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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on March 8, the committee will begin its study on the federal government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

Appearing before us today are Huda Bukhari and Zena Al Hamdan, both from the Arab Community Centre of Toronto; Rachel Gouin and Hayat Said, from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada; and Sherman Chan, from the Canadian Council for Refugees.

I would just like to remind the witnesses that each group will have seven minutes to make their representations.

I will begin with Ms. Bukhari and Ms. Al Hamdan.

Ms. Huda Bukhari (Executive Director, Arab Community Centre of Toronto): Thank you.

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, good morning. Thank you for inviting the Arab Community Centre of Toronto as a witness this morning in regard to the Syria initiative.

The ACCT, the Arab Community Centre of Toronto, wishes to congratulate the federal government on its response in resettling the 25,000 Syrian refugees within the short time that it did. Thank you. From the members of the Syrian community I bring their thanks. The resettlement of the Syrian newcomers is a proud and important part of Canada's humanitarian tradition, which reflected our commitment to Canadians and demonstrates to the world that we have a shared responsibility to help those who are most in need of asylum.

The Syria initiative galvanized the whole country and brought to the fore communities that traditionally have had no part to play within the settlement sector, sponsoring groups and well-wishing Syrian volunteers.

The Arab Community Centre of Toronto responded to this initiative early on, commencing in January 2015 by partnering with Lifeline Syria, a community-based initiative aiming to resettle 1,000 Syrian refugees a year through community sponsor groups. The ACCT's role was to connect with the settled Syrian Canadian community and have them act as a focal point, as Canadian contacts, for those families or friends whom they wished to have matched with community sponsors.

Lifeline Syria was formally launched in June 2015, and the Province of Ontario was the first of the funders to respond to this initiative in funding the project. The ACCT was able to hire a Syrian community worker to connect with the Canadian Syrian community.

To date, the ACCT has put forth more than 750 cases to be matched, has held 12 information sessions, and has provided guidance and assistance to more than 600 Syrian community members filling in sponsorship forms.

The ACCT at that time, with inadequate staffing, requested from IRCC funding assistance towards additional staff and was turned down in October and again in December 2015. We had at that time an increase in Syrian clients accessing our services and could not keep up with the demand. Funding was made available—thankfully—in April 2016 for the addition of two full-time staff members to address the Syrian newcomer clients.

At that time, the ACCT needed to hire Syrian settlement counsellors who could reflect the Syrian newcomers' languages. Arabic is spoken in 22 Arab countries, and each country speaks Arabic with a different dialect. The Syrians are made up of Armenians, who may not understand or speak Arabic, and Syrians in the north and in the south who speak Arabic with completely different accents. We needed staffing to help us in that initiative.

As well, Arabic is understood within the 22 Arab countries through the classical, written version. Not many people speak the classical Arabic. I'll come back to that later.

From early June 2015, the ACCT worked at bringing to the escalating Syrian refugee crisis the attention of the larger community, working closely with Syrian Canadian grassroots organizations, such as the Syrian professional group, faith-based organizations, and other settlement agencies, to focus the public's attention on the issue and on creating a coordinated response. This was done through the creation of response networks delivering Syrian cultural information sessions to the sponsoring groups, settlement agencies, and other organizations across Canada.

The ACCT connected with non-traditional partners, such as landlords, employment agencies, hospitals, school boards, and so on to leverage all resources to facilitate the plan of action to honour Canada's commitment.

To maximize the efficiency of the support provided by the ACCT to the more than 100 non-Lifeline Syria sponsoring groups who access our services, we assigned a settlement counsellor and two volunteers to facilitate communication with their new families and provide active support. This initiative was provided through funding from the Province of Ontario and the City of Toronto.

Commencing December 2015, again the ACCT saw itself at the heart of the Canadian response to the crisis. Five staff members were assigned to assist as interpreters and escorts at Pearson Airport.

•(1105)

They provided over 300 hours of service coordinated through the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, or OCASI, and Malton Neighbourhood Services. This initiative was funded through IRCC, though release of funds and information was slow to trickle down to the IRCC program officers in Toronto, who had absolutely no idea that this had been agreed upon.

The ACCT saw an increase at this time in the number of Syrians requesting our assistance. During the first quarter of 2015 there was a 9.5% increase of clients accessing our services who were Syrians. The second quarter saw an increase of 9.7%, the third quarter an increase of 15.3%, and as of April 2016, 50% of our clients are Syrians.

In December 2015 again, five partnerships were created, with the Toronto Employment and Social Services, the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, the Peel District School Board, and Mount Sinai Hospital for referral of clients and for cultural interpretation.

With the Toronto Catholic District School Board, the ACCT proposed that a homework and tutoring program be initiated because of the referrals and because of the information we were getting that the children who were coming in were acting out in schools. To that end, discussions are still in the works for us to set up that homework and—

The Chair: Ms. Bukhari, you have 30 seconds, please.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Okay.

Additionally, by this time the ACCT had received and trained 75 volunteers.

I have 30 seconds and I'm going to talk about the challenges and the trends.

The challenges include permanent housing for the government-assisted refugees. The stay at the reception homes and hotels was a lengthy process, though it created a social connection with other Syrian refugees who were there.

We're experiencing through the Syrian refugees who are coming in a lower-than-expected literacy level.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bukhari.

I notice that you've provided us with copies of your opening remarks. As soon as we have them translated into French we'll make sure that a full set is distributed to all of the committee members.

Thank you.

We will now move on to Ms. Gouin and Ms. Said.

You have seven minutes, please.

•(1110)

Dr. Rachel Gouin (Director, Research and Public Policy, Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada): Thank you. We're grateful for the opportunity to present to you today.

Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada supports and encourages children and youth to achieve great futures. We have 96 member clubs. We

see 200,000 children and youth through our doors each year and we have service locations in 625 local communities.

Several of our Boys and Girls Clubs have stepped up to help welcome the Syrian refugees. In fact, they welcome newcomers every time they arrive in communities. They're working with settlement agencies. They have opened their doors specifically for the Syrian refugees during the day, have arranged transportation for children and youth to be bused from school or from housing projects to club programs, and are integrating youth into regular after-school programs.

They're noticing that parents are busy working very hard to integrate, that families are large, and that children and youth need that extra support, even help with homework or having some sporting activities, some recreation in their lives, especially youth and young adults who struggle most when their parents do not speak English or French and who require that extra support for school and possibly to find some employment, such as many of our Canadian-born youth have in their adolescence.

