on that. Before I do that, I would simply say that, at Transport Canada, we have been working with our partners to put in place extensive restrictions on travel as well as rules for safe travel when travel returns, everything from closing the border, shutting down flights and shutting down cruise ships to restarting all of these industries but ensuring that it's done with the right measures to protect travellers, whether it is distancing, mask mandates or vaccine mandates. Those have evolved significantly over the last two and a half years. We put in place dozens and dozens of orders and adjusted them dozens of times based on public health conditions and the latest public health science and research.

It is our assessment that they have made a significant difference by enabling people, Canadians and foreigners, to travel and do so safely despite the threat of COVID.

In terms of the broader question about the impact of mandates on protecting the population, I would have to turn to a colleague from the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: With respect to the measures that have been put in place as a result of COVID-19, we've undertaken a multi-pronged or multi-layered approach. With respect to a mandate based on vaccination, obviously a vaccination mandate would mitigate the importation of COVID-19 as well as decrease the potential for infection and severity.

• (1545)

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, please, Ms. Lutfallah.

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: Along with the vaccine mandate, Canada has taken that multi-layered approach and implemented a number of other mechanisms to reduce the risk to Canadians' health and to increase their health security. That included testing as well as quarantine, isolation and masking. When you take all those measures together, as Dr. Tam has said on previous occasions, it has gone far in protecting the health of our population.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. McDonald.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ms. Lutfallah, because she was unable to finish answering the question I asked her earlier about quarantine verification.

From what I understood, notifications can be sent through the ArriveCAN app, and there may be telephone verifications.

Are physical verifications also made to determine whether people are complying with quarantines?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: We do on-site verification as well, based on the risk that the individual may pose with respect to non-compliance. In very limited circumstances, after we have the on-site verification, which is usually done by a security company, we will refer some of those more egregious cases to police of jurisdiction.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Do you have an approximate idea of numbers? For example, how many physical verifications were conducted this summer?

What percentage of individuals in quarantine have been physically verified?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Lutfallah: I will have to get that number for you. I don't have it readily accessible.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: All right.

We would be grateful if you could provide that information later.

Mr. Keenan, there's a lot of talk about ArriveCAN and bugs. People wonder whether the app works and whether it's effective in reducing waiting times. We're still gathering data and evidence on that. We also hear that the ArriveCAN app may be retained for the long term.

I'd like to know the government's intentions in that regard. Will the ArriveCAN app become permanent? Will it be terminated or not?

The Chair: I would ask you to answer in 15 seconds, Mr. Keenan.

Mr. Michael Keenan: It's hard for me, as a public official, to say what the government's policy decisions will be.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for Mr. Keenan regarding the air passenger protection regulations.

You mentioned the new amendments to the regulations that are coming into effect on September 8. Last week, on August 10, Transport Canada issued a statement stating that “amendments to the Air Passenger Protection Regulations will come into force to ensure passengers are compensated for flight delays, cancellations, and other incidents that may be out of an air carrier's control.” We looked into those amendments, and the amendments don't do that at all. The amendments essentially refund passengers their airfare if they're not able to complete their trip within a certain amount of time.

Can you speak to why Transport Canada put out such a misleading press release and is not clear about what these amendments actually achieve?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, the member points out an important improvement in the air passenger protection regulations that actually has, as its antecedent, the complete shutdown of air travel back in March 2020. What happened there is that the passenger rights system had a set of obligations for carriers in terms of the treatment of passengers, whether or not a delay is within their control. However, the regulations didn't envisage the kind of catastrophic shutdown we saw in March 2020, so they didn't speak to what you would do if the air carrier can't actually complete the journey in a reasonable time. That generated the issue of vouchers versus refunds.

This change ensures that if the passengers want, they can get compensation in the form of a full cash reimbursement of the ticket if it's a situation where it's impossible for the airline to complete the journey within a reasonable time.

Short of this amendment, the airlines still have obligations, even in situations under the current rules as they exist today, before September 8, for rebooking passengers and duty of accommodation and care, even if the cause of the delay is outside of their control. This bolsters the rights of passengers and gives them the ability to declare, no, they just want a refund and they just want their money back.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach, and thank you, Mr. Keenan.

Next we have Mr. Baldinelli for five minutes.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Thank you, Chair.

My questions are going to be for Mr. Vinette.

