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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Good morning. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 9 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in the room and by Zoom. As you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation, and in light of the recommendations from the health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person shall abide by the appropriate rules. As the chair, I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting, and I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few of the rules.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, French or English audio. If interpretation is lost, inform me immediately and we will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings. The "raise hand" feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or to alert the chair.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines for mask use and health protocols.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphones will be controlled by the verification officer. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person. Please do not be shy to remind me.

Today's meeting is a briefing on the ministerial mandate letters.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on January 31, the committee will proceed to a briefing on the ministerial mandate letters. I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks, followed by questions.

Appearing will be the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Housing, Diversity and Inclusion; Romy Bowers from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; Mala Khanna from the Department of Canadian Heritage; and Janet Goulding, associate assistant deputy minister, Office of Infrastructure of Canada.

Before we begin, I would like some direction from the committee, as it is my understanding that we may have to suspend briefly for voting. There are 30-minute bells, but since everybody has the option of voting by distance, if it's the wish of the committee we would suspend for the last 10 minutes just prior to the vote so committee members can participate virtually in the vote.

Before we begin, then, I would seek agreement to extend the first hour by the amount of time that we are suspended for the vote. Is that agreeable to the committee?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Yes. That's acceptable to us. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Madam Kusie.

With that, we will begin with Minister Hussen.

You have five minutes, please, for your opening remarks.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by acknowledging that I'm joining all of you virtually from the traditional land of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples.

As we all know too well, this decade has had an incredibly difficult start.

[Translation]

Housing has a critical role to play in ensuring that we seize this moment and continue to progressively realize the right to adequate housing.

Our government has set out an ambitious agenda to make housing more affordable for everyone in Canada, tackling the issue from every angle that will have an impact. We'll do this by making further investments in programs that are already making a difference through our National Housing Strategy, a 10-year plan, backed by more than \$72 billion in investments, to give more Canadians a place to call home.

[English]

Through our national housing strategy, we have helped house over 1.1 million Canadians since 2015. That's because we put in place different programs that address the different housing needs of Canadians. This includes more funding for the national housing co-investment fund and enhancements to the rental construction financing initiative and the federal lands initiative.

These programs to create more housing are working, but we need to free up roadblocks at the municipal level. That's why we will be launching a housing supply accelerator fund to increase the housing supply in Canada's large and most rapidly growing urban regions. It will include financial incentives for new housing units and measures such as upzoning, inclusion rezoning and transit-oriented development, modernized permitting systems, and a more responsive housing supply to improve housing affordability and accessibility.

Next week I will be co-hosting a national housing supply summit with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to bring together all orders of government and all sectors. Now more than ever before, we need our provincial and municipal partners to work closely with us. I will also be working to develop a fairness in real estate action plan to ensure that there's more protection and transparency for both homebuyers and renters.

On the other hand, through Reaching Home, Canada's homelessness strategy, we will continue to support communities across Canada to prevent, reduce and eventually eliminate chronic homelessness. So far this program has helped thousands of Canadians, and I look forward to sharing an update in the coming weeks.

• (1110)

Similarly, through the rapid housing initiative, we will continue to create more urgently needed housing for those who need it the most. This program, Mr. Chair, is very close to my heart. We launched it a year ago and we now see that we've exceeded our targets and are on track to create over 10,000 new permanent, affordable housing units.

Over 40% of these will support indigenous families. First nations, Métis and Inuit people face some of the worst housing conditions in the country. That's why, on top of the previous supports in the programs that I have listed so far, we will be working with indigenous partners to co-develop a northern, urban and rural indigenous housing strategy, as was recommended by this committee last year.

Mr. Chair, having grown up in social housing myself, I can't overemphasize what having a reliable roof over your head does for people. I saw it first-hand, and that is why I couldn't be more committed to this mandate that is ahead of me. In my role as Minister of Diversity and Inclusion, I know just how important an equitable

housing system is to creating communities where everyone feels they belong.

Even as we celebrate Black history month, recent events have made it clear that the fight against racism requires vigilance, allyship and a sustained commitment. This government will continue to combat racism and discrimination in all its forms. I'm sure members are as thrilled as I was two weeks ago when we kicked off Black history month by announcing a carve-out of \$50 million through the national housing co-investment fund to support Black Canadian renters across the country.

Before I conclude, I also want to make a brief mention of the Canada housing benefit. This benefit is a prime example of why we need all orders of government to work together, as this \$4-billion fund, in collaboration with provinces and territories, provides direct rental support payments to Canadians. The national housing strategy is all-encompassing, Mr. Chair, with many ambitious initiatives to make sure every Canadian has a safe and affordable place to call home.

I turn it back to you, Mr. Chair, and I would be happy to take any questions from the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now open the floor to questions, beginning with Mr. Jeneroux for six minutes.

Mr. Jeneroux, you have the floor.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux (Edmonton Riverbend, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Happy Valentine's Day, Minister. It's good to see you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: I have only six minutes, as the chair has indicated, so I want to get through a whole bunch of questions quickly, if we could.

Minister, is it correct to say that the CMHC is an agency that reports to your department?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Approximately how many times since the election have you met with representatives from the CMHC?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We have regular meetings to go over housing policies and also to get updates on various programs, like the rapid housing initiative.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: It's also true that CMHC has recently funded a study by a group called Generation Squeeze. Is that correct?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That is correct.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Is it true that this study indicated that one of the best courses of action on housing affordability was to tax Canadian's primary residences more?

Is that correct?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I can talk to you about our government's position on that—

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Is that correct, Minister? I have follow-up questions on that.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm happy to talk about our government's position on this.

You know my position on this, both inside and outside the House of Commons. I'm happy to repeat our government's position on this question.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: It's true.

Is it also not true that, according to page 13 of the Liberal Party of Canada's "Forward. For Everyone." document and in your mandate letter, the government will establish a tax on residential properties?

This agency reports to your department and to you, as minister, and this agency developed a report to tax homeowners more. You've met with this agency multiple times. Caucus members, as recently as December 17, have met with Generation Squeeze.

It's fair for Canadians to be suspicious of your government's motives as you continue to explore additional taxes on homeowners.

This is a slippery slope, Minister.

• (1115)

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

I welcome this opportunity to once again unequivocally state that the Government of Canada is not looking at charging capital gains or any surtaxes on primary residences. This is not under consideration by our government, and any suggestion otherwise is false. We've said this again and again.

I want to assure the honourable member once again that our government is not even thinking of or considering charging capital gains taxes on primary residences.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Minister, the evidence is all there.

I laid it out for you. They report to you and you've met with them multiple times. Generation Squeeze has met with the member for Beaches—East York and the member for Vancouver Granville, again, as early as December 17.

It's a fair assessment for Canadians to be suspicious of the government's motives, regardless of how many times you say it.

I want to move on to housing supply, because we know that—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Groups can meet members of Parliament. You know that. Different groups have met with you and other members of Parliament. It's part of our democratic process. However, our—

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: When you're about to tax homeowners more, minister, that's when Canadians are suspicious of this government's motives.

I want to talk to you about housing supply, because I know it's something that we both want to talk about.

By your own admission, how much housing supply and how many homes has your ministry been responsible for?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We have ensured that we have housed 1.1 million Canadians since the beginning of this government in 2015. We have built over 480,000 units of housing through the various programs in the national housing strategy.

Through programs like the Canada housing benefit, in addition to building housing and preserving housing stock, we are also making sure that we put in place direct rental supports for those who need it. The Canada housing benefit is a program that is working right now in every province and territory to support Canadians.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Minister, in question period on December 15, 2021, the Prime Minister indicated the following:

Since 2015, our government has supported the creation of nearly 100,000 new units....

Let's go with your 1.1 million and his 100,000. We'll put that aside and we'll go with your number for a second—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: No. I said that we helped 1.1 million Canadian families meet their housing needs.

In terms of the number of units that we've built, it's 480,000 units.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: It's either 480,000 units from your numbers, or the Prime Minister's number from question period on December 15, 2021, of 100,000 units.

Let's go with your number. It's a higher number that works slightly more in your favour. Scotiabank has indicated that you need 1.8 million more homes right now. Regardless of whether it's 400,000 units or 100,000 units, you're a lot of homes short.

What are you going to do urgently? It will be extraordinarily difficult to get this many homes built in the timeline that Scotiabank has indicated.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We know that housing supply is one of the tools we need to make sure there are more homes available for Canadians, including more affordable housing. There is more work to be done. I agree with the honourable member.

That's why, in our mandate, we will move forward to implement a new housing accelerator fund to help speed up housing projects and put money on the table to enhance the capacity and the ability of municipalities, non-profits and others to build more affordable housing. It will also build a more flexible first-time homebuyer incentive, a new rent-to-own program to help renters become homeowners, and measures to prevent renovations.