Boys and Girls Clubs has submitted a written brief to the committee. We have two main recommendations. We would like to see the government give some thought to how we can support young people in the short and medium term to integrate. We think that youth programming that helps them make connections to their community, encourages their leadership, supports them through homework, and helps them find that first job or volunteer opportunities is very important and that the programs should be universal, open to all newcomer youth regardless of their immigration class or their country of origin.

We have invited Hayat Said to speak to her experience of immigration and the importance that such programs have had for her.

Ms. Hayat Said (Member, Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada): Thank you to the chair and the committee for having me and allowing me to share my experience with you.

My name is Hayat Said. I came to Canada in 2011. I originally came from Syria. Coming to Canada was really hard because one of my struggles was that I didn't speak English, and my family didn't speak English as well. Getting introduced to the Boys and Girls Club by my mom was really helpful because I'd been bullied before I came here. Coming here was really supportive and the Boys and Girls Club helped me with my English. My experience was really good because I was really shy. I couldn't even talk to anybody for two seconds because I was just afraid that I was going to get bullied there, too. Getting the help that I needed, learning English, and getting the support, like being involved in spelling bees, being with the leadership programs, and giving me the opportunity to be the president of the leadership program, helping the members give back and teaching them how to be a good and strong leader, was really helpful.

They supported me with everything. My school was really a big part of it. I wasn't doing really well at school, so when I got introduced to the Boys and Girls Club I started having high grades, and my family started to learn some English because of the club. Now my siblings have joined the Boys and Girls Club of Canada, in Ottawa. It was really helpful, and it's my second home, honestly. I got the opportunity to be a young volunteer, and now I have over 800 volunteer hours. I enjoy going there every day because I want to give back what they have given me. I learned English over three years, and it's been a crazy experience, and I wanted to give that back.

I want all refugees to have the opportunity to learn English and get experiences like these, and speak out about their experiences. Also, the club is giving me the experience of working with them and being a part of the Boys and Girls Club, and now I'm going to graduate with a scholarship and go to Algonquin College to study ECE, that is, early childhood education.

I've been really happy and blessed to be with the Boys and Girls Club, which is really supportive and has given me the education and the help, and I would love to answer any questions.

• (1115)

The Chair: Before we move on to questions, there still are two minutes, Ms. Gouin, if there's anything else you'd like to add. If not, we will move on.

Dr. Rachel Gouin: I would add that the Boys and Girls Club has developed a national program called the newcomer youth advancement program that is helping support our clubs to reach out to newcomer youth and to help the clubs be skilled at helping young people integrate. Over the last three years we have seen 2,750 youth in nine locations across the country. We've added three more locations this year and two more will be added next year, and the outcomes have included an improved sense of belonging, increased and improved cultural awareness, leadership and self-direction, communications and social skills, and better attitudes around school. These are exactly the things that the UN Refugee Agency recommends, these kinds of programs that help young people connect to the receiving population. The UN agency has recommended that these programs are needed, so we are trying to do our part and we wanted to raise awareness about the importance of such programs.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gouin.

Mr. Chan, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Sherman Chan (Executive Committee Member, Canadian Council for Refugees): Thank you for inviting me to the meeting today.

I am an executive committee member of the CCR, and I also work as the director of family and settlement services for MOSAIC in Vancouver. I have been working with the sector for about 24 years.

I am going to highlight some of our observations and recommendations for the committee study.

CCR is a national non-profit organization committed to the rights and protection of refugees and other vulnerable immigrants to Canada. We have about 180 members across Canada.

It is really important to encourage Canadian individuals and groups in the resettlement of Syrian refugees, and we see that harnessing goodwill from Canadians is essential. We should continue to involve and have active community engagement with Canadians.

Additional funding for Syrian refugees by the Treasury Board is a good investment.

Throughout our services to Syrian refugees we notice many new private sponsors, many new community groups that want to help. We think it would be good if there was some support through settlement organizations to work together with them on how to help resettle the Syrian refugees into the community. We would suggest the government consider this.

In terms of the integration challenges, an ideal is for Syrian refugees to be closer to their families. For many reasons—housing, the availability of jobs, or even schools—it may not happen and we think it would be good if settlement organizations could intervene or work earlier with the resettled Syrian refugees, even when they are in temporary accommodation, to make some good arrangements. We can make sure there is the desire; we know that through our experience. Many of them will eventually move to where there is community support or family support and that will make their integration in Canada more meaningful.

The availability of employment counselling and placement services is important, we know that. Many of them have high hopes of finding employment in Canada because they really want to be part of the community and contribute to the Canadian economy. We also know that many of them don't speak English well or they don't have any work experience so settlement support in finding a job, resumé writing, and labour market information is important.

I will give you an example from Vancouver. Working with the Province of B.C., there is going to be a survey on working with the employer and looking at the occupational profile of refugees, particularly the Syrian refugees in metro Vancouver. That means we can work with the employer community and have better matching and have the employer know what skills the refugees are bringing so they can match easily with the employer and have the refugees work well there.

We understand that in big cities it is always a challenge to find affordable housing. We think that settlement organizations or the sector could have a worker specific to housing, educating Syrian refugees on landlord and tenant rights, and how they can negotiate to make living there meaningful.

On the education of refugee children, through the IRCC there is a program called settlement workers in schools. It is a good way to make sure that refugee children can integrate well into the school system.

•(1120)

With the ESL program, the LINC program, 62% of Syrian refugees indicated they don't have any English language skills or French language skills. We also know that there's a long waiting list for LINC, particularly for level one and pre-literacy. We think that at this point we could be looking at some informal alternative to the LINC program to support them because many of them really want to be part of the community. There is an opportunity to recruit more volunteer teachers, to develop curricula, and to have conversation circles to support them.

While we are doing that we'll be looking at best practices and also looking at some of the information guidelines on how to work with refugees, their community profile, and some of the ethical and professional issues of working with immigrants and refugees.

Those are the recommendations that we have.

In terms of medical support, we would like to see.... Yesterday I got an email about the interim federal health program, IFHP, cut-off rate for dental, particularly for many of the refugees who are in a really bad situation in terms of dental care.

There are many refugees who can't hear particularly well—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, please.

Mr. Sherman Chan: —and refugee children with developmental delays, so if IFHP can support them, I think that would be very good.

The last point is about the non-Syrian refugees. We think that it is important that it's not just focused on Syrian refugees but looks at refugees from other countries as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chan.

We'll begin the rounds of questioning of seven minutes.

Ms. Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'll take this opportunity to thank all of our witnesses for coming today and for providing their input.

My first question is for Ms. Bukhari.

Last year in December you spoke at Minister Freeland's town hall on Syrian refugees. You stated that a key aspect to successful integration was ensuring that refugees were able to easily access the services that they require. Which resources do you feel are the most important to successful integration of the Syrian refugees? Do you think that there are presently enough resources for Syrian refugees to have that access? Which resources would need to be improved upon?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: This is a two-part question.

