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• (1100)

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): I call this meeting to order. This is meeting number nine of the Board of Internal Economy in the 44th Parliament.

We'll start off with the minutes of the previous meeting. Are there any questions or points arising?

Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Mr. Chair, the only thing that I noticed was on the decision on remote interpretation services. You may want to note that the minutes are missing a reference to the board's preference for the use of the translation bureau employees and freelancers. After your proposal that only bureau staff be used, Mr. Holland had suggested that the board could express a preference as a compromise, and we did. Otherwise, I have nothing else to raise on the minutes.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll make sure that adjustment is made. Is everybody in favour of that? Everybody's fine. Very good.

Is there anything else on the minutes of the previous meeting?

[*Translation*]

We will move on to the second item on the agenda, business arising from the previous meeting.

Are there any comments or suggestions?

I see that there are none.

[*English*]

Agenda item three is the Joint Interparliamentary Council.

[*Translation*]

This concerns the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie and the 49th annual session that will be held in Montreal from July 4 to 9, 2024.

Appearing today are Francis Drouin, chair of the Canadian Branch of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, and Jeremy LeBlanc, clerk assistant and director general, International and Interparliamentary Affairs.

Mr. Drouin, go ahead.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Chair, Canadian Branch of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It is good to see you in person.

Thank you for receiving us again with respect to our budget request, so that the Canadian branch can present the 49th annual session of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, or APF, in Montreal in 2024.

For the record, my last appearance before you, on October 8, 2020, was to make the same request, but it concerned the 47th annual session planned for 2022. The health situation that has plagued us all has also taken a toll on our willingness to host this event, which should have been held next month. Given the risks, the executive committee of the Canadian branch decided on January 19 to postpone this meeting to 2024.

So I am back before you to provide an update on our budget for the same event, held in the same city, but this time in 2024. You will note that the largest portion of the cost increase for 2024 falls under the logistics category and is related to the audiovisual and transportation budget items. During the pandemic, a series of mergers and acquisitions occurred in the Canadian audiovisual industry, which, combined with inflationary pressures, drove up the costs of these services.

We have also included the meetings of the Association des secrétaires généraux des parlements francophones, or ASGPF, as well as the Parlement francophone des jeunes. That entity also sits in parallel to the annual session.

I can assure you that, as with the previous request, we will ensure that we honour the management of public funds for this event in the most efficient manner possible.

Thank you for your attention. I am ready to answer your questions.

• (1105)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

Mr. Brassard, go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the last couple of years the board approved a \$1.35-million budget for the 2022 annual session, plus a further \$100,000 for the Parlement francophone des Jeunes, which was relocated. How much of those budgets was spent before the 2022 annual session was relocated, if any?

Mr. Jeremy LeBlanc (Clerk Assistant and Director General, International and Interparliamentary Affairs): The money that was spent on the organization of the conferences would have been solely for the staff salaries associated with the people working on the organization of that conference. There was money that was set aside from surpluses in the JIC envelope—so not supplementary funds. It would have been, I'm guessing, in the order of \$100,000 to \$150,000 on staff salaries, but no other expenses.

Mr. Francis Drouin: If I can add to that, on January 19, there were major decisions we had to make. If we had cancelled in 2022, we would have incurred costs of \$400,000, I believe, before December 31, and up to \$800,000 before March 8. I believe it was around those dates. That's why we had to cancel. We just didn't know if it was going to happen or not, and spending \$800,000 for a conference that may not happen was too risky for us.

Mr. John Brassard: I'm glad to hear that.

During the 2020 board conversation, there was a discussion about maybe switching to a hybrid or virtual arrangement if necessary. That didn't happen. Why?

Mr. Francis Drouin: Canada does not organize the virtual conference. That would be up to the international secretariat.

Every six years, the host countries are asked to host the annual session. Canada took the international presidency in the years 2022, 2023 and 2024, starting in July. That's why we wanted to be the host country. We've looked at the year 2023, but I understand that administration will be occupied in organizing another conference, so it was too much pressure on the staff.

Mr. John Brassard: That's it, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Are there any other questions?

[Translation]

There are no other questions.

Do committee members agree with the proposed recommendation?

We have unanimous consent.

We will move on to the fourth item on the agenda, the Pay Equity Act.

[English]

The presenter today will be Michelle Laframboise, chief human resources officer.