We're doing everything we can with the national housing strategy, but we intend to do more to bring in this really important and substantial housing accelerator fund. We know that a lot of the backlogs in building permits and zoning—and moving forward with more housing supplies more quickly—are at the municipal level.

What are we doing? We're working with municipalities by putting together a housing accelerator fund to enable them to build more housing supplies and to do it more quickly. This will also enable them to hire more officials and, as I said, eliminate barriers to the development of more housing much more quickly.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Long, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Chair, I want you to know I'm going to share my time with MP Van Bynen.

Minister, it's always a pleasure to be able to see you.

I want to thank you for coming in today to update the committee on the important work our government is doing to ensure that every Canadian has access to a safe and affordable place to call home through the commitments outlined in your mandate letter.

In June, I was thrilled to announce, in my beautiful riding of Saint John—Rothesay, \$1.3 million through the national housing co-investment fund to build the Unified Saint John Housing Co-operative's Victoria Street building. It includes 14 housing units primarily intended for low-income women, including women and children. This project is truly transformational for the old north end of Saint John. It represents a strong vote of confidence on the part of our government in the co-op housing model.

Can you explain how our government is building on investments like this to help support co-op housing through our national housing strategy?

Thanks, Minister.

● (1120)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you so much.

I remember making that important announcement in your constituency.

Our government is taking concrete actions to protect the most vulnerable Canadians. I'm proud of the fact that our national housing strategy is doing exactly that. We announced a new \$4.3-billion Canada community housing initiative, through the national housing strategy, that is helping to protect community-based housing for some 330,000 households across the country. In addition to this, a few weeks ago we announced \$118.2 million over seven years through the federal community housing initiative, to support 18,000 units of community housing. This will preserve these units and their affordability and protect the most vulnerable. This is on top of our previous investment of \$500 million for the federal community housing initiative, which will protect tenants and stabilize the oper-

ations of some 55,000 affordable housing units in federally administered community housing projects.

The co-op sector and the co-op model have worked really well in all parts of Canada, including in Nova Scotia, where the honourable member made that announcement with me. It shows that our national housing strategy is working right across the country from coast to coast to coast. We're tackling the housing needs of Canadians right across the housing spectrum, from those on the street who need a permanent place to call home, to those who need co-op, non-profit and deeply affordable housing, to building more purpose-built rental buildings through the rental construction financing initiative.

We're also enabling more Canadians to access their dream of home ownership through the first-time homebuyer incentive.

Mr. Wayne Long: Minister, thank you very much.

I'll pass it over to MP Van Bynen.

The Chair: Mr. Van Bynen, you have three minutes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know housing is the foundation to building better lives and to sharing in the prosperity of our community. In 2020, our government provided \$79 million to help finance the construction of 216 residential units in my riding of Newmarket—Aurora. It's important for our community to see the grassroots implications of these important projects.

I thought this was a great approach because it created a business model without the federal, provincial, regional or municipal governments needing to provide grants or funding. It was able to move the project forward by transferring the risk of construction.

Can you explain how the funding from the rental construction financing initiative is helping more families find a safe and affordable place to call home?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I love this program. The rental construction financing issue is really about building the next generation of rental housing in our communities. As we all know, the very people who contribute to making our communities and urban centres dynamic and providing a good quality of life for all of us are increasingly being priced out of the rental market, and they're having to move further and further away from the places in which they work. Through the rental construction financing initiative, we are contributing to the building of 71,000 new rental units across the country, enabling teachers, construction workers, paramedics, firefighters and others to stay in the places where they work and play.

It's a financing initiative. We get all that money back, but in exchange for that financing we create rental housing and communities, because one of the conditions of the rental construction financing initiative is that folks who apply for that financing have to build close to transit, close to work, and close to schools and community services. We are building communities. They also have to abide by our energy efficiency and accessibility guidelines.

We are making a difference. One of the projects I was lucky enough to announce before we moved virtually—and I was there in person—was the first purpose-built rental building in Coquitlam since 1971. With 301 units of affordable rental housing, 100 will be deeply affordable. Right across from a transit hub, right next to a YMCA, the building was built in collaboration with the Government of Canada, the Government of British Columbia, the City of Coquitlam, a non-profit organization and a private developer. That's how we build more rental housing in Canada. The rental construction financing initiative is working really well to do that.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Van Bynen, your time is up. I would just remind you, if you come in again, to unmute your microphone. You're speaking through your laptop and it's causing problems for translation.

We go to Madame Chabot for six minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will give my time to my dear colleague, Denis Trudel, member for Longueuil—Saint-Hubert.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Trudel, you have the floor.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank my colleague for giving me her time so that I may speak with the minister.

Hello, Minister. I am pleased to be speaking with you today.

I would also like to greet my colleague for Hochelaga and Ms. Bowers, whom I see onscreen right now, as well as the other members of the committee.

I am very pleased that we are discussing housing today.

Currently, housing needs are growing faster than the number of dwellings being built, namely because of record levels of immigration and the real estate crisis we are experiencing. I'm not telling you anything new.

There is therefore a chronic lack of housing, especially social and community housing for the most vulnerable. In fact, Canada has a considerable shortage compared to other G7 countries. I'm referring here to the Scotiabank study published two weeks ago, of which you are no doubt aware. According to this study, Canada is last among G7 countries when it comes to housing. Indeed, Canada

is missing 1.8 million dwellings, just to reach the average of G7 countries. Canada has 424 dwellings per 1000 residents, when the average is 471.

What is the plan to turn this around? What do we have to do now to start building housing at a rate faster than the increase in need?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for the question.

[English]

It is a very important question. Housing supply is something we're very much seized with. We understand the importance of building more housing supply faster.

One of the things we have noticed, obviously, and it should be clear to all members, is that we in the federal government have a role, and so do the provinces and territories. We also know and understand the critical role played by municipal authorities in the zoning policies and permitting processes that lead to more housing. We have to be there with them to incentivize things like inclusionary zoning, transit-oriented development, and speed up the permitting and zoning processes so we can build more much-needed housing supply and do it faster. We're doing that through the housing accelerator fund, and we intend to work with them.

In addition to that, I want to tell the honourable member that the national housing strategy programs are trying to address the different housing needs of different Canadians who are in different parts of the housing spectrum.

If you look at what we intend to do, for example, we are enabling more federal lands to become available to non-profits to build more affordable housing. We are using the housing accelerator fund to offset the cost of land, so municipalities can build more affordable housing. We are introducing programs like the rent-to-own program to enable more Canadians to own their first home, and we are enhancing the first-time homebuyer incentive.

We know there's more work to be done. The national housing strategy has achieved many outcomes. We're blowing past our targets, if you look at the rapid housing initiative, for example. For a program that just started recently, we are on track to build 10,250 units.

The housing accelerator fund, and other ways in which we can move forward, will enable us to really address the issue of housing supply, including more affordable housing of course.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you for the answer.

I'd like to come back to the proposals you made during the last election campaign, which were to double the tax credit for buying a first home, create a tax-free savings account for first-time buyers, levy a tax to prevent the successive purchase and resale of residential properties and temporarily ban the purchase of residential property by foreign buyers. Also, Bill C-8 will introduce a tax on under-used housing.

The five proposals I just outlined focus mainly on demand, but experts everywhere in the country are pointing to the lack of truly affordable housing.

Are you aware that your national strategy is ineffective when it comes to building housing? What is the plan to encourage the construction of more social housing?

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The plan is to enable us to continue the progress we have made through the national housing strategy. Those programs will continue, and they are delivering more affordable housing, but in addition to that, we recognize more work needs to be done.

The housing accelerator fund that I referred to in my previous answer is not exclusively for building more affordable housing. It's for building more housing supply, period. As part of that mix, that housing accelerator fund can and will be used for building more affordable housing by municipalities, for example, by offsetting the cost of land.

We also intend to make more federal lands available for the building of more affordable housing. That's another way we're encouraging the building of more affordable housing. The federal lands initiative is a great model. We need to expand it. As I just mentioned, our support for the co-op sector is going to continue.

We know a lot of work has been done, but more work needs to be done. I agree with you that we need to build more affordable housing in Canada. That's exactly what we're doing, including the recently announced results of the rapid housing initiative, through which 10,250 permanent new affordable housing units will be built. That's progress. That's 10,250 people or families who will be off the street and have a permanent place to call home.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trudel.

[*English*]

Now, for six minutes, we go to Madam Zarrillo.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you.

I'm going to get right into it, because I have only six minutes, and it's a big topic.

Minister, you talked about Coquitlam. I need to share with you the “behind the scenes” of what happened in Coquitlam.

For eight years I've been in a microcosm of what's being proposed and some of the things you talked about today. The blame on the municipalities is something I take big issue with, so I want to share with you what happened.