What we have been experiencing with the refugees coming in is that the information they were getting in the three-day orientation sessions pre-arrival was dated. It was outdated when they came to us, and we had to update the information. It was completely different to what they had received.

The resource that they will need is better access to services, and by better access to services, probably I mean that settlement agencies

should have access to the refugees at the hotels versus the clients staying at hotels for over a month without any kind of service at all provided to them. Those are the resources.

Should the Canadian government perhaps create extra reception centres for refugees who are coming in, that would be a lot better. That's one thing.

Another thing that we have experienced is that privately sponsored refugees fare a lot better because they have better resources through their sponsors who are around them all the time and through the support of the sponsors around them. I think that these refugees should be allowed to stay with sponsoring groups in areas where there are other government offices.

Let me give you an example. We were called out to Grey Bruce County where there was a sponsorship group who had a family they had to drive for 45 minutes each way so that they could access their language classes, LINC. They had to take them for over an hour so that they could get to a Service Canada office to get their OHIP cards issued to them.

We recommend resources such as making sure that refugees are housed and are permanently housed in a location that has those government services around. Those are some of the things.

•(1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bukhari.

I understand, Ms. Zahid, that you'll be splitting your time with Mr. Ehsassi.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Ehsassi, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me also thank everyone who has made the effort to be here. It's amazing to hear about all your experiences.

On this occasion, I also want to say congratulations to you, Hayat, and your amazing work. You really are a testament not only to how critically important the Boys and Girls Club is, but more importantly, to how critical it is that all of the settlement agencies be part of the process.

Mr. Chan, since you did allude to the specific challenges of work and training for refugees who are coming in, and you also talked about how you have partnered up with other settlement agencies, I was wondering whether you could perhaps provide us with best practices, and let us know what your experience has been so far and what works and what doesn't.

Mr. Sherman Chan: So far, in terms of the best practices that we are looking at, first of all, we definitely see a strong interest from the business community, or the corporate employers. Overall, they are interested in how they can support refugees. I think that's a shift not just in terms of looking at their skills but in terms of some compassion and the ways that they want to adjust the way they work.

In Vancouver—and I'm using Vancouver as an example because I work there—it starts through the provincial government. Of course, the Immigrant Services Society of B.C. is also part of it. They are developing and have already formed five refugee response teams in B.C., so we work particularly at leading in Vancouver, and what we have done is to invite about 38 organizations, including employers, the city, the language providers, and the health care professionals, to meet and develop strategies in approaching this.

In terms of the employment working groups, as we call them, we have had meetings, and we had the B.C. employment council work with us to develop a questionnaire for us to do surveys to find out who the refugees are who are coming here, what their language skills are, and what their jobs were. We learned that many of them could be farmers. Many of them could be good at driving. We don't know too much, but here's what I think we need to do. If the employer really wants to hire, they want to know who they are looking for, who they are, so we will compile the information and we will put it in the public domain on a website.

We also have employment counsellors who can negotiate with what we call the “labour market engagement specialists”. We can engage with them, say that we have this pool of refugees, and ask how we can help. Some employers may be even willing to do some job placements, and then they also provide some kind of a workplace connection. They could have some refugees.... Right now, many immigrants could have a job experience there, build up their confidence, and have employers knowing who they are. I think that's something we want to do.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, please, you have seven minutes.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank all of you for coming and giving us your testimony.

I want to particularly congratulate the representatives from the Boys and Girls Club for their testimony.

Ms. Said, your English is outstanding.

Ms. Hayat Said: Thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: You speak better than a lot of MPs I know, I might add.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Tilson: As far as spelling bees are concerned, I remember that in school I used to hate spelling bees, and my staff still correct me for spelling, so congratulations on your progress. I wish you all the best in your career.

Ms. Hayat Said: Thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: I'd like to ask a question, Mr. Chairman, to all the witnesses.

There have been examples of champions in the community, such as, for example, employers who are providing language training on the job or who have stepped up in terms of housing, or employment,

or other things, and who have demonstrated extraordinary dedication to this effort. If you know of any, I wonder if you could tell the committee about any examples you can share about these individuals and what they have done.

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan (Programs Manager, Arab Community Centre of Toronto): We do have a couple of examples that touch on both issues. We have had overwhelming support from private sector employers. We had employers such as FreshCo. coming to our recent job fair and basically hiring on the spot. They take into consideration the fact that the refugees have virtually no English language skills, and they're willing work with settlement organizations in terms of supporting their new employees, fitting them in within the workplace culture, and that sort of thing. On the other hand, they're looking to settlement organizations for cultural interpretation for their employees, in order to absorb the new refugees that are coming in.

We also had landlords who came into our centre—that was probably in mid-November to December—saying they were willing to work with the sponsorship groups in terms of housing larger families in townhouse units. Also, the heads of household were employed within construction companies that are owned by the same company.

We have had overwhelming support, even from small shops. They would come in and say, “I'm looking for so-and-so. I'm willing to train.” It's not one example or one sector. It's everybody coming and offering support.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you.

I'd like to ask a question to all of you, again about the so-called 13th month. As you know, this is the first month after the 12-month period in which the federal government provision of financial support to either the federal government or the private sponsors comes to an end. In some cases, this may also include the end of reduced rent that had been negotiated as part of the initial settlement of housing arrangements. It includes all kinds of other things.

Do you have any concerns about this period of time? We'll call it the 13th month. Do you have any concerns about when this funding stops, namely one year after the refugees have been provided with financial assistance.?

Anyone, Mr. Chan perhaps, would you care to answer?

Mr. Sherman Chan: Yes, I do have concern in terms of how we can strategize and make a better coordination effort within Canada, and of course with local communities, to have the infrastructure in place.

When I say “infrastructure in place”, right now, through IRCC, we're welcoming community initiatives that have been engaging with some of the employers or the city people to look at housing and the coordination of services. That's one thing that we are starting to look at.

Yes, materially they may be off the rent program, and if they are not really able to succeed, it means that they may be on income assistance. The good thing is that we know in the longer run, many refugees succeed well. Statistics Canada even looks at children of refugee families, and they do quite well in the long run, about five years or so.

Yes, we really want to address it and I don't really have any concrete recommendations or suggestions right now. In June, CCR will have a meeting in Saskatoon to look at the challenges and at some of the ways we can work together to address that 13th month phenomenon.

•(1135)

Mr. David Tilson: The 12 months are going to end before we know it, and if you have any suggestions from your meetings or consultations, even though the committee probably will have finished its study of the Syrian settlement issue, that doesn't stop you from writing a letter to the chairman and offering suggestions. We would appreciate that.