[Translation]

Ms. Laframboise, go ahead.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise (Chief Human Resources Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The purpose of this presentation is to provide the Board of Internal Economy with information on the implications of the Pay Equity Act for members and House officers in their role as employers. It is also intended to outline the measures that the House of Commons administration has put in place to help them meet their obligations.

As you probably know, the objective of this legislation is to achieve and maintain pay equity through proactive means, by correcting systemic gender discrimination in employer compensation practices and systems. Members and House officers with an average of 10 or more employees will be required to prepare a pay equity plan.

[English]

The first obligation was to post a notice of the implementation of the act, which House administration did in November 2021. Much like with the implementation of Bill C-65 and the Canada Labour Code, the House will assist impacted members and House officers in meeting their upcoming obligations, particularly in regard to the creation of a pay equity plan and subsequent reporting requirements.

The administration will support the members by providing expertise and guidance on analysis, benchmarking and consultation as well as the development of tools, training and material. We will assist in maintaining pay equity in the workplace.

Throughout the implementation of the Pay Equity Act, the administration will prepare and send communication products to members and their employees to keep them informed of their responsibilities and obligations.

• (1110)

[Translation]

Finally, the administration will support members in implementing pay equity plans by providing a template plan and assisting them in maintaining pay equity in the workplace, as well as meeting mandatory reporting and plan review requirements.

I will be pleased to answer questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments.

[English]

Mr. Brassard, you have the floor.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Ms. Laframboise, thank you for the presentation.

[English]

I have a series of questions. One is related to House officers and their employer obligations when things transfer or reset within those offices or when there is a change of the House officer.

For example, our party will be electing a new leader in September. Would that new leader start a new three-year clock, or would we carry on with the one that started previously under Mr. O'Toole last August? How would that work under this system?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: That's a very good question.

It's part of the scenarios that we're going to have to consider as we move forward in the project. Technically, when a leader changes, it's a new employer, and there might be a shift in the workforce and new employees. It's really a scenario that we're going to have to work with as we work through the implementation to see how that's going to impact. It's not something that is assumed in the law.

That's one of the things we are looking at, and we're working with our legal services team as well going forward to see how that's going to impact the change.

Mr. John Brassard: I assume that's going to be part of the communication process that you send out.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Absolutely, yes.

Mr. John Brassard: The next question I have is determining an employer where there's an average of 10 employees. For example, we're in the season of summer student and interns. Some MPs will hire staff who have to be factored into this. How would externally paid interns, such as in the parliamentary internship program, work under this system?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: As for employees who are captured under the act, although they include constituency and Hill workers and employees on leave, students and interns are not included. As far as the calculation goes, a measurement is made over the previous fiscal year. An employee count is taken at each pay period, and it's averaged out over the fiscal year to see if that 10 threshold is met.

Mr. John Brassard: I think Mr. Calkins has a follow-up question to that. Do you want to follow up now?

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Chief Opposition Whip): No, you can go on.

Mr. John Brassard: The next question I have is that the act requires that, if a pay equity plan discloses any gap in compensation, the employer must increase that compensation. Given that we work with fixed, assigned budgets, what happens in the case of a hypothetical scenario where an employer has to increase pay but doesn't have the budget room to do it?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: That's a very good question. I think it's something we'll have to look at as we go through the process to see if adjustments need to be made. Adjustments to salaries can be made incrementally, so if there is a large change that's required, there is a significant period of time that's allowed to make those changes. They don't all have to be done right away.

If the change is minor, they are required immediately. If there is going to be an impact on the budget, I think that's something we'll have to look at, if and when we get there.

Mr. John Brassard: As you rightly mentioned, there could be some significant increases here affecting members' budgets disproportionately, for example.

That's good.

The last question I have is that, although the first plans need to be in place by 2024, it sounds like there are a number of steps required beforehand. When should offices subject to the act expect to start hearing from the House administration on the beginning of the necessary groundwork? What's the reasonable timeline that we can expect?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: It's definitely by the fall. We are currently in the process of getting some expertise and hiring the consultants necessary to help guide us through the process.

We've already started the work. By the fall, you'll be hearing from us.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you for this.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: You're welcome.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We will now continue with Mrs. DeBellefeuille, who will be followed by Mr. Calkins.

Mrs. DeBellefeuille, go ahead.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I have only one question.

I have been involved in employment equity analysis processes before, and I know that we rely a lot on job descriptions [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] because, in order to compare, you need benchmarks.

But we know that, in politics—

● (1115)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mrs. DeBellefeuille, can you start over? There was a transmission problem, and we missed part of the question.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I was saying that, when you do a job analysis as part of a pay equity process, you start with the job description, so you can compare job tasks.