Thank you for being here. It's good to see you again.

Mr. Vinette, one of the main issues plaguing our airports is not only ArriveCAN, but we're also hearing about a severe shortage in staffing with regard to CBSA officers, not only at our airports but also at our land border points of entry. What does CBSA need to do to achieve its full staffing complement in Canada? How many officers are we short?

Mr. Denis Vinette: The CBSA plans every year for its seasonal fluctuations in traffic in the various modes—land, airports and through the cruise ship season—and aligns its resources and moves them accordingly.

In support of the air transportation sector, we hire student border services officers every year, and they come on strength after their school year ends in April. They help us and we retain some of them through the balance of the year so they're ready to be on site the following year. They supplement our workforce.

In terms of the overall workforce, like other sectors, we have had individuals who, as a result of COVID and other measures, have been unable to attend the workplace, and we've respected that and we've worked with them. They've continued to contribute to our border services by supporting the front line through other venues and other programs to ensure that we could sustain the capacity.

We continue to advance the staffing, and I'm pleased to report that we've actually doubled our recruitment target for the next two years in order to offset the loss of some officers as a result of the COVID restrictions that may have affected them and their ability to return to the workplace.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Thank you for that.

I was just checking the CBSA employment page earlier, before coming over, and there was a COVID notice. It said, “Due to the impacts of COVID-19, we are experiencing unforeseen delays with some aspects of the selection process.” Speaking with several stakeholder groups.... They had heard that the CBSA training session was closed during COVID. Possibly that's why there are the shortages and the backlog of officers needed.

I'm wondering if you can confirm that. Was that training centre in fact closed for a period of time? Did that add to the backlog? Why are we still “experiencing unforeseen delays with some aspects of the selection process”?

Mr. Denis Vinette: The CBSA did shutter its national college for recruitment in Rigaud, Quebec for two cycles, I believe. I would have to confirm that.

When it was safe to do so, we reopened. We actually had individuals report to the college. They would quarantine for the 14 days before classes. Visitors were kept from entering the location to ensure that we could keep the college as sterile as possible. We are now back in full operation. As I stated, we will be doubling our recruitment in order to deploy—

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Thank you.

In terms of that cohort—you mentioned two cohorts—how many officers would that have been in total?

Mr. Denis Vinette: In a given year, we target about 275 to 300 new recruits. Therefore, it could have been upwards of 600. We are now back in full cycle, and we will complement our resources by doubling those cohorts for the next two years.

• (1555)

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Was CBSA unable to operate? Colleges and universities, even the Ontario Police College, were operating in a virtual manner. Why was the training centre not able to do the same?

Mr. Denis Vinette: The type of work that we undertake requires that our officers learn hands-on both how to operate systems—they have to have access to those systems—and how to inspect vehicles. They do use-of-force training throughout the entire curriculum. Our training for officers is 20 weeks long. The first four are at their residence, online, and then the following 16 need to be in person. It's very similar to police training and recruitment.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Thank you.

Mr. Vinette, when we last met, in June—it was at the international trade committee—I asked you if you had the opportunity to visit Niagara Falls, which is the number one leisure tourism destination in Canada. With only four weeks left, I'm truly hoping you were able to do so. Is that the case?

Mr. Denis Vinette: I vacation. My summer vacation was spent in Niagara-on-the-Lake and in Niagara Falls this summer. I have not visited my operations there at this time. I've been heavily focused on the airport operations.

It's been well in hand with our regional director general for the area, with whom I'm in touch on a daily basis to ensure that we are being responsive to the demands in terms of the volume of individuals travelling through our land borders, which is now recovered to just above 60% of historical volumes.

Mr. Tony Baldinelli: Consider this your invitation to come down. I'd love to have you down. We have four bridges in my riding alone. Two of those are in the top four commercial land crossings in all of Canada. They are vitally important to us to ensure the efficient and effective flow of traffic. We would like to have you down, speaking to those two bridge commissions. In fact, we're finding bridge traffic down to 50% prepandemic, but we're finding wait times that could be over two hours, in comparison to prepandemic times. We need to find a better solution to those impacting the efficient flow of tourism and trade crossing those border points.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Baldinelli. I'm reluctant to point out that I did not receive an invitation to your riding as well. It's very sad, but we'll move on to Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Koutrakis, you have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Keenan.