First of all, that development wasn't the first one. There was another development on the corner of Charland and Blue Mountain, 40 units of purpose-built rentals. The people or organization that built that unit were expecting a GST rebate of almost half a million dollars, because they owned the land and they used the land to build some purpose-built rentals. They didn't get their GST exemption. That was half a million dollars that went right onto those rents. I want you to know that's not the first one.

Second of all, in that community, in that area, it wasn't until the eleventh hour that the federal government came forward. We went through years and years of displacing people in that community from the purpose-built rental units that were in the community. The lowest-income people, Syrian refugees, came into that space. We lost hundreds of units of affordable housing. I personally walked into those units and talked to people.

Here are some examples.

A 72-year-old man begged me to find him a long-term care home to go to, because he had nowhere to go. There was a mother with a child, a teenager with a disability, who went from paying \$800 a month to \$1,200 a month for rent. The problem was that the developer came and told them all they needed to get out even before the zoning came to the city.

The third one was a woman my age, living on disability, who could not find anywhere to live. She was living in her car with her pet for almost three months after she was displaced. I'm telling you that there are people being displaced with this market drive to get municipalities to upzone. Our municipality is a microcosm. We approved thousands of units of housing, and it pushed people who couldn't afford to be there anymore out of the community. It pitted neighbour against neighbour, because there was like a gold rush of real estate agents knocking on people's doors, harassing them.

I was sitting in council chambers, begging real estate agents to leave people alone, people in their seventies and eighties who were getting five or six door knocks a week asking them to move out of their homes because that land was worth so much.

I want to let you know that in Coquitlam we did an official community plan change with a bunch of changes allowing for potential upzonings. It drove up the value of the land to the point where people had to leave. People couldn't be there anymore, and the richest developers and real estate agents took advantage of that. The same thing is happening now in Coquitlam, on the north end. We approved an official community plan. There's an opportunity for a bunch of upzoning. I sat in chambers and asked them not to touch the areas where low-income seniors are living in these co-ops.

Do you know what's happening right now, Minister? These real estate investment trusts are going after these pieces of land. They're going to be pushing out more seniors into our community. I'm begging you to understand and listen to what's happening to people on the ground, because I'm very concerned that we are going to continue to drive investment vehicles in our housing market rather than getting people housed, because the only people who are benefiting from this upzoning are the ones who can afford to buy the land and build these massive towers.

I was talking to a woman, Minister, right where you were standing, a 65-year-old woman who is still working as an EA in our school district, who said to me, "My next home is going to be a tent, because the real estate agents are pushing me out of this community."

Please understand that I am so happy that there is at least finally a federal look at housing, but please understand that there are people on the ground hurting from these flat upzones, from this idea that it needs to be close to transit. It's not happening the way we want it to.

I want to talk a bit about—

• (1135)

The Chair: Ms. Zarrillo, I need to get permission from the committee to continue, because the bells are ringing.

Do we have consent, as we discussed earlier?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The committee will continue.

Ms. Zarrillo, do you want the minister to respond?

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I have one question for him.

My concern is—and I've heard rumblings about it—that they have this program for federal lands to get housing. I have heard some rumblings in the last month that the plan is to sell these federal lands to developers.

I want to get assurance from the minister that these federal lands will remain in private hands and it will be social housing that will be built, owned by the government, on these federal lands.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have to respond?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you.

Let me make it absolutely clear: Federal lands that are made available to communities are made available only for affordable

housing. They're made only to make sure that the housing that goes on those federal lands will add to our stock, our national numbers of affordable housing. I can make that absolutely clear. No federal lands will be used to build housing that is not affordable. It will always, always be on that condition. Anyone who wants to access the federal lands initiative has to abide by those conditions.

The second point I want to make is with regard to something you spoke about. In no way, shape or form did I imply that there's a problem with municipalities, per se. We work very closely with municipalities. In fact, on our rapid housing initiative, we were able to exceed our targets because of our close collaboration with municipalities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. We intend to work with them through the housing accelerator fund, because we recognize that projects are taking too long. The supply of housing needs to come on board faster and in larger quantities.

When I say "housing supply", I mean both deeply affordable housing and housing supply for middle-class Canadians. It's about incentivizing them to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You can probably carry that over into another answer.

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

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Minister, housing inflation is homegrown. Bloomberg reports that Canada has the second-most inflated housing bubble in the world. In my riding alone, Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, houses sold this past month, in January, for \$756,000, an increase of 39.7% from a year ago. That's despite a median family income of only \$61,000.

Within your mandate letter, there's a commitment to identifying how federal regulators can be better positioned to respond to the housing price fluctuations and make it more stable for Canadians. I was a bit concerned, and I'd like you to clarify, that in your opening remarks you talked about the housing accelerator fund being primarily focused on urban areas. For the rest of Canada and those of us who represent rural Canadians, how are you planning to address these fluctuating prices?

• (1140)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: First of all, it's really important to understand that for our national housing strategy programs, for existing initiatives but also for any proposed new programs like the housing accelerator fund, we will always, always take a rural lens, a rural and remote community lens, to make sure their needs are also taken into consideration.

In addition to that, when we talk about new programs like the rent-to-own program, that will also, of course, serve Canadians who live in rural and remote communities. As well, when we talk about the federal lands initiative, for example, we have a lot of federal land in all parts of the country, not just in urban areas. Obviously, those will also be made available to build more affordable housing.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Minister. I would point out that in my riding of Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, the only federal lands are the military base, the 4th Canadian Division Training Centre, and the Bruce Peninsula National Park. I don't think we're building any affordable housing in either location there.

My next question, Minister, is about another commitment in your mandate letter, which is to end chronic homelessness among veterans. Can you provide any data on how you're determining the number of homeless veterans? How many to date have been housed? Is the government looking into partnering with the provinces in projects like the one being undertaken with the Homes for Heroes Foundation and the Province of Ontario? The partnership is building up to 25 tiny homes as part of a veterans village, which will help all those military veterans who are suffering homelessness.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: No Canadian deserves to be on the street. For any Canadian who finds themselves experiencing homelessness, that's something we're all concerned about, particularly for those who served us with honour and dedication. I know there's leadership across the country, including the program you referred to, but there's also leadership from municipalities like London, Ontario, where they've eliminated chronic homelessness among the veteran population.

Through Reaching Home, our federal anti-homelessness program, we are providing direct support to community entities to provide services to those experiencing homelessness and temporary, transitional and permanent affordable housing solutions. If you look at our spending over the last two years, we've actually doubled the support for the fight against chronic homelessness. In our throne speech and commitments, we have changed our target from reducing homelessness by 50% to a new target of the elimination of chronic homelessness in Canada. We're going to get it done in partnership with our municipalities, provinces, territories and the non-profit sector.

Mr. Alex Ruff: My final question is going to go into a subject that I know is going to require collaboration with the provinces and the municipalities, but I think the leadership is required at the federal level.

Many ridings across the country, including mine, are facing what we call "renovictions", where, due to the low vacancy rate and the demand being so high, tenants are being "renovicted". The landlords are evicting these low-income housing folks to renovate, and then they can't afford to get back in there.

What steps is the federal government taking to help, either through regulation or working collaboratively with the provinces to address this?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You are absolutely right, it is something about which we are extremely concerned. We will take action, both as a government but also in collaboration with provinces and territories and using some of their tools to make sure we deal with this

problem head-on. We're looking at a number of options, including using our Canada Revenue Agency tools to examine this issue and looking at the options we have to tackle this quite concerning issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ruff. You are right on time.

We have about 18 minutes on the bell also.

Now we go to Mr. Collins, for five minutes.

• (1145)

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): It's nice to see you again, Minister. It was nice seeing you in Hamilton a couple of weeks ago. You were in town to announce 109 units for the city of Hamilton and two not-for-profits. It was a \$25-million investment in the affordable housing area for a rapid housing initiative. We were very appreciative of the funds and your visit.

I just want to speak to the rapid housing program, because it has been a tremendous success, as you have highlighted here this morning. As past president of CityHousing Hamilton for a number of years, from a municipal perspective and a service-provider perspective I can say that the rapid housing initiative for us was a terrific program. It was an easy application process; the funds flowed quickly to service providers, and we were able, within 12 to 14 months, to take people off the affordable housing wait-list.

Minister, can you elaborate on the successes of that program, not just in Hamilton but across the country? Have you any glimpse of where we are going in terms of further investments with the rapid housing initiative? It has been a tremendous success, and I know not-for-profits and municipalities are eagerly awaiting more investments in that area.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I believe the rapid housing initiative has been an amazing success. We have demonstrated that a new, rapidly implemented housing program can build housing in a matter of months. The reason we have been able to do that is the collaboration, as you said, with municipal governments and non-profits.

This is a program that has far exceeded its targets. Its initial target was to build around 7,500 new affordable and permanent housing units. We far exceeded that, and now we're on track to build 10,250 affordable housing units in record time, from 12 to 18 months. Some of them will be in even less time. I've seen projects that went through the first round that already have people living in them and were built in four to eight months.