But we know that, in politics, there are no pay grades, no levels, and sometimes not even job descriptions.

How will you go about analyzing the differences in duties and responsibilities? How will you determine if there is pay equity between a woman's position and a man's position in the same apparent position? This seems like a rather complex exercise to me.

Is this a first for you? Have you ever had such an experience?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you for the question, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

I admit that the process is complex, but it is not new. The pay equity process has been around for about 20 years, and my employees and I have worked on it often.

Previously, the pay equity process existed. We could evaluate job descriptions and the value of the position, as well as determine which groups and positions are male or female dominated. All of these things were already being done, and we have been doing them for years.

Right now, we only conduct extensive investigations and analyses when there are complaints. What the Pay Equity Act changes is that it invites us to be more proactive. We are being asked to analyze positions without complaints being made. The objective is to ensure that there is equity without waiting for someone to file a complaint, in which case a request for analysis would follow. The tools and expertise to do this kind of work already exist.

I have been working in the field for about 15 years. I have conducted several pay equity analyses, and my team has a number of employees. In addition, we will be seeking outside expertise to support us during the process. The concepts of pay equity and how to measure it are all tools that already exist.

I agree with you that the job description is an important tool, but we also use other tools. We have discussions with both the employer and the employee to evaluate the positions, the effort required, the conditions under which they are performed, and so on. We make sure we have all the information we need to determine the value of a position.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Ms. Laframboise.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

[*English*]

We'll now go to Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like some clarification on the follow-up from my colleague. Can you give me your interpretation of the implementation of the legislation in a hypothetical example where an MP might have five full-time equivalency positions. If that MP chooses to job-share those five positions and have 10 employees, do they have 10 employees or do they have five employees?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: I'm going to see if Robyn can confirm, but my understanding is that it's the number of employees, not the number of positions.

Ms. Robyn Daigle (Director, Members' HR and Business Partner Services, House of Commons): That is correct.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

That's very good. That was strictly for information. Everybody understands it perfectly now. I'm glad to see that.

Now we'll move on to item five, the annual report on the members of the House of Commons' workplace harassment and violence

prevention policy for 2021-22. The presenter will be Michelle Laframboise, chief human resources officer.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker.

[*English*]

It's my pleasure to be presenting to the board today the annual statistical report on the members of the House of Commons' workplace harassment and violence policy for the 2021-22 fiscal year, as is required by the policy.

Over the course of this reporting period, human resources services have managed eight complaints. Of these eight, one complaint was withdrawn, one was formally investigated, and six were resolved through the negotiated resolution process.

Nine inquiries were also submitted to the respectful workplace team regarding, among other things, coaching on dealing with harassment-related situations and information on the policy and the tools available.

While this number seems slightly higher than in previous years, this is not unusual following the amendments to the Canada Labour Code and the subsequent implementation of the policy, which may have served to generally increase awareness regarding the responsibilities of members of Parliament as employers and their employees to record and report occurrences of harassment. However, even with this slight increase, given the population covered, the figure remains statistically very low.

• (1120)

[*Translation*]

In terms of training, the House of Commons administration is offering a training session on harassment and violence prevention for members of Parliament titled "Strengthening a Culture of Respect—From Awareness to Action". This session is offered in person and virtually.

During the fiscal year covered by the report, 14 sessions on harassment and violence prevention were offered to members. All members of the 44th Parliament participated in the session, which was offered as part of the orientation and integration program for newly elected members. The House of Commons administration offers a variety of resources and training related to harassment and violence to members of Parliament and their staff.

Our goal is to help MPs' offices build their ability to manage conflict in sensitive situations, and to foster a respectful workplace free of harassment and violence. To this end, we have developed tools and delivered sessions on team leadership, mental health and diversity.

[English]

A communication from the Speaker will be sent to all MPs to let them know that the annual report is available. The report will be announced on Twitter and will also be posted on the appropriate websites, Our Commons and the Source.

It's my pleasure to answer your questions.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

[English]

We have Mr. Brassard, followed by Mr. Julian.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks again, Michelle.

Your report simply notes that there were seven of eight complaints last year concerning multiple grounds. Are you able to break that down a little bit further for us?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: When we say “multiple”, that typically means that there is more than one element in the complaint, so it is labelled as “multiple”. It includes or can cover some of the different areas. It's not strictly harassment or strictly abuse of authority. It is unacceptable behaviours or a mix of the others. A breakdown per se would mean having to try to say how much of which, so it's really just a mix. That's what we mean when we say “multiple”.