Mr. Chan, I have another question to you. You mentioned the issue of the dental care that is being provided to refugees. I can attest that I've had a number of complaints, particularly from seniors in my community, and others who do not have dental care. They don't have insurance. They have limited funding. There's a certain resentment from a certain percentage of the population. I have no idea how big it is, but the very fact that I've been asked questions.... Could you comment on that?

The Chair: Thirty seconds please, Mr. Chan.

Mr. Sherman Chan: From an individual perspective, I would say it's from the refugee, if they suffer from needing dental care, I think it's always important they have that opportunity to have a tooth extracted, or have an X-ray. We're not talking about major care. It is something that helps many refugees, if they are looking for a job and they don't have healthy teeth, or sometimes even for their mental health, when people feel shy or don't feel comfortable going out. I think that is helping them to become more confident.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chan.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses and presenters.

I have three or four areas I'd like to explore.

On the question around financial security, there's no question there's going to be a crunch in the 13th month when the sponsorship ends. In the meantime, even as it stands now, many of the refugees I've met raise the issue of the lack of financial support. On income assistance, it's hard for people to make ends meet. Many people run out of money before the month is over, and they're relying on food banks.

Ms. Bukhari, could I have you give us some quick comments on your experience with the people you have encountered with respect to that aspect of it.

I'm going to ask all these questions so people can start thinking about them.

Refugees are affected by the transportation loan they have to repay. Do you have any experiences that you can share with us in terms of the pressures that are put on them related to that? On the question around language training, there's a huge wait-list for people trying to get into language training. As indicated, they seem to be at

a lower literacy level than anticipated. How long is the wait-list, and what are the issues related to the child care provisions, so that the women get access to the language training program as well and they're not faced with isolation.

In the presentation from ACCT, there's a note around domestic violence, and that reports have been coming back with respect to women clients disclosing incidents of domestic violence within two to three weeks of arrival. That is hugely concerning. What action is being taken and what action needs to be taken to ensure the supports are there for the women in this difficult time?

I'm going to open the floor for Ms. Bukhari and then Mr. Chan.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: In regard to financial security and food, it's a different issue for the two groups, within the GARs, the government-assisted refugees, and within the PSRs or privately sponsored refugees. The PSR groups have been stepping up in adding some more money to their particular groups so they can buy food. We have had a partnership with some of the Arab stores, and they have been distributing food to many of the clients that access our services.

We've also made connections with the faith groups and mosques in the area, who have been distributing food to clients upon need. That has been going on.

Money is not enough. Money is never enough. We've been trying to hold information sessions for the clients who are coming into our offices in regard to budgeting and how to budget. For example, we had a client who came in and said, "Do you realize that it costs over \$4 to buy milk? I'm not going to buy milk. It's too expensive. Do you realize how much four dollars is, and how far four dollars can go back in Jordan?"

We were trying to give information sessions in regard to budgeting and how far money can go here.

As to the transportation loans, what has been happening is that the transportation loans have been taken away from the Syrians who have been coming in from December to March.

•(1140)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All the refugees you're dealing with are people who have come after November 4. Those who came before November 4 would not have had a transportation loan.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: We'll leave that. We'll move on to the next issue.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Language training is an issue. It's one of the great issues. The way that many of our clients have been accessing it, especially the females who've been trying to access it because of child care, is that they split the time in regard to the particular school they go to. They will go in the morning, leave their spouse at home with the child, and then the husband will go to classes in the afternoon when the wife comes back. Child care is an issue.

Access to child care is an issue. This is an area that we really need to be able to address. There have been enormous wait-lists. In the LINC classes and the ESL classes they say they're understaffed and don't have enough spaces. That has been an issue. One way of working through it is for the husband and wife to split the time when they go. We have also started conversation circles at the office over the weekends. The wives and/or the females within the household can come in and attend conversation circles in English, to help until they get child care opportunities available within the schools. I don't know how long the wait-lists are. It depends on each school. I really have no idea how long those are, but those are things that need to be worked on.

Domestic violence: this is something that really surprised us at the centre. We get calls from doctors. We get calls from the hospitals. We get calls from maybe other service providers. As an example, a husband came in and told us that he had gone home, realized his wife and two children were missing from the apartment, and assumed that his wife had taken the children to school. He waited until the end of the day for his family to come back. When the family didn't come back by 8 p.m., he went to the police station, he said. Once he got to the police station, with a friend who was interpreting for him, to make the missing persons report, he was apprehended and put in jail. He came out 10 days later to tell us the story. Apparently his wife had filed a domestic violence report against him.

This is what we're beginning to see. A lot of females are coming to us. Through the initial intake and assessment at our office, because we have Syrian counsellors there, one a psychiatrist, they've been able to disclose domestic violence. There's an increase.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bukhari. These are very important questions. Perhaps you can submit written answers. If you'd like to flesh out some of your answers from your community centre as well, please submit them in written form. The chair will make sure they're distributed to all the committee members.

It is now Mr. Chen's opportunity to ask questions.

You have seven minutes, please, Mr. Chen.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses, particularly to Ms. Said for telling us her story.

I've heard a number of witnesses today talk about young people. I know that in the public discourse there's been a lot about access to housing and employment, but I haven't heard too much around education, and particularly around supporting young people. I know from working in the community that so much of the success of this project will be measured in the outcomes of the youth, whether they are able to attain education and have good outcomes moving forward, which won't be apparent for years to come. A number of you have spoken of the importance of supporting children and youth.

I know that in Ontario there used to be school community workers within the public school system. Those were cut by the previous provincial Conservative government and have not been reinstated since. These workers were specifically tasked with reaching out to diverse communities to make sure they were integrated. We know

how important it is to involve parents in the education of their children.

Can you talk about some of the challenges with respect to educational attainment in terms of English language learning, in terms of settlement within the context of families and education, and in terms of their involvement and how important that is? What are some of the challenges and how can those challenges be addressed?

• (1145)

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan: The problems and challenges that we see are the different school systems that the parents are coming from. There isn't much involvement of parents in their children's education. Once the child goes to school, it is the teacher's responsibility. The concept of being involved in the child's life is non-existent. Most of the families we see are illiterate in their own language.

The school system is very intimidating and overwhelming. The concept of being different.... They come from a homogenous community. They are not really very familiar with the fact that there are diversities and there is potential for bullying, isolation, and things like that.

The other important factor is that many of these newcomer refugees have been out of school for two or three years. We have seen young children who have never actually seen a formal school. They don't understand the school system, so this is one of the biggest challenges.