The rapid housing initiative is an example of what can happen when we work closely with our municipal partners, deliver the money directly to them, allow them to invest in projects as they see fit, and trust them to make those decisions. That is precisely what we have done.

In terms of the future, I hope we can continue this program, because it's working really well.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you for that, Minister. That's good to hear.

Coming from the municipal sector and having been a member of city council in Hamilton for over 25 years, I know that the supply of housing units, wherever they sit on the housing spectrum, is largely a provincial and municipal process. From the time the application is submitted by the developer to the time it is approved by the municipality—and then whatever happens after that, should there be an appeal to the provincial level—it is largely a municipal and provincial process.

I know you have emphasized today, and in the past and in the House, how the federal government would then insert itself into that process in terms of providing assistance. We watched it recently here in Ontario, when the provincial government created a task force. There are 55 recommendations, I believe, right now that speak to ways and means by which to assist municipalities with increasing supply, to get us to that point where we can start to see prices come down and provide units for people who are in the market looking for one.

Through you, Mr. Chairman, to the minister, can you elaborate on how you and the ministry and the government are playing a role in assisting provinces and territories—but, in particular, municipalities—with that process, which traditionally has been a provincial and municipal one?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. That's a really important question. It highlights the need for collaboration.

Many municipalities want to build more housing, and they want to build it faster, but they are encountering obstacles. An example is land. Their fiscal capacity sometimes doesn't allow them to acquire that land and build affordable housing.

Other barriers to the faster building of housing include infrastructure upgrades. These are things like needing to expand the local water treatment plant so you can build another 2,000 units of housing for middle-class Canadians. These are real challenges being experienced by small, medium and large municipalities.

We're saying, as the federal government, that if we intend to see more supply in this country we have to do our part to incentivize them—especially municipalities—to bring in things like inclusionary zoning and transit-oriented development. We want to help in terms of their capacity to do more by enabling them to hire more zoning and permitting officials, as well as helping with the cost of land so that they can build more housing.

All those things are on the table. This housing accelerator fund will go a long way toward enabling municipalities to build more housing supply faster.

• (1150)

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you, Minister.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Collins.

I'm going to get direction from the committee. We are now down to the last 13 minutes with the bells. I would suggest we suspend for 10 minutes.

Minister, we will resume with the final round of two and a half minutes, which will be Madame Chabot, Madam Zarrillo, Monsieur Jeneroux and then Madame Ferrada. That would complete the first hour with Minister Hussen.

We will suspend for 10 minutes and then resume for roughly 10 minutes to conclude.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Chair, the voting doesn't kick off for about another 12 minutes, and then it will take a while to conduct the voting.

Is the proposal that once we have confirmation that all members of the committee have voted, including the minister, we can then reconvene?

The Chair: That's correct. Thank you, Mr. Ruff, for clarifying.

I just assumed that we could.... The remote app is not open yet.

You've heard Mr. Ruff. It is agreeable. Once everybody has voted virtually, we will resume the meeting for the final 10 minutes.

Is that okay, Minister?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes.

The Chair: Committee members, that will be the routine.

We will follow with Madame Chabot, Madam Zarrillo, Mr. Jeneroux and Madame Ferrada when we resume.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The meeting is suspended.

• (1150)

(Pause)

• (1210)

The Chair: With that, we will resume the committee's meeting and conclude with Minister Hussen.

At this time, Madame Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Just to be clear, we're going to have four rounds of two and a half minutes, with Madame Chabot, Madam Zarrillo, Mr. Jeneroux and Madame Ferrada, to conclude the first hour.

Madame Chabot, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Hello, Minister. It's a pleasure to welcome you here among us to discuss your mandate letter.

In light of the questions and answers you provided, I want to emphasize that it is the social and community housing crises that represent the greatest source of concern for us. I would imagine that this is the case not only in Quebec, but elsewhere as well.

Your programs refer a great deal to affordable housing. As we know, there is a difference of opinion on the issue. Not everyone agrees on the definition of what affordable housing actually means. At one point, it was even said that \$2 200 a month for rent in Montreal was affordable.

Furthermore, I do not think that the private market is greatly concerned with the real estate market or its costs.

What exactly is your action plan for social and community housing?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for the question.

[English]

I want to start by talking about our government's efforts.

[Translation]

Since 2015, we have invested over 4.5 billion dollars in housing in Quebec. This led to building or repairing more than 580 000 dwellings.

Last fall, we were very pleased to announce a bilateral agreement between the governments of Canada and Quebec. This agreement will result in a combined investment of an additional \$3.7 billion over 10 years to improve the housing conditions of many Quebec households in need.

As part of our commitment to end chronic homelessness, since the beginning of the pandemic, we have spent over 70 billion dollars in Quebec through the Reaching Home program.

To quickly create permanent homes for the most vulnerable, we created the Rapid Housing Initiative. Through this initiative, we have partnered with the government of Quebec to invest 179.8 million dollars in 68 projects. This represents 1 491 new dwellings in the province.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Your two and a half minutes have concluded.

Madam Zarrillo, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to reiterate my call to the minister to protect the most vulnerable in this race for supply. I would mention that sometimes the applications are very complex, which adds to the time it takes, so just keep that in mind.

The minister mentioned that infrastructure is needed to get housing built, and that is certainly true for indigenous housing. In my riding, there is an impasse right now in getting sewer and water to an indigenous project. I know that in B.C. we have a willing partner in the provincial government, and I'm wondering about this. For indigenous housing, they are saying that they need a federal partner

in building the infrastructure. What is the federal government committing to on that front for infrastructure, so that housing can be built on top of that for indigenous housing?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I have no doubt that the Government of British Columbia has been a really strong partner to our government when it comes to being ambitious in the area of affordable housing. No relationship is more important to our government than the one with indigenous peoples, including those who live in urban areas. We're fully committed to working with indigenous peoples to co-develop an urban, rural and northern indigenous housing strategy following the "for indigenous, by indigenous" principle.

That work is already under way. For example, in the rapid housing initiative, almost 40% of the units created will target support for indigenous people, including those living in urban areas, and \$638 million has already been allocated specifically to housing that benefits indigenous people living in urban, rural and northern communities.

When it comes to the infrastructure piece, I've had conversations with my colleague, the Honourable Dominic LeBlanc. He completely supports our approach to making sure that our infrastructure investments, including investing in transit and our transfers to provinces, also leverage housing and ensure that there's more affordable housing that comes out of those investments.

The municipal housing accelerator fund will also enable municipalities to offset some of the costs that will inevitably arise when you increase housing supply, and those costs are mainly in infrastructure.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

Now we'll go to Mr. Jeneroux for two and a half minutes. You have the floor.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Minister, are you aware of the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada, FINTRAC, and its role?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, I am.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: For those following along online, I'll just quickly read that its mandate is to "facilitate the detection, prevention and deterrence of money laundering and the financing of terrorist activities, while ensuring the protection of personal information under its control".

Minister, are you aware of how many real estate audits this watchdog conducted in 2019-20 and 2021-22?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I will turn to the president and CEO of CMHC to answer that detailed question.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: I actually have them, so why don't I answer it for you, Minister?

In 2019-20, 149 audits were conducted. In 2020-21, only 53 audits were conducted. That's a 64% decrease in real estate audits conducted by the anti-money laundering watchdog. The same watchdog was on high alert during the pandemic, and they realized and noticed, starting....

With more dirty money being used to purchase homes, driving up home prices across the country, why does the number of real estate audits keep decreasing year after year?

• (1220)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll turn to Madam Bowers to answer that question.

Ms. Romy Bowers (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

At CMHC we are concerned about incidences of money laundering in Canada, and through our research activities we try to support institutions like FINTRAC in combatting money laundering in Canada. We're willing to do whatever we can to support the federal government's efforts to ensure that Canada has a stable and transparent housing system.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: With the increase in foreign buyers and the initiative of the minister in the mandate letter, you'd think this would be something that we would see...we wouldn't see this continued decrease.

My last question is to you, Minister, and I have to applaud you for taking the time here today to join us. It's nice to be able to ask some questions and have you answer them directly.

Your mandate letter mentions "enhancements to the Federal Lands Initiative". Now, the federal lands initiative enables the transfer of surplus federal lands and buildings. Currently, though, no properties are available under the federal lands initiative.

How many new housing units have been created through the federal lands initiative since its launch in 2018?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That program has a lot of potential, because we know there are lots of federal lands from coast to coast to coast. What we intend to do is enhance that program so that more federal lands can be made available to those who are willing to build affordable housing and guarantee affordability for a long period of time. We are fully committed to doing that, and we will be moving forward on that, absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Jeneroux.

For two and a half minutes, Madame Ferrada, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister for being here with us today.

I don't have a lot of time, so I will be brief. I will try to combine both of the questions I would like to ask you into a single one.