Mr. John Brassard: The other question I have is that five of eight of last year's complaints saw that a member was the respondent to the complaint. One of the complaints has led to a formal investigation. Does that involve a member respondent?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Given the small number, for privacy reasons, we can't divulge that information.

Mr. John Brassard: I guess you can't divulge the outcome of the investigation either.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: No.

Mr. John Brassard: Sometimes it's difficult when we're sitting in public, Mr. Chair, to get down to understanding a little bit more about the report, so perhaps we may want to consider an in camera session at some point.

This is my last question. A number of allegations came to light concerning a now former member of Parliament. It was my colleague Michelle Rempel Garner who wrote the Clerk to ask for a review and investigation. I believe the board did discuss this situation and this case last autumn. Is that matter accounted for somewhere in your report?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: It would have been the previous year.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: There was no formal complaint.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: That's right.

Mr. John Brassard: There was no formal complaint—okay.

One of my colleagues did write, but as a result of that letter being written there was no formal complaint initiated or...?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: I think we might be getting into some pretty private areas.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Now we'll go on to Mr. Julian, followed by Ms. Sahota

[Translation]

It will then be Mrs. DeBellefeuille's turn.

[English]

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you for the information you have provided, Ms. Laframboise.

The training sessions are very important. I am pleased to know that all members of Parliament have participated. This is important if we are to change unhealthy behaviour on Parliament Hill. It is a very positive thing.

I agree with Mr. Brassard's concern that some questions should be asked in camera rather than in a public meeting.

In terms of the multiple complaints that were filed last year, I am surprised that they increased compared with 2020-2021, when there were only two. There were eight complaints filed in 2021-2022.

Are multiple complaints related to one person or are they complaints about eight people?

• (1125)

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Of course, I can't give you details on who was involved in these complaints. However, in terms of the increase over the two complaints from the previous year, you have to remember that the pandemic hit us that year, and people were not in the workplace as they are now. The return to the office occurred more last year.

In 2019-2020, there were five complaints. So the number of complaints went from five to two to eight. The increase is also due, in large part, to the fact that there has been a lot of training and awareness. In my experience over the past 30 years or so, when you provide some training or a little more information to the public, complaints go up a little bit, and that's normal.

It is important to mention that the increased number of complaints did not result in multiple investigations. Only one of the complaints required an investigation. Another complaint was withdrawn, and the remaining six were resolved through facilitated discussion, negotiation or conflict resolution.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Ms. Laframboise.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

[English]

We will go to Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Deputy Government Whip): Thank you.

I know that there has been a lot of advancement at the House of Commons when it comes to providing more information to those who work here and trying to really make this a harassment-free work environment. In that line, I wanted to know, since this policy doesn't cover members to members, what would be your advice...? I do understand that we have a unique situation. We're not employed in the same fashion that our employees are employed under us. Therefore, there is a distinction to be made there.

I was wondering if you could help explain that a little better as to the consideration, or if there has been consideration given, for ways for members to also be protected under some kind of policy if there is perhaps harassment in the workplace at that level. Is it just the different party whips' jobs to monitor that and handle that? Could you give me some feedback?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: As far as the policy goes, as you mentioned, the policy is designed for members as employers to provide a harassment-free workplace for themselves. Conduct between members is covered by the code of conduct, which at this time has a component for sexual harassment only.

As far as how it works, it is very different from a regular workplace—I agree with you—so whose role it is to help that.... The role we play and the support we provide is that, through the respectful workplace team, we try to equip people to.... We provide coaching. We provide training and tools on the prevention side as well as the support side to help people who come forward and who might be dealing with a harassment situation. Those tools are available to any member who requires them.

As far as the relationship between members is concerned, that is something that is done differently depending on where you are. It's not something that the House administration manages.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: But there's no formal policy. The code, like you said, only covers sexual harassment—

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Yes, sexual harassment.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: —and not harassment generally.

Would you have any thoughts as to whether the code should be expanded? Without a policy, are you able to effectively guide those individuals who might come to you?

I've been approached by a few people. Therefore, I'm asking these questions today.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: We provide the support that we can within the realm of the policy framework we have and the role that we play. Anything more than that, I think, is a conversation for the stakeholders and the board to have.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Has that conversation taken place previously, that you know of?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: Not in the time that I've been here, but I still feel fairly new.

• (1130)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: You have a lot of experience after 30 years.

Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's very good.

[*Translation*]

Do you have anything to add, Mr. Dufresne?

[*English*]

Mr. Philippe Dufresne (Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, House of Commons): I would only add that in the policy, it indicates:

The following parties may file a complaint under this policy:

an employee of a Member;

a Member;

A member can't file a complaint against another member under this policy, but they can raise concerns of another nature with the administration, and then those would be looked at to see if they fit under this regime.

However, in terms of member to member, it is only the code that has been developed, as you know, by PROC, and covers sexual harassment.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mrs. DeBellefeuille. You have the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'd like a specific answer to my question. All members have taken the training, which is mandatory, and that's a good thing. I find this to be an advantage, and I commend the human resources team for incorporating it into orientation. In the last Parliament, several new MPs were able to take this training.

I think the act requires employees of MPs' offices to take training three months after they've been hired.

Am I wrong?

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: No, you're not wrong. You're quite right. Employees do indeed need to take it.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Okay.

I'm a little surprised. I see that there were 535 participants in the training sessions.

How does the House of Commons administration follow up with all 338 MP offices?

In fact, there is a lot of staff movement in our offices, both on the Hill and in our ridings.

How do you ensure that all the new employees complete the training and, ultimately, comply with the Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Commons?

Is there a way to support members' offices to remind them that there are mandatory training sessions for their new employees.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

In the employee orientation program, we have just recently added regular follow-ups for new employees to ensure that they complete this mandatory training. As you mentioned, there is a lot of turnover in the MPs' offices, so we follow up.

In some cases, we have been contacted by whips' offices specifically to follow up with the offices of MPs where employees haven't completed the training.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Each whip's office follows up to ensure that employees hired less than three months ago can register for training and meet obligations.

Is that right?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: That's right.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Are there any other questions?

I see that there aren't any.

So we'll move on to the sixth item, "temporary COVID-19 financial policies".

Our presenters are Paul St George, who is the chief financial officer, and José Fernandez, who is the deputy chief financial officer.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Paul St George (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am here today to seek the Board of Internal Economy's approval to extend two temporary policies that were put in place to assist members of Parliament in dealing with the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and are due to expire on June 30, 2022.

I would also like to inform the board that the House of Commons administration has extended the offer of rapid antigen tests until March 31, 2023.

The first temporary policy allows members to include messages and solicitation of donations related to COVID-19 in their advertisements and other printed materials. As the pandemic continues to evolve, the administration recommends that the board continue to allow members to do so until March 31, 2023.

The second temporary policy concerns the reimbursement of Internet expenses incurred by members' employees. Based on our research, 30% of MPs used this policy in the 2021-22 fiscal year, compared to 42% in the previous fiscal year. As this policy has had an impact on MP employees who are teleworking, the administration recommends that it also be extended to March 31, 2023.

• (1135)

[*English*]

Given the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the fact that some employees continue to telework, the extension of these temporary policies would provide members with the flexibility to communicate COVID-19-related messages to their constituents and to reimburse reasonable Internet costs incurred by their employees.

I also want to report that the administration has extended the availability of the rapid antigen tests until March 31, 2023, with an annual budget cap of \$1,800, which is the annualized amount per member for the full fiscal year. The cap for House officers and national caucus research offices would also be adjusted accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, this concludes my presentation. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

[*English*]

We'll go to Mr. Brassard, followed by Mr. Julian.

Monsieur Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The rapid test submission that was approved this winter contemplated \$1.2 million in expenses during the last fiscal year. Can you confirm what the actual final cost was?

Mr. Paul St George: I can give you an estimate, as we are closing our books at this time.

We issued about 204 in total, and when I say "issued", 82 were disbursed from the House and 122 were actually purchased by the members. Therefore, the total that we spent of that was only just under \$100,000.

Mr. John Brassard: When you said "204" and "122", I would have thought it was 204,000, but....

Mr. Paul St George: No, I'm sorry. It's 204 units.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay. It's 204 units: 82 and 122.

Mr. Paul St George: That's correct.

Mr. John Brassard: I may have some more questions.

I'll come back to that, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go on to Mr. Julian.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for the report.

I support the recommendations. In the last week, 260 Canadians died from COVID-related causes. I know that there is a tendency to want to turn the page and just pretend that COVID isn't out there, but it is killing Canadians every day still, as we know, and the reality is that there are new variants that may be problematic as well and may lead, unfortunately, to an increase in that death toll.