The school boards have been very co-operative in the GTA, the greater Toronto area, in reaching out to settlement organizations and to us, specifically. We have worked with the Peel District School Board and the Toronto District School Board in the ESL context and in the special education context.

There has been a lot of communication, but a lot of work has to trickle down from the board itself to the people on the ground, to cross-collaborate with settlement organizations and organizations that actually know the community that is coming in and how to coach them. SWIS workers play a big role in connecting with settlement organizations, but there is also a lot of work to be done on the part of settlement organizations in terms of educating parents on how to be involved in their children's school.

One more thing I would like to say is that we are seeing a very new demographic that we haven't seen before, the very young parents. We would see clients who fit under the category of youth. They are under 24, but they are actually parents of two or three children at that time.

That is a bigger challenge, because the age category.... They are considered youth, but the services are mainly targeted at 14 to 18, and 18 to 24 is sort of missed in the midst of services. In this age category, mostly what we are seeing are parents. These parents will need extra support as newcomers, as parents, and as youth, and potentially as part of the workforce.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you.

Dr. Rachel Gouin: I would like to add to that. Statistics Canada's study that Mr. Chen mentioned on educational and labour market outcomes illustrated that children mostly do well when they are younger, but when they arrive as teenagers they struggle, especially when their parents don't have a good grasp of the official languages.

There is a need for extra support for youth. That support can come through schools—I am happy to hear that there are things happening there—but after-school programs are renowned for their ability to support young people and give them that additional leg up. Those are important, whether they happen at Boys and Girls Clubs or in other community programs. Those spaces where young people can get the additional support, and even career counselling and mentoring, are important.

• (1150)

Mr. Shaun Chen: Ms. Bukhari, you talked about access to government services and the one-hour drive, for example, just to get to a local office.

Ms. Gouin, you mentioned the national youth advancement program, and how you have set up nine locations. Do you feel there is a need...? As refugees are being settled throughout the country, what are the challenges that you are facing as an organization to ensure that those types of programs are having a far enough reach to get to those settled in more remote areas?

Dr. Rachel Gouin: We are hearing from our clubs that more and more of their population is made up of newcomer youth. The Moncton Boys and Girls Club has seen its newcomer... The members are largely newcomer youth now, and they are busing them in from different communities to the main location.

We have small clubs and large clubs, and we are able, through this program, to fund the small ones in smaller communities. Well, Moncton is not that small, but we also have LaSalle, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, and St. John's—we have a new program that has started there.

I am not sure I am answering your question, but I think it is possible to support small community organizations to give that extra support. It doesn't replace the need for settlement. We are not teaching young people English. We are an environment and a community where people can practice or where they can feel a sense of belonging. It is kind of an additional supplement, but it doesn't replace the need for English language or settlement services in regions.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Finally, Ms. Said—

The Chair: Mr. Chen, be very quick.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Okay, very quickly, Ms. Said, do you feel that the bullying you experienced at school was because some of the kids were not aware of refugees and what their struggles are?

Ms. Hayat Said: Yes. When I was in Syria, I didn't belong there, and I felt like I was the only black person who was there. I used to get picked on every recess, or when I was eating by myself. Then when I came here, I was afraid of having the same experience, not knowing that every place was different, so when I got help and motivation and support, it was eye-opening and it was life-changing too.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Said.

Mr. Saroya, I understand you'll be splitting your time, and one minute will be going to Madam Boucher.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Absolutely. Maybe Madam Boucher can take that minute first.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, CPC): Good morning.

I am new to this committee; I am replacing someone today.

I have a question I put to all organizations. There is a lot of talk about Syrian refugees. We have some in my riding, and most of them are anglophones or are trying to speak English.

[*English*]

Mr. David Tilson: I'm sorry, I think some of the witnesses need to have translation.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I'm sorry about that. I'm a francophone.

[*Translation*]

Okay, I will start over slowly.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madam Boucher.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I am from Quebec. Syrian refugees are arriving in my community, and they speak very little French or English. Do other communities have the same problem? Is it difficult to send the Syrian refugees to the right place? There are Syrian refugees in Quebec, but most of them don't speak French. Is the English-speaking part of the country dealing the same problem?

The Chair: You can provide a brief answer.

[*English*]

Mr. Sherman Chan: Maybe I can try to answer that. I think the ultimate goal is to find a place where the Syrian refugee feels comfortable residing.

The challenge, of course, is dealing with temporary accommodation. That is where they need to land and relax a little bit and have time to explore the community. We have seen movement in interprovincial migration. As I mentioned earlier about the early intervention by settlement organizations, we can really help them to develop a settlement plan, looking at where the communities are and then moving them there.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chan.

Mr. Saroya, go ahead for three and a half minutes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank all of you for coming down and educating us on many issues.

Hayat Said, you are the star here.

Ms. Hayat Said: Thank you.

Mr. Bob Saroya: You are absolutely a star. If you keep up something like this, you could be sitting on this side of the table in a short time.

Ms. Hayat Said: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Can we talk a little bit more about bullying? How can we help? What can the Canadian government bring to the table to stop this bullying?

Ms. Hayat Said: Honestly, it would be helpful to have really motivating people. When I came I met a lot of volunteers who spoke the same language, Arabic, and it was really good to communicate with them and tell them what I needed and ask how I could translate that into English. It is really important to have a really supportive community and people who support you every day. Even though people will say nothing is impossible—I used to say it would be impossible for me to speak English or to get high grades or go to university or college—it is really important to have that motivation and the people who can motivate you every day and tell you even the simplest things and just tell you that you can do it and you can achieve whatever you want. It's also important to have financial support. The Boys and Girls Club gave me financial support and donated supplies to my family. It is a really great community helping me.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Ms. Bukhari, how can we help as a Canadian society to stop the domestic violence you mentioned? The person was arrested. Obviously, is it the cultural difference? Maybe it's something that's acceptable somewhere else, but not acceptable here. What can we do to help?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: We need to be able to set up, if we can, some culturally sensitive information sessions for the newcomers in regard to domestic violence in Canada, on what the rights are, what the responsibilities are, what will happen. This is what we do at the centre in a limited way. But what happens if the wife complains to the police? What happens if the neighbour complains to the police and the husband is taken away?

It needs to be done in a culturally sensitive manner, in a safe manner. Programs such as this will need to be set up, particularly targeting this newcomer population that is coming in.

There is a great need. There are many issues coming out of this problem. We have heard of this particular family that I spoke of. We have heard that the wife has gone to Vancouver, that she's somewhere in Vancouver right now. This is a rumour and we have no idea whether this is true.