The government's approach to housing is based on the right to housing. When developing public policies, we have endeavoured to work on the most important aspects to ensure the right to housing

for the most vulnerable as a whole. I'm thinking specifically of the recent appointment of an individual to the position of housing advocate.

I would like to hear you talk a bit more about that.

I would also like to raise another extremely important issue, which is women affected by domestic violence.

Can you tell us about initiatives that target this problem directly? For example, it is very important to ensure that women and other people who need it can have a space in transitional housing accommodations.

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

[*English*]

It is really important to highlight how our government has really moved forward on entrenching housing as a human right. We've moved forward with the appointment of a federal housing advocate, which is a key commitment that we delivered in under 100 days, as we promised in our election platform.

In addition to that, if you look at the rapid housing initiative, the national housing strategy, the national housing co-investment fund and many other programs, the priority populations mentioned there include women at risk and women and children fleeing gender-based violence. You can also look at the outcomes of the rapid housing initiative, whereby a lot of those permanent, new, affordable housing units are going to be provided to women and children fleeing gender-based violence.

In addition to that, the Canada housing benefit is a game-changer. It is allowing many women at risk and women and children fleeing gender-based violence to be able to pay their rent and access independent housing when they're in a vulnerable state. We're coming through with that Canada housing benefit, which is now, by the way, operational in every province and territory. Through other programs, for example the supports that we're providing to the non-profit and co-op sectors, most recently with a new top-up announcement funding of \$118 million, we're ensuring that women and children are protected in those co-op units, where they receive much-needed subsidies. We're protecting those subsidies; we're protecting those units, and we're ensuring that women have a safe and affordable place to call home. We will continue those outcomes.

In budget 2021, we are bringing future money forward through the national housing co-investment fund and dedicating that to providing supportive services, transitional housing and permanent housing for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Last but not least, we also committed to topping up the Canada housing benefit by an additional amount of over \$300 million. That money will be exclusively dedicated to funding rental supports directly to women and children fleeing gender-based violence.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Madame Ferrada.

That concludes the questioning of the first hour of the meeting.

I want to thank you, Minister Hussen and witnesses who are appearing before our committee this morning to answer questions. Thank you so much.

We will suspend briefly while we reposition for the last hour.

• (1225)

(Pause)

• (1230)

The Chair: Welcome back to committee.

We'll proceed with a briefing on the ministerial mandate letters.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French audio.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I would like to welcome our witnesses. We have the Honourable Kamal Khera, Minister for Seniors; Alexis Conrad, senior assistant deputy minister; Cliff Groen, senior assistant deputy minister; Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister; and Annette Gibbons, associate deputy minister.

We'll start with Minister Khera for five minutes, please.

Minister, you have the floor.

Hon. Kamal Khera (Minister of Seniors): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, colleagues. Thank you for this opportunity to join you today.

As this is my first time joining you as the Minister of Seniors, I want to take this opportunity to thank you all for the work you do as committee members. I totally look forward to working with all of you in advancing the priorities set out in my mandate letter.

As you have already mentioned, Mr. Chair, I'm delighted to be joined by our senior officials today, who will be supporting me. Truly, these are some of the finest public servants and colleagues. I want to thank them for all that they and their teams do across Canada.

The government has been working hard on many fronts to respond to the needs of seniors, both before and during the pandemic. We need to think about seniors' health, social well-being and financial security. We have made significant progress, but there is more hard work ahead of us.

We all know just how challenging this pandemic has been for seniors, from social isolation to the higher costs of staying home and being safe, to the challenges in long-term care homes. Seniors have been impacted the most by this pandemic, and we must support them now and into the future.

I'm here today to speak to you about the priorities outlined in my mandate letter. The overarching goal is to work with colleagues and stakeholders to help protect the physical, mental and financial health of seniors. My work will be informed through engagement with seniors themselves, parliamentarians who represent seniors across this country, stakeholders and the National Seniors Council, as well as, of course, through collaboration with our provincial and territorial counterparts.

Furthermore, I'll be working closely with the Minister of Health in a concerted effort to improve the quality and availability of long-term care, and to take concrete actions to support seniors who want to age at home. With my colleague, Minister Duclos, the Minister of Health, I will be establishing an expert panel to provide recommendations for creating an aging at home benefit.

Additionally, as part of the effort to help seniors aging at home, our government will be helping organizations that serve seniors, which have the local knowledge to offer practical support to low-income and otherwise vulnerable seniors in order to enable them to better age at home.

As I've said, the pandemic has exposed many systemic problems with long-term care homes that have proven tragic for thousands of seniors and their families. As you may know, much of my work is informed by my own experience as a nurse, working directly with seniors. I'll be happy to share more on that later.

Working with the provinces and territories to fix these problems is something we need to get done, and get done quickly. We want to improve the quality and availability of long-term care homes and beds, and improve infection, prevention and control measures.

We welcome the news that the Health Standards Organization and the Canadian Standards Association have released draft national standards for long-term care for consultation, and that the final standard will be available to use later this year. This is important work to improve care for seniors. It will set the bar higher for safe and respectful care in these facilities. We look forward to working with the provinces and territories on that lasting change.

We're also deeply concerned about the safety of seniors. I will be continuing to work with the Minister of Justice and Attorney General to strengthen Canada's approach to elder abuse. After years of hard work and contributing to Canada, seniors deserve to age with dignity in the best health possible, and with social and economic security.

One of my biggest priorities is to strengthen financial security for seniors. I'm proud of the work we've done up until now. We are restoring the age of eligibility for the OAS pension and the GIS to 65 from 67; increasing the GIS for the lowest-income single seniors; enhancing the GIS earnings exemption; providing a one-time, tax-free payment to help seniors with their extra costs during this pandemic; and, of course, moving forward with our plan to boost the OAS pension by 10% this summer for seniors 75 and older.

A big priority for me in this mandate is to increase the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 for single seniors and \$750 for couples starting at age 65.

Some seniors received pandemic benefits in 2020, and had their GIS impacted. To fully compensate these seniors, we will be providing up to \$742.4 million for one time payments to reimburse those GIS benefit reductions. Last week, we also introduced and tabled important legislation, Bill C-12, to permanently exempt federal pandemic benefits from the calculation of GIS or allowance benefits in future years. This exemption will begin in July 2022.

• (1235)

The legislation needs to be passed by Parliament quickly in order to ensure that there is enough time to implement changes to IT systems and to ensure that there are no disruptions to the ongoing delivery of OAS benefits to seniors.

Colleagues, we must ensure seniors' safety, security and dignity. That's our focus and that's our goal.

Thank you. I am happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

For the first round of questioning, we will go to Madam Kusie.

Madam Kusie, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister, for being here today. It's greatly appreciated.

You mentioned that one of your priorities is to strengthen financial security for seniors. With the help of the official opposition, the government provided a number of benefits to Canadians, including seniors, throughout the pandemic. They included the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada recovery benefit.

Unfortunately, what followed was that 90,000 low-income seniors—those who are the most vulnerable in our society—found that their guaranteed income supplement payments would be clawed back as a result of the government's mismanagement in implementing these benefits throughout the pandemic.

You just mentioned here—and it was announced in December 2021—that you would give up to \$742.4 million for a one-time payment of the guaranteed income supplement.

The question I have for you today, Minister, is this: On what date these will seniors receive this money?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Thank you, Mrs. Kusie, for that very important question.

When the pandemic first hit almost two years ago, our government moved very quickly to provide support to Canadians, whether it was through the CERB in support—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Minister, please. There are seniors who can't eat right now. There are seniors who can't heat their homes.

On what date, Minister, can these seniors expect the money with their GIS, please?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Mr. Chair, as I was just stating, we moved very quickly to provide these very important measures that were put in place so that seniors, particularly the most vulnerable seniors, would have a roof over their head and money to put food on the table.

We all know that some working seniors were part of a group who relied on these pandemic benefits to—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister.

They're waiting for those funds right now, for those exact things you listed.

You brought up Bill C-12 in the House on Friday. I am looking for it to be rescheduled as soon as possible so that these seniors can get their money.

How much will this one-time payment be? You mentioned the global amount of \$742.4 million, but can you guarantee today that all of these seniors will receive every single penny that was taken from them in your government's clawback of the GIS?

Can you guarantee that they will get every single penny of that money back? Through your error, they thought they had it, but then they found out they were not entitled to it.

Can you guarantee that they will get all of that money back, please, Minister?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Mr. Chair, if the honourable member will allow me, I will walk her through the ways we're going to address this issue.

As I was stating, we moved very quickly to provide this support to seniors—and, indeed, to all Canadians—but we know that these programs were meant to ensure that people could stay at home. We know that some working seniors were part of a group that relied on these benefits to help them get through this crisis. As a result, having received these benefits in 2021—we were all navigating this unprecedented crisis—some seniors unfortunately saw their GIS allowance affected in 2021.