The idea of wearing masks is something that I think we have all agreed to. The idea that we would continue some of the other COVID financial measures makes sense as well. Being able to provide information in our constituencies is fundamentally important, and providing support for donations to charities that have been working to ensure that in our communities the people who have been impacted by COVID.... It's not just the virus. It's the fact that so many people have suffered economic dislocation as a result as well.

All of those things seem to be smart measures to take, not only with the current situation, where we continue to lose Canadians, but also in anticipation of other measures that we may have to take. I support the recommendations, and I believe we have to continue to be prudent as we work through the coming weeks and months. The idea that this is simply over is not true. Prudent public health measures and making sure that our constituents are aware both of programs that may emerge and of issues related to COVID in our constituency just makes good common sense.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments or questions?

Mr. Brassard.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In doing the quick math on the report, it tells me that 15% of MPs have continued acquiring test kits. I'm going to take our party and the Bloc party out of it. Let's suppose it was the Liberals and the NDP, which isn't actually the case, that would still mean that more than two-thirds of MPs from those two parties, for example, aren't even bothering to have test kits available to their own staff.

Would that number be accurate, in your opinion?

• (1140)

Mr. Paul St George: That is correct, but we're finding that not all test kits that they have are necessarily being reimbursed or coming from the House. Some are being received free of charge, so we don't have the total in terms of the numbers that are being utilized.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

Do you have any data, even anecdotal data, for example about the recent uptake of the permission to include pandemic fundraising appeals and so on in MP communications?

Mr. Paul St George: No, I don't at this time.

Mr. John Brassard: The other thing that you've done is that you've provided us with data on the uptake of the home Internet reimbursement policy, but do you have the total dollar value of those reimbursements that were made in the previous fiscal year, the number?

Mr. José Fernandez (Deputy Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): For the Internet, it was around \$140,000.

Mr. John Brassard: It was \$140,000, okay. Are there any concerns on your part that if we extend the home Internet reimbursement policy to a full three years since its original approval, it will start to be perceived as somehow a permanent component of the compensation package, with its eventual end causing possible problems?

Mr. Paul St George: That's actually a very good question, and we did look at that very closely in the administration. The answer is no, because we do have the ability to adjust compensation packages, and it would be a decision made by the employer.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay. If it's within a unionized environment, how would that happen?

Mr. Paul St George: I would have to pass that question on the union perspective to Madame Laframboise.

Mr. John Brassard: I'm wondering if that would involve negotiations, collective bargaining, adjustments or....

Mr. Paul St George: Typically in my experience, then it becomes a request that comes from the union and it's a discussion point between the two parties.

Mr. John Brassard: Okay.

The last point I want to make is that, before you return to any further renewals of the home Internet reimbursement policy, would you be able to do some research on how widely or not it has become in similar office-based work settings? Would you be able to do that?

Mr. Paul St George: We certainly could look to our colleagues in other government organizations in terms of their processes and practices. Absolutely, that's something we could look at and bring back to the board.

Mr. John Brassard: Thank you. Those are all the questions I have, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

We'll now go to Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's not a question, but more a comment. I think Mr. Brassard raised an important issue. In terms of test kits, I would share with you, Mr. Speaker, that for my mother, because she is in a long-term care facility, that long-term care facility provides test kits so my tests take place as a result of the facility providing the free test kits.

I think Mr. St George is absolutely right that a lot of members of Parliament are in a similar situation, where they're receiving test kits from other sources, but this shouldn't mean that we cut off the ability to get those test kits through MOBs for some members of Parliament.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any comments on that?

If I could interject, I was thinking exactly the same thing because I know my staff went out to buy some and I instructed them to go to the nearest pharmacy. They went in, got them for free and brought them back.

I'm not sure if this is even a question that's in line or in your bailiwick, but do we know if all the provinces allowed for citizens to go to pharmacies to pick them up? I'm in Ontario, and that's the way it works here.

Mr. Paul St George: We haven't actually done that review yet, but it's something we could certainly look at.

What we're looking at here is essentially just ensuring that we have enough within our warehouse or within our vendors' capability to provide it if necessary.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. I'm not saying to take away the option to buy it, but I'll just maybe point it out to MPs that they don't have to.... I was going to say they don't have to spend federal money but put it on the provinces. That's not exactly the way I wanted to put it, but basically that's what it comes down to.

Are there any other comments? Very good.

Do we approve the recommendations that have been put forward?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Now we'll go in camera to deal with item number seven when we come back.

We're going to take about a two-minute break. Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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