We need to be talking about these things.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Ms. Said, I want to say we're really proud of you, as others have said. You've overcome bullying, your shyness, language barriers, all in a very short time.

If I had a magic wand or this panel had a magic wand, what do you think that we could do better to make new refugees' lives better? What would be the challenges you face and the ways that we can make your integration, your adjustment, a lot easier?

Ms. Hayat Said: It definitely would help to have the different languages. It doesn't matter if the refugees only come from Syria or from all over the world. We should all give them the supplies that they need. It would be helpful giving them the education as well, obviously. Coming here it was really helpful knowing my

language...and the English support was a big thing. Also, it's motivating them to join different programs, like leadership programs, outdoors, and being motivated and having confidence.

Also, financially, it would be helpful to help the family, and getting that communication with the family and joining with them.

● (1200)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Are there any cultural challenges when coming from the Middle East to here and adjusting into a western society, i.e., being a young woman and being allowed to go into, say, extra-curricular activities? I'm not saying in your particular case, but for other young kids who come from Syria or other refugee countries in that area. Do you see any challenges that they have in any way and how we can help them adjust to those challenges?

Ms. Hayat Said: Definitely. Honestly, when I came I was really shy because I was a hijabi and I couldn't do certain things like swimming or other things that in my religion I wasn't allowed to do.

My family was really supportive, and the Boys and Girls Club was really supportive too. I overcame my shyness and I did what I loved, that is, working with kids and helping them and motivating them, and also being a role model to them and being a person they can look up to. It was really great, and it's very freeing when you can overcome your shyness.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: This question is for Mr. Chan.

What are the long-term integration challenges your organization envisions for Syrian refugees in comparison to others? Because you're from Vancouver I thought it would be appropriate for you to answer this question. What are the long-term challenges that you think will be facing the refugees as they settle?

Mr. Sherman Chan: I would say that for Syrian refugees we're looking at it as an initiative. I think the long-term challenge as leaders, as the Canadian government or as an organization, is having a good vision of creating a welcoming environment and mobilizing the communities to make it happen. I think that is the long-term challenge.

We don't want to see it as one shot; we have 25,000 and that's it. We see it as a good investment and that everybody can make it happen. I think the long-term challenge will be to sustain that.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Do you think the current funding for programs like yours is adequate to help them after they've gone through the 12-month period?

Mr. Sherman Chan: No, given the current... Even with the regular settlement programs, we are experiencing funding cuts in two years. With additional funding dollars, it's still not enough.

We are looking at how investment can be made, and we know that long term through Stats Canada and also recently with the EU reports, refugees are contributing big time. That is the good message we want to give to the Canadian public.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chan and Mr. Sarai.

I know I speak on behalf of all the committee members when I express my gratitude for the incredible work that all the panellists are doing, making Canada a welcoming place for refugees who are arriving on our shores.

I want to thank Ms. Said in particular. You give us hope that we will get a lot of this right.

Thank you so much to all of the panellists.

Ms. Hayat Said: Thank you so much for having me.

The Chair: I will suspend for the next group to arrive.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1205)

The Chair: Good afternoon.

Our second panel today consists of witnesses from the Kitchener-Waterloo region, who are appearing jointly: Tara Bedard, Ken Seiling, Mike Murray, Carl Cadogan, and Lucia Harrison. Welcome to the committee.

John Haddock, welcome by video conference.

I understand this is a coordinated presentation, so jointly there is a 21-minute maximum. You may begin.

• (1210)

Ms. Tara Bedard (Manager, Immigration Partnership, Region of Waterloo): Good morning, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to be here today to speak to some of the work happening to support the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Waterloo region.

My name is Tara Bedard. I am the manager of the Waterloo region immigration partnership. I'm on staff with the Region of Waterloo, which is the host of our partnership.

Our immigration partnership has been deeply involved in supporting the Syrian resettlement initiative in our community, and in my role I have been providing foundational support to the municipal and community partners across our community who have been supporting Waterloo region's refugee resettlement preparedness plan.

Waterloo region has a long history of welcoming immigrants, and we are a resettlement community for government-assisted refugees. The residents of our region are also very generous in the private sponsorship of refugees.

Our immigration partnership has been operational since 2010. Previous to that there was collaboration around an immigrant employment network. This significant history of collaboration amongst partners in our community has provided a very strong foundation for the resettlement work happening in our community right now.

Our refugee resettlement preparations began in September when international attention was drawn to the crisis in Syria with the photo of the boy who washed up on the beach in Turkey. Interest in our community and private sponsorship was growing. We began to bring together settlement-funded organizations, more and more people who were getting involved in private sponsorship, and community groups that were getting more involved informally in the resettlement support of refugees, so that everybody would know who was involved in the playing field in our community.

In November, after the recommitment to the 25,000 Syrians was made, we began by hosting a service preparedness planning session for services across the whole of our region. We had a huge turnout from agencies across sectors who had been involved in the past in our partnership and many who had not, looking to know how their organizations and services would be impacted by the arrival of a significant number of refugees into our community and to begin planning how, together as a community, we would be responding to support the resettlement.

At the same time, emergency management offices across the province had been activated through intense discussions with our settlement partners and the emergency management coordinators in our region. We arrived at a plan which brought together emergency management activity with the settlement and other activity being coordinated through our local immigration partnership structure into our current Syrian refugee preparedness plan. This merged an existing emergency response structure that had previously been in use in our region with a community initiative that was forming at the behest of settlement services and other community partners working on preparing for the resettlement. This has turned into a highly effective model for collaborative leadership between municipal and community partners in the Waterloo region.

In November we struck a series of nine working groups, including community emergency management, international skills and employment, education, children's services, health and mental health care, housing, community integration and language supports, volunteers and donations, and transportation. These groups were supported by a communications working group and a safety and security working group. We later added a private sponsorship working group, given the perception of difficulties in reaching out to make sure that the private sponsorship groups were also benefiting from all of the service preparations that were happening in our community.

These working groups were coordinated through a steering committee that was co-chaired by municipal and community partners, the medical officer of health from the Region of Waterloo, together with the executive director of our resettlement agency, Reception House.

Also, at our steering committee, the representatives across each of our working groups shared their developments and challenges and brought forward cross-referrals for issues that should be tackled by other groups. This has resulted in a lot of fast action.

Our steering committee also was a channel for reporting up to a municipal control group in our region, where all of our area mayors, our regional chair, the CAOs from all of our communities, our regional police chief, and the regional fire coordinator are participating to receive updates on the status of the resettlement in our community, the developments on the ground with services, the successes we have seen, and also the challenges we have been experiencing in our community.