I make mention of this because this particular... It's something we moved on very quickly. Indeed, on the very first—

• (1240)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister.

It wasn't quickly enough, unfortunately, as they're still waiting for it.

Can you guarantee today, Minister, that they will not be taxed again on these funds they will receive—this large amount that you have promised—after receiving them? Your government has made this error previously.

You gave them the money; you clawed back the money with the GIS, and you've now said, "We're going to give it back." Are you going to tax them on this money again?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Mr. Chair, if the honourable member will allow me, I will tell her that this commitment is under way in two steps. First and foremost, we are fulfilling this commitment as soon as possible, with the support from all of my colleagues in the House. As the honourable member knows, we announced in the economic and fiscal update that we will be delivering a one-time payment to GIS and allowance benefit recipients who received CERB in 2020 and saw a reduction.

This is going to be an automatic, one-time payment. It is going to support seniors by fully compensating them for the full loss of their GIS and allowance—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister. You have mentioned that.

I'm not alone in my concern. You mentioned the finance minister. I actually have here in front of me a letter from the Advocacy Centre For The Elderly—

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I could recite Standing Order 16(2) regarding decorum, but frankly I would hope I wouldn't have to.

This questioning is very rude and the minister is not receiving the opportunity to respond.

The Chair: Mr. Van Bynen, that is not a point of order. We will resume the questioning.

Conclude, Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair, for your excellent leadership in this committee.

As I said, Minister, I have a letter here from the Advocacy Centre For The Elderly, which is addressed specifically to you, as well as to the finance minister, whom you just mentioned and with whom you said you are working to resolve this problem that is causing seniors significant duress.

We've recognized today that we don't know when they're going to get the money. We recognize that we're not sure if this money is not going to be taxed back.

Can you assure me, Minister, as well as not only those 90,000 seniors who are suffering, hungry and cold in their homes right now,

but all seniors across Canada, that you will work to ensure that this type of error never happens again?

Thank you.

Hon. Kamal Khara: Mr. Chair, allow me to continue to confirm for the honourable member first and foremost that we moved very quickly with our officials and the Minister of Finance to put forward measures in the financial and economic update to fully compensate seniors who were affected. This work is already under way. This is going to be a one-time, automatic payment to fully compensate the seniors who lost their GIS in 2020.

Secondly, Mr. Chair, to ensure that this doesn't happen again and to fulfill this commitment in my mandate letter, we introduced Bill C-12, which is going to do precisely that. It is going to amend the Old Age Security Act to exclude any income received under the CERB or CRB for the purposes of calculating the amount of GIS and allowances payable.

It is a very simple bill. It is a quick but very significant amendment to the OAS act to ensure that seniors, particularly the most vulnerable, are not impacted this year for the benefits they took last year.

I've had conversations with all parties and with my critics on this. I really hope we can all agree and move quickly to make sure we put this in to ensure that those most vulnerable seniors have the supports they need.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Van Bynen looks warm and fed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Kusie.

For the next six minutes, we have Mr. Coteau.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for being with us today. We appreciate it.

I got to sit in the Ontario legislature for the last decade. Over the last few years I was really watching what was taking place with seniors in this province and in this country. I often think back and remember when the previous Conservative government raised the old age security from 65 to 67. I often think about how it would have impacted about 100,000 seniors and kept them in poverty. I often think about the government that's here today—your government and our government—and the values it brought forward during the pandemic.

It's really Canadian values to see that adjustment to bring it back to 65 from 67 and then putting in place many different programs during the pandemic—which is perhaps the most challenging time this country has ever gone through since World War II—to help seniors who are struggling.

In my community in Don Valley East, seniors come in all the time and they are struggling. Having a pandemic hit changed everything.

I want to say that it's nice to have a government that is reflective of Canadian values. In fact, 80% or 90% of the money that went to support Canadians during this pandemic came from the federal government directly.

We're here now, two years later. There have been a lot of challenges. What has been the impact of some of these programs when it comes to seniors, not only from an individual perspective, but also from community-based organizations working with municipal and other levels of government?

What have you seen really work well over the last two years when it comes to the programs coming from your ministry?

• (1245)

Hon. Kamal Khera: Our priority from the very beginning, since 2015, has been to support those most vulnerable. I am proud to be part of a government, one of whose very first actions was to cut taxes for middle-class families and raise them for the wealthiest one per cent. We introduced measures, as you know, to restore the age of eligibility back to 65 from 67, which it was in the Harper years, especially for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement.

We also put forward and enhanced the guaranteed income supplement, which has helped 900,000 low-income single seniors. The measures we put in place have certainly helped 45,000 low-income seniors to come out of poverty.

When you talk about this pandemic, if there is one demographic that has been particularly hard hit, it is our seniors and the most vulnerable seniors. Complementary to directly supporting their health and financial health, we were also able to provide other funding as a result of delivering services and supports directly to them, using the power of organizations on the ground in communities and adding our own capacity, thereby ensuring that local knowledge and skills were harnessed. I am very proud of every volunteer organization and company that has stepped up during this pandemic to support seniors.

As you know, the services that help seniors in their day-to-day lives can help save them that extra cost and the stress, which can affect their health, especially if they have to manage it alone, as you can only imagine.

Therefore, to help seniors and others get essential services and supplies, we invested over half a billion dollars. There was an additional \$20 million for the New Horizons for Seniors program's community-based projects, \$350 million for charities and not-for-profits, \$9 million for United Way Canada, \$100 million for food banks and local food organizations, and, of course, millions for the previously funded New Horizons for Seniors program, which was modified so we could pivot quickly to address the needs of those specific individuals.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Minister, I know you have been interrupted a lot today, but I have a minute and a half left. I would just like to ask you about an issue that's really serious to me and I think to all members of this committee, which is the issue of elder abuse.

During the pandemic there has been, obviously, a lot more isolation. Can you share any insight in regard to elder abuse during the

pandemic, and what the ministry and partners have done to help mitigate what I can imagine has been its growth during that time period?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Absolutely. Thank you for raising that extremely important question.

Senior abuse in all its forms is extremely unacceptable. It's an issue that from the very beginning our government has taken extremely seriously.

We're working on initiatives to combat senior abuse, including strengthening the law, creating a national definition, collecting more data and cracking down on seniors fraud. The work is already under way on this issue through the funding of projects, as I mentioned, through the New Horizons for Seniors program, to help raise awareness around senior abuse and fraud.

We have also invested \$29.5 million for the digital literacy program to help seniors develop their online skills and to educate them on fraud protection.

Of course, work is also under way with the National Seniors Council, which examines these issues. This is something we take extremely seriously to make sure that seniors are protected in their homes, online and, of course, in public.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau.

Now, for six minutes, go ahead, please, Madame deBellefeuille.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us, Minister.

I listened carefully to your statement, although I am surprised that you made it only in English. I thought that ministers were required to make their statements in both official languages. Perhaps I am mistaken. I thought that they did it out of obligation, but perhaps it is simply out of courtesy.

In your statement, you said that you were a nurse. For my part, I am a social worker. I am still an active member of my professional association in Quebec. I spent my career in service to seniors, offering support at home and in nursing homes. I can tell you one thing: it's not the national standards you are working on that will change anything at all for the quality of services offered to seniors in nursing homes in Quebec. I am strongly opposed to the issue of national standards. The solution lies in health transfers, as requested by the premier of Quebec and those of all the provinces.

Even though I would like to discuss the matter and debate it with you, I am so convinced that you are on the wrong track that I will not raise it today with you. I would prefer instead to talk to you about the financial situation of the most vulnerable seniors.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions of you in the House, Minister. Here, I would like you to answer me quickly and precisely, so that I don't have to interrupt you often during your answers.

As you know, 183 000 seniors are no longer receiving their Guaranteed Income Supplement because they accessed the Emergency Response Benefit. In December, you said that these people would get a one-time payment in May.

Can you explain to me clearly and simply why the one-time payment will only be made in May? What are the reasons? How do you explain this?

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khara: Allow me to take a moment to thank you, as a health care worker to a health care worker, for the work you've done in your own community and that you continue to do.

Mr. Chair, and for my honourable colleague, as I mentioned, when the pandemic first hit two years ago, we moved very quickly, as the honourable member knows, to provide that support, whether it was to workers, seniors, students—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Minister, I am terribly sorry to interrupt you. It's really not like me to interrupt witnesses, but I asked you a simple question.

Explain to me the reason for which you cannot make the one-time payment sooner, to get it done before the month of May. Explain the reason to me. There is a reason. I know the answer, but I'd like to hear you say it.

Why can't you move up the payment you intend to make in May?

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khara: Let me just say that when I was first appointed to this role, this was the very first thing we worked on. We worked extremely closely with our officials, looked at all options possible. We worked with the Minister of Finance and quickly put a major investment in the financial and economic update to fully compensate these low-income seniors who were affected.