We heard a lot of claims, especially from my colleagues in the Conservative Party, that only the federal government supports keeping ArriveCAN.

I'm just curious to know if you're aware of a letter that was sent to the chair of the Standing Committee on International Trade earlier this year. I will quote Lorrie McKee, who is the director of public affairs and stakeholder relations at the Greater Toronto Airports Authority: “Starting on June 28, travellers arriving from international destinations now have the option at Toronto Pearson and Vancouver International Airport of completing their customs declaration in ArriveCAN 72 hours before travel, reducing the time they need to spend at a kiosk in the customs hall by up to 50%. We have already seen significant improvements and benefits as a result of this digital integration.”

Besides the GTAA having this opinion, have you heard from any other airport authorities that share the same opinion of ArriveCAN?

Mr. Michael Keenan: Mr. Chair, I could offer a general answer to the member's question and then turn it over to a colleague from CBSA.

On this issue, I would say that, as I indicated in an answer to an earlier question, a lot of hard slogging was done with all partners to get the throughput up through the customs hall and move a lot of people through a small space as traffic came back. There was a lot of really good work our CBSA and GTAA colleagues did in terms of passenger facilitation and passenger flow wayfinding. They could talk about that in some detail, but at the heart of that strategy was using electronic tools and digital systems to get people through faster. That included adding a number of kiosks to the customs hall at Pearson. It added a number of eGates, and the new functionality that CBSA brought on was the eDeclaration, which is integrated into ArriveCAN.

I would say that, in our discussions with industry and the air operations recovery group, the expansion, the use and improving the functionality of digital tools to make for a faster and easier travel process for passengers and to facilitate the international arrivals process are actually a centre point of our discussions. All the industry partners support finding the best combination of tools that respect the privacy of passengers but use digital technology to facilitate that passenger flow, and we're continuing discussions with them almost daily in terms of how to keep making progress in that area.

I don't know, Denis, if you want to add to that, because you guys are on the sharp end of delivering a lot of this.

• (1600)

Mr. Denis Vinette: Thank you, Deputy.

We've been on the path to modernization of digital services for many years, and that led to the birth of the kiosks that we've seen in the airports. We are already working to transition to eGates with our air industry partners, and we've always had a plan to modernize through digital offerings, through various platforms. ArriveCAN was required for the capture of the public health measures, but the opportunity to provide your advance declaration was something that we already had in the books in terms of the type of work we were going to deliver. We had an opportunity as we worked with the airlines and the airport authorities to pursue that now, to further expedite the passage through the airports.

I can offer that you save about 30% of your passage time using a primary inspection kiosk. You save about 50% of your passage time using an eGate if you've provided your advance declaration. We are reaping the rewards of its use, already achieving about 35% of passenger traffic in the three airports where it's currently offered.

Digital services are one of those elements that the CBSA was pursuing and will continue to pursue across all modes, looking to bring that to our land border where we have significant masses, as well as those who enter Canada through pleasure marine craft and aircraft.

Thank you.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I don't know who would be the appropriate person to ask. Is masking in any way creating any type of delay at our airports?

The Chair: Give a 20-second response, please.

Mr. Michael Keenan: I would say that Transport Canada, with evolving regulations, continues to require masking while on a plane and in secure areas of an airport as a protection measure, and that's based on evidence. I don't have a sense that it materially affects the

flow rates through the airport. It's not an issue where we feel there's a problem we had to solve with our industry partners, where something was being slowed down because of the fact that people are wearing masks.

I don't know if Denis or any of my colleagues might have a comment on that.

The Chair: I think that's all the time we have, unfortunately, Mr. Keenan. Thank you very much, and thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

I'd like to thank all our witnesses for appearing before committee today. Thank you very much for your time. It was greatly appreciated.

Before I conclude the meeting today, colleagues, I wanted to ask a very quick question. For those of you who are aware or not, we received an invitation from a parliamentary delegation from New Zealand that will be arriving in Ottawa towards the end of September. They've requested a meeting to discuss areas of importance for them, which would be transport and infrastructure. If there are no objections from members on this committee, I will instruct the clerk to move forward with the booking of an informal meeting that would not in any way take up the time of the committee's regular business.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): We're certainly in agreement with that.

The Chair: Seeing no objection, it is approved, and I will so instruct the clerk.

Thank you very much, everybody. Have a great rest of your summer.

The meeting is adjourned.

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