•(1215)

This coordinated engagement of multi-tiered municipal leaders has resulted in coordinated communication to provincial and federal counterparts on behalf of our community, raising concerns and promoting solutions to the challenges that our community has been facing, challenges we believe we have in common with many communities across the country.

This has been a new level of municipal engagement in Waterloo region when it comes to refugee resettlement. It has been extremely successful until now and very welcomed by the community partners who are involved in our community. It has been really great to see that as a community, across our region, we're all pulling in one direction to support the resettlement initiative.

Consistent and comprehensive communication support has been key amongst our partners, we've been told, to fostering and appropriately channelling community engagement and ensuring that all refugees in our community, regardless of how they have received assistance, either through government or private sponsorship, are benefiting from all of the work happening in our community.

Our communications work has been adaptive and responsive to a constantly changing information environment and to the constantly changing information needs of agencies in our community so that they feel that they have the information they need in order to be properly supporting the resettlement. We have launched a website. We were using 211 information lines, a lot of social media messaging, and we started at the beginning of December a series of weekly briefings about arrival status, population information as it was becoming available for people who had arrived, and also service developments across our working group areas. That went out across our community to all of our service partners and all of our municipal partners, and also to our MPs and our MPPs, so that everybody had the same information about how things were developing in our community.

This resulted in very effective communication of information and an ability to identify needs very quickly and to identify solutions as they were needed in our community.

We've taken a very—

The Chair: Ms. Bedard, I understand you'll be sharing your time, so I just wanted to let you know that you're almost at seven minutes.

Ms. Tara Bedard: I'm sorry.

Okay, I will stop here and leave time for some of my colleagues.

The Chair: Who'd like to be next?

Mr. John Haddock (Chief Executive Officer, YMCAs of Cambridge and Kitchener-Waterloo): [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] representing the YMCA.

The YMCA is one of the primary federally funded settlement organizations in our region. We also pilot one of the CLARS, one of the language assessment and referral services, on behalf of the federal government in our region.

Personally I'm on the immigration partnership council. I also want to note that the YMCA has been working with newcomer youth for over a decade in our region to help with the belonging and the

settlement process. Although it's not funded by the government, we knew it was a need and see it as a growing need.

I have five quick points.

I want to start off by saying that the settlement agencies and the immigration partnership council were very effective in the fall in indicating the needs and issues that we might be facing as a community, and in doing so they enabled the process that Tara so ably talked about to happen. It was knowing first-hand that we were going to be receiving probably... We have more than 1,200 Syrian refugees, which is significant for our region.

Second, our community has been very generous, not just on the privately sponsored refugees or PSR side but in coming forward with donations. We were able, with the Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation and the Cambridge and North Dumfries Community Foundation, to work with the foundations on receiving donations. They are able to issue the receipts, but then they transfer the money over to the region so that a task force of the immigration partnership council is able to assess the needs of individuals and agencies and make adequate responses where there are unintended and emerging gaps in the services. That's been a very effective tactic.

I think another reason you've had some good early-on success with our Syrian refugees is that they were provided permanent residency, were able to receive refugee assistance, had an early health approval process, and received a social insurance number. This is so important for our Syrian refugees, to speed up the process and allow people to put their efforts and energies into getting settled. I would indicate that this should be a consideration for all of our refugees, not just our Syrian refugees.

My fourth point relates to investment. As indicated in the previous presentation, there has been a reduction in investment in settlement services over the last few years in our region. Our immigration has actually increased during that time. Now we have a situation whereby we've actually tripled the number of refugees we take in over a year and have done so in two months.

We're getting many stresses not just on the settlement sector but on all of the other required elements, such as education, mental health, health, and housing, in order to help a large group of people become settled. I would ask for consideration to be given to investment in some of the settlement requirements as well as in the broader community sectors that will require support.

Last, I would say that it's about going forward. Because of some good early-on planning and some good supports initially from the federal government, I think we've been able to assimilate, at the first stage, a large group of Syrian refugees. But as we go forward, we know that the issues and needs of our refugees are not going to be satisfied or achieved within the first year and that responsibility for resources and support will be required. I would ask for some continued investments—wise investments—using our community partnership planning model to understand what our needs are.

Those are my comments.

Thank you.

•(1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Haddock.

Mr. Cadogan.

Mr. Carl Cadogan (Executive Director, Reception House Waterloo Region): Thank you.

My name is Carl Cadogan. I am the executive director at Reception House Waterloo Region.

I am relatively new in this position. I started at the end of March—up to that point Bert Lobe had run the organization—and came on to help the organization plan strategically where they wanted to go. Then the Syrian refugee crisis happened, and the focus for the organization from November onward was looking at how we could serve the Syrian refugees.

Historically, Reception House served 250 to 300 refugees a year, so this influx of the Syrians was a very changed reality for the organization. We are one of the organizations that, like many, housed the refugees in temporary housing. We worked with Howard Johnson Hotel. We received people daily. One of the very positive things about not only the partnership that Tara spoke about but having the refugees in one area is that we were able to provide a wide range of services at the same time.

Housing has been the major issue. I think the region has had very low housing stock availability, and prices and costs for housing have been very expensive in the region. Working with landlords and with the community was a way in which the organization was able to harness the energy from the community. A number of people stepped forward.

We developed a plan. Typically refugees stay in temporary housing for three to four weeks. We had people for much longer, because we had very large families and had to be working constantly to get people into housing. I think the mayors around the region, in Cambridge, Stratford... We took tours to those cities. We gave the refugees an opportunity to see other parts of the community, not just Kitchener and not just Waterloo, and really tried to open their eyes to possibilities in housing.

We made outreach to the community and had incredible response from the community. Like a lot of other communities, we had responses, as John said, not only in terms of money but of people offering housing. That helped us a great deal.

We worked very hard with the medical officer of health to focus on medical assessments, dental, dental screening. We typically had medical clinics half a day a week. We expanded that to one full day a week and added the dental screening as well. We had health fairs that moved a number of families through intake and provided a wide range of services to the community.

Both school boards were very responsive. Typically school boards like to wait until families are settled in permanent housing before they accept kids into the system. Because of the numbers, school boards came to the hotel, and we were able to process students very early on and get kids into the school system very quickly.

For me the big issue going forward is language training and employment. People are very open to finding employment, and people are now very open to language training. We are trying to get as many people as possible as quickly as possible through English assessment, through the YMCA. We are working very quickly to

find spots. Provincial funding is provided through the province for ESL and from the federal government through the LINC program. We're working very hard to get language training for people. That's the next hurdle to accomplish.

•(1225)

We look at all aspects of settlement. People think of settlement agencies dealing only with settlement, but the whole community responded and tried to settle these Syrian refugees.