The work is already under way. This is going to be an automatic one-time payment, which will support affected seniors by fully compensating them for the full loss of their GIS. Of course, there are challenges, and we want to get it out as soon as possible, but I—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Minister, I am terribly sorry to interrupt you.

I will answer the question myself.

I think that you can't make the one-time payment before May because there are computer bugs. We heard it in other committees.

Even the minister of Finance said so. The computer system won't allow an earlier payment to be made.

So, you will confirm that, because of the computer system, you cannot make the one-time payment before the month of May, which will go to seniors who are struggling to pay their rent, groceries and medication.

Can you confirm that for me, yes or no?

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khara: Look, I completely agree with the honourable member that we need to move quickly on this. This is a priority for me, and we are doing everything we can to get it out as soon as possible.

I will turn to my senior officials to give you the challenges that exist and the work we are doing to make sure we can get it out as quickly—

• (1255)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Cliff C. Groen (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Benefits and Integrated Services Branch, Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Yes, thank you very much.

Thank you to the member for asking the question.

The earliest we can make the one-time payment is in the month of May. We are currently working hard to see if it is possible to make the payment sooner.

It is true that there are technical constraints. It must be said that the computer system we use for the Old Age Security program is outdated. This system dates back to...

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: That's perfect. I very much appreciate your answer.

What I understand is that the government is stuck with a big problem right now. The Employment Insurance Act cannot be reformed because of computer problems. At Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, work visa applications can't be processed fast enough and bring in needed foreign workers, again because of computer problems.

Now, you're telling me that because of computer problems and your antiquated computer system, it is impossible to accelerate a single payment to vulnerable seniors whose benefits were unfairly slashed. Very sincerely, as an MP and a social worker for seniors, I find that unacceptable.

Every Canadian who needed a CERB cheque had one sent to them within 10 days, but vulnerable seniors who had their benefits slashed can't get a cheque for \$3 500 sent to them before the month of May. Can you explain this to me?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: We were indeed able to pay benefits to Canadians very quickly. I was closely involved in the payment of the Emergency Response Benefit, as well as other benefits.

In this case, we want to pay out these benefits as quickly as possible. We're making it a priority, so we're working very hard on it.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

[*English*]

Next is Madam Zarrillo for six minutes, please.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's been an interesting but sad committee meeting today. What we're seeing is that the cracks in our social safety net have really come to light here, and that there's a lack of planning from government year after year and decade after decade.

I guess if we think about the answers we just got right now around the antiquated technical infrastructure—earlier we saw the lack of investment and foresight in social housing—now we're looking at really catastrophic outcomes for the senior population.

I want to speak specifically to the minister about what is not in the mandate letter, which is a plan for seniors, a national strategy for seniors. This is something that the NDP has wanted for a long time. Today has just shown how much we must invest in good planning so that we can protect the most vulnerable when a crisis happens nationally. Elder abuse was talked about today, as were food insecurity, mental health and loneliness of our seniors.

I want to ask the minister about a national plan. We've heard lots of piecemeal issues today, but what about a national strategy for seniors? Where is that, and can we expect to see it very soon?

Hon. Kamal Khera: I know this is a topic this committee has also previously looked at. It is something I am taking advice on in order to make sure we are dedicating our resources toward the best results for seniors who need our help the most, the most vulnerable.

This strategy would possibly bring together a range of work that we are already doing for seniors, and we're happy to consider that in due time as we continue to deal with the pressing concerns our seniors are facing during this pandemic.

As the honourable member may know, we have made significant investments in areas of income security, housing, accessibility and caregiving, and this is building on that work. We've also asked the National Seniors Council to provide advice on whether a national seniors strategy would be helpful for strengthening our government's attention to seniors' well-being.

We're going to continue to look at that work and work hard with seniors—and, indeed, with all members of this committee and all stakeholders—to ensure that seniors have a safe, dignified and secure future.

● (1300)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I want to follow up on the GIS piece. I look forward to seeing a national seniors strategy soon, but I want to follow up on the GIS, because this is really the most pressing issue for many seniors in our country who are now at the point of being left out in the cold.

I want to talk specifically about how quickly that money can get on the ground. What could other MPs, other parties, do collectively over the next couple of weeks to get those payments out to seniors before May or June? What can we do together, collaboratively, to get those payments out ASAP?

Hon. Kamal Khera: There are a few things. First, I want to assure the honourable member that we left no stone unturned to support these most vulnerable seniors. We worked extremely quickly with our officials and the Minister of Finance and looked at all options available to find a solution. As you know, in the fall economic update we made a major investment to fully compensate the seniors who were affected.

Of course, that work is under way. This automatic one-time payment will support those seniors by fully compensating them for the full loss of their GIS. Of course, I agree that we need to get the money out as quickly as possible, and that's exactly what we're doing and exactly what our officials are looking at.

I'll turn to Cliff to provide even more clarity on that, but I will say that the honourable member talked about what we can do. That is precisely why we introduced Bill C-12. It is going to ensure that we prevent this from happening again, giving vulnerable seniors the security that their GIS won't be impacted because of the pandemic benefits they took last year.

I really hope we can work alongside all parties. I have been forthcoming and I have engaged with every party. My seniors critic offered them briefings on making sure we can move quickly on this, because it is urgent. Bill C-12 is a simple, quick fix to get this done, and I really hope the honourable members, and indeed all parties, will do just that.

I will turn to Cliff to provide more clarity on the one-time payment.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: I'll just add that, on the challenge we are encountering with the delivery of the one-time payment, some of it definitely has to do with the technology challenges we have. There is a plan related to replacing the technology through which the old age security program is delivered. There's an initiative called "benefits delivery modernization", which will be replacing the technical platform moving forward. That's a key investment that has been made, and the project is under way in that regard.

Another part of the challenge we have related to the timing is that it coincides with the tax season. We are in the midst of issuing 12 million tax slips, which is part of our obligation in delivering the program. That also coincides with the renewal period for GIS and us working directly with the Canada Revenue Agency.

We are doing absolutely everything we can to advance this payment as quickly as possible, and it remains very much a high priority for us to be able to deliver it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Groen, and thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

Now I need direction from the committee. I'm in the hands of the committee.

We are past one o'clock, but as you are aware, we agreed to suspend for a while. Do I have the consensus of the committee to proceed?

Madam Khera, are you available for a while?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Yes I am, Chair.

The Chair: Next up is Mr. Benzen in the five-minute rounds, and then, if the committee is agreeable, we would conclude with the two 2.5-minute rounds for Madame Chabot and Madam Zarrillo. That gets everybody.

Do I see consensus on that?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's great. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Good. Then it will be Mr. Benzen, Madame Martinez Ferrada, Madame Chabot and Madam Zarrillo.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you, committee members.

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

Mr. Bob Benzen (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister Khera, for being here today.

I think this "age well at home" initiative has an opportunity to be a really good initiative, so I'd like to ask a couple of questions about it.

It says here that you made a decision to use volunteers. I'd like to understand why you decided to use volunteers.

Also, right now we're having labour shortages; we have increases in the number of seniors, and seniors are living longer. Are we going to have enough volunteers in the end to make this program successful?

• (1305)

Hon. Kamal Khera: Allow me to talk briefly about why it is a priority for this government to make sure we can get as... We know that seniors and older Canadians want to live in their own homes independently as much as they want. This pandemic has certainly highlighted that Canadians desire to age in their own communities as long as possible. Sadly, we know that many vulnerable seniors do not have all the supports needed to live independently in their own communities.

We did a number of measures in the past as well. I will take you back to 2016, when our government put a major investment, billion of dollars, into home care in a health accord with the provinces and territories.

You alluded to the age well at home program. For that program, \$90 million over three years was put in the last budget to do that important work. This initiative will provide funding opportuni-

ties to offer practical support for seniors-serving organizations. That would be support with meals, housekeeping, yardwork or any of the work that seniors-serving organizations can provide on the ground to vulnerable seniors in their own communities.

Funding would also be available for regional and national projects to expand services that have already shown results in helping seniors age in their own communities. This is going to mobilize the seniors-serving organizations and recognize the important work they do.

I will turn to Annette to provide a bit more depth on this program.

Mr. Bob Benzen: I was really just concerned about whether you will have enough volunteers. I mean, people are looking to hire people, and they can't get people to come and work. I'm not sure you're going to have enough volunteers.

I would like to address another issue. It's great that people are going to get help at home to cut their lawn and get groceries and various other things like that, but I think the major thing about living and aging at home is medical costs. This might come under the aging at home benefit, which you could talk about. It's very expensive to have seniors in the hospital. It's very expensive to get seniors to the hospital in ambulances and all that kind of stuff. We don't really want seniors in the hospital if people can get well better at home, so there's a need to have them at home.

How are you going to get the medical part of this covered in that, maybe working with our health minister to keep our costs down but also having people at home longer and dealing with the medical issues they're going to face?

Hon. Kamal Khera: As you know, in the delivery of health care there are jurisdictions. That's under the provincial government. That's why in 2016 we gave billions of dollars for home care to provinces and territories to do that work, because it falls under their jurisdiction. The age well at home program is designed to find the gaps, the ones that provinces and territories perhaps.... It's to fill the gaps. We don't want to duplicate the work that is already being done.

I will turn to Annette to give a bit more depth on this, as it's something she is very well versed in. I will say that it is part of my mandate letter too, of course, to establish, working with the Minister of Health, an expert panel to provide recommendations for establishing an aging at home benefit. I'll be doing this work with the Minister of Health, and we'll have more to say in the near future.

Annette, can you talk a little about the age well at home program, please?

Ms. Annette Gibbons (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): Sure. There is home care delivered by the provinces, and federal funding supports for that as well. That's very clearly in the medical space. The age well at home program is intended to move into that space of more practical supports that are non-medical. It's very deliberate that it's complementary to what is happening at the provincial level, because there isn't as much of that at the provincial and municipal levels.

With respect to your question about volunteers, the reality is that an awful lot of organizations, not-for-profits that are active in supporting seniors, are very strongly volunteer-based. Of course, they have paid staff who lead the organization, but a lot of volunteers provide supports to seniors. We really just wanted to build on that. Seniors themselves are often volunteers in those organizations, which of course has benefits in terms of engagement in the community, combatting social isolation and so on.

• (1310)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Benzen.

We now go to Madame Ferrada, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here with us today.

I'd like to come back to the question that was put to you earlier, about the fact that the monthly Guaranteed Income Supplement benefits had been reduced for seniors who had received the Emergency Response Benefit. You have already spoken about it at some length, but I would like you to add certain details.

For example, could you specify how these individuals will be compensated? How will this work for people who received benefits outside of the 2020 tax year?

Additionally, can you say why, in fact, Bill C-12 is so important? More specifically, what will change in terms of legislation to better protect seniors in the future?

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khara: Part of our government response has always been to support those most vulnerable seniors, and that is why we moved quickly on some of the measures that we've talked about since 2015, on restoring the age of eligibility to 65 for OAS and GIS and enhancing the GIS and CPP.

We've all been in this now for two years, but when the pandemic first hit, almost two years ago, as you know, we moved extremely quickly to provide support for Canadians, including workers, seniors, students and businesses. These programs were certainly meant to ensure that people could stay at home, stay safe and have a roof over their heads, and that they would be able to make ends meet.

We know that some seniors were part of that group that relied on these pandemic benefits to help them get through this crisis. To be clear, it's important to recognize that every year thousands of seniors get their GIS adjusted depending on their income in the previous year. Since some of these working seniors received pandemic benefits, because they needed them at the time, they had their GIS affected in 2021. I agree that they shouldn't be penalized for that.

They needed that support at that time, and I want to assure the honourable members of this committee that when I was first appointed to this role, this was the very first thing we worked on. We worked very quickly with our officials to look at all possible options. We worked with the Minister of Finance to quickly put in a

major investment in the financial and economic update to fully compensate the seniors who were affected, and that work, as I mentioned, is already under way.

This is going to be an automatic one-time payment. It will support affected seniors by fully compensating them for the full loss of their GIS and allowance benefits.

To your second point, why is it so important to ensure that we move forward on Bill C-12? Bill C-12 is going to ensure that this doesn't happen again. To fully fulfill the commitment in my mandate letter, we introduced Bill C-12. It is going to simply amend the Old Age Security Act to exclude any income received under the CERB for the purposes of calculating the GIS or allowance amounts payable.

It is a very simple bill. It is a quick but significant amendment to the OAS act to ensure that seniors, particularly the most vulnerable, are not impacted again this year for the benefits they received last year. As I mentioned, I have already proactively reached out to all parties. They all agree. They have been calling for this. I really hope we can move quickly to advance this bill, because we need to get to the point where we can make sure this doesn't happen again.

Cliff or Alexis, would you like to talk a bit about why it's so important to get it in place as soon possible, so we don't have that impact again this year?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Very quickly, regarding this legislative change that is currently before the House, it is critical that it be passed by the beginning of March in order for it to not impact individual entitlements of GIS benefits, effective in July. GIS benefits are renewed every July based on the previous tax year's income, and therefore the system changes that we make always occur in March, when we shift from the previous tax year to the most recent tax year. That is why it is absolutely critical that this legislation be passed for us to be able to deliver the program with the objectives of that legislative change.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Ferrada.

I will now move to Madame Chabot, for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Hello, Minister.

I would like to talk to you about a commitment made in your mandate letter, which is also the government's commitment, regarding the Old Age Security pension. This commitment is both a good and bad idea: the good one is to increase the Old Age Security pension; the bad one, to apply it only at age 75.

I am sure that you know that the Old Age Security pension applies at 65 years of age. As a result, in your commitment, you are discriminating against seniors based on their age. You are creating a breach in the Old Age Security program, when there is nothing to justify it.

If you are, as you say, very sensitive to seniors' financial situation, are you willing to revise your decision, so that the increase in the Old Age Security pension applies at age 65?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Thank you for the question.

[English]

Mr. Chair, through you, I would like to tell the honourable member that from the very beginning, our government's priority has been there to support the most vulnerable seniors. The focus on older seniors and the OAS increase recognize three extremely important things, and it's important to highlight those.

The first is around the fact that seniors are living longer, which is a good thing. We also know they are more likely to be running out of their savings as they spend more years in retirement.

The second is around the fact that older seniors are statistically more likely to have low income; they're more likely to be widowed; they're more likely to have a disability. All of these come with higher costs, as we all know.

Of course, the OAS system has always had varying amounts for different groups. It's based on years of residency in Canada as well.

In particular, with our focus on targeting the most vulnerable, we worked hard to strengthen their overall income security and OAS, which they rely on in particular. Our plan, of course, delivers on that promise. It is around—

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Minister, there are people who are vulnerable at 67 years old, and others at 73. How can you justify such discrimination?

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khara: What I will tell the honourable member is that the plan we have, as we know, was a commitment in 2019, also, to increase the OAS by 10% for seniors 75 and older. We kept that promise, and we will be delivering on that this summer.

I also want to allude to another commitment in my mandate letter. It is around increasing the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 for single seniors and \$750 for couples, starting at the age of 65. That is a priority for me, and I'm going to make sure I move forward and deliver on that commitment.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

We will now move to Madam Zarrillo, for two and a half minutes, to end this hour.

Madam Zarrillo, you have the floor.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just have to come back to this vital, proactive tool to protect the well-being and dignity of seniors, going forward. That is a national seniors strategy.

I would ask through the chair to the minister, when can Canadians see a national seniors strategy in the budget, and does the minister agree that there is a need for it with all the learnings that have come from COVID-19?

Hon. Kamal Khara: I alluded to this question earlier. I will say that we've seen the reality in this pandemic that many seniors have faced, and the vulnerabilities that exist.

The work we have been able to do, whether it is around strengthening financial security for seniors—I'm looking at my mandate letter—whether it is the increase of the guaranteed income supplement by \$500 for single seniors and \$750 for couples, whether it is looking at how we get more seniors to continue to live longer in their own communities, whether it is our commitments to our age well at home program, or, of course, whether it is creating an expert panel to provide recommendations for an aging at home benefit or around the fact that we need to ensure that those living and working in the long-term care homes have the supports they need....

Of course, when it comes to the national seniors strategy, this is something I know the committee has looked at. I know the National Seniors Council is able to provide advice on whether this seniors strategy could be useful in our government's attention to seniors' well-being.

I certainly look forward to working with all members in this House to make sure that we continue to find different ways to support seniors. That is a priority for me, and I look forward to building that and having continued discussions with this committee and, of course, with all members in this place.

• (1320)

The Chair: You can ask a short question, Madam Zarrillo, to end if you want.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: My final question will be about the gender lens and gender-based analysis when dealing with seniors.

We know we over-index for women seniors. We also know that LGBTQ+ seniors are often missed in the supports that come out, so I want to get an understanding of this expert panel and what the gender lens will look like.

Hon. Kamal Khara: Absolutely. This is a priority for me. As you know, our government has made sure that we put in a GBA+ lens, a gender-based analysis lens, on everything we do as a government, whether it is our budgets or the investments we have made.

When you talk about the most vulnerable seniors, when you add in the intersectionality of single seniors, in particular those who are mostly women, or LGBTQ2, or minority groups, those vulnerabilities grow even more.

That is a priority for me. I can assure the honourable member that as we move forward in our programming and the work we do, we're going to ensure that is part of this work.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo, and Madam Minister, as well as the witnesses, for appearing today to answer the questions for committee members. Thank you, committee members.

With that, we will now adjourn.

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