Right now we have all refugees out of the hotel.

The Chair: Mr. Cadogan, there are four minutes left, and I understand there is one other presenter from the group.

Mr. Carl Cadogan: Thank you.

Ms. Lucia Harrison (Chief Executive Officer, Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre): I will try to be really brief. I'm going to start with my last point first.

One of the great benefits I saw after 18 years in the settlement sector is that many people in our community did not realize we were a refugee receiving community. That's always been left to the settlement agencies, to the reception houses, and other people were left out of that equation. This has been great with people understanding that it's a broader commitment. That brings with it the realization that the broader community wants to be involved in the decision-making about receiving refugees moving forward. That's been an interesting point in this exercise; our regional and municipal governments are going to be more interested in being involved.

It would be helpful to have a more comprehensive approach of a flow of information to PSRs as well as GARs. With PSRs we had a surge of well-being and goodness and desire to sponsor, but by groups that had very little experience in doing so. To ensure that those PSRs are attached to existing services, to settlement agencies, if there could be a comprehensive approach moving forward, everyone would benefit.

We saw great gains in our area of a realization by health care providers that trained interpreters were a necessary component to the medical assessment of our refugees, and that when family members or other people were used, we had inaccurate assessments. That growth of understanding was really important. It may need to be followed with funding to ensure that trained interpreters are available.

We have an innovative idea in our community of attaching a transition assistant to employment counsellors to help newcomers who want to access employment, but Employment Ontario cannot provide services in Arabic. We are really trying to remind people that the need to learn English is so important early on because if our employment providers and the community put stress on people to work, successful settlement will not happen in the long run.

I will end there and be open to questions.

•(1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, please, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you all for being here. It's great to see you again. Everyone is from the Waterloo region. Welcome to the citizenship and immigration committee. It feels like more of a power hour with Waterloo region here.

Waterloo region makes up 1.6% of Canada's population, but we've been resettling 4.6% of the Syrian refugees. That's a great big task, and I know it's been taken on greatly in our region, and with all your efforts, we've done a tremendous job.

Mr. Seiling and Mr. Murray, what are the conditions that make a welcoming community like Waterloo region willing and able to resettle Syrian refugees?

Mr. Ken Seiling (Regional Chair, Region of Waterloo): Waterloo region is particularly well suited to it. It has a long history of taking immigrants and that goes back to the 19th century when people came into our region. We can go back to the Russian Mennonites who came in the 1920s, and the Vietnamese community. We took large numbers at that particular time, and there's a sense of stewardship that exists in the community, perhaps because the Mennonite roots are there. It's always risen to the occasion and done those sorts of things.

I think one of the strengths we've brought to it is a collaborative approach to doing things. As soon as this thing started to happen and emerge, we thought that we couldn't have people running all over the place doing their own thing. Somehow we had to bring this together.

As was referenced earlier, we invoked our emergency planning model on a regional basis for all the agencies. It was developed during the SARS outbreak, but we took that model—Mike is here, and he can maybe speak to it better—and adapted that to what was going on here. All the key agencies were brought in, a table was created, regular meetings were held with the medical officer of health, and the Reception House co-chaired that group and started to pull everybody together to make sure we were all going in the same direction. We identified common needs, people had their roles to do, and people weren't stepping all over one another.

I think that's the key to success in pulling it all together. If you are all running off in different directions you get a lot of unintended consequences. It's not that everything is perfect, but I think it certainly is much more coordinated, much more welcoming, and much more successful.

Mr. Mike Murray (Chief Administrative Officer, Region of Waterloo): I would probably just reinforce what Chair Selling said.

My sense is that one of the keys to success was a true partnership model. This was an interesting response where I would say it was a completely joint response between municipal government and community agencies. It was side by side, hand in hand, and not one leading over the other, but leading together.

It was probably one of the first times we've seen that true parallel partnership model in the community. We had existing structures we could use and adapt, but there was a spirit of partnership everybody brought to the table and a sense of common purpose and a sense of

how municipal and regional government can work hand in hand with all of our community partners to deal with the task at hand.

The community partners are here, and they may want to add to that.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Does anyone else want to add to that?

I can go on to my second question. My second question is for Mr. Haddock.

Thank you for joining us from Edmonton.

I understand you're retiring after 19 years of service, and I want to thank you for that service to the YMCA of Cambridge in the KW region.

Can you give us an idea of the changes you've seen in Waterloo region in that period of time with respect to refugee settlement? I understand in your initial statement you mentioned there was a reduction in settlement services in previous years. How has that affected the organization?

Mr. John Haddock: Thanks, MP Tabbara.

Yes, I've had the opportunity to be in Waterloo region for 19 years and to be part of what Chair Selling talks about, the collaborative approach to community needs.

The YMCA has been the primary funder for federal immigrant services and settlement, and language assessment since that time as well.

Before the Syrian refugee crisis, our region's immigrant enrolment increased 30% over this past year. We're seen as a primary site of settlement, but also a secondary site where people may be coming in through a different port of entry, but are coming to our region for a number of good reasons. I would say our region is seen as a popular destination and that is increasing for technical, employment, investment, and educational reasons.

To Mr. Murray's point about the group working together, it is true, but the expectation that the community is going to be able to accommodate continued growth in immigration, and a continued expectation that there is going to be an increase in refugees, is somewhat challenging and concerning. Over the years I've seen support from the federal government grow in terms of settlement support, but lately it's been declining and within our region—perhaps it's different from other points in Ontario—I see a need for increased investment for refugee and immigrant settlement services.

Thank you.

• (1235)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

As our region continues to grow, many more services will be needed.

Ms. Bedard, the immigration partnership has been working with employers to open doors for newcomers and to address the employment challenges. How can the federal government help in addressing future employment for resettling refugees?

Ms. Tara Bedard: That's a very loaded question, and I don't think anybody has the answers to that after so many years of focusing on this in our community.

Certainly the engagement of employers at all levels to support newcomer integration into the workforce is important, and it goes well beyond the capacity of community organizations. Support by all levels of government on accommodating newcomers in the workforce is really important.

There's also the matter of facilitating training needs. We are seeing that the capacities and past experiences of the refugees who have arrived in the Waterloo region are not what they were expected to be, so we need a longer-term focus there.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bedard.

After the committee meeting, if there are submissions that the group would like to make, please send those through to the committee chair.

Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, I understand you are splitting your time, half and half, with Madame Boucher?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

She has one question. Let her take her question first.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Thank you for that.

[*Translation*]

You are very proactive with refugees in the Waterloo region, and I thank you for that. You are a role model in many respects.

I would like to know what is done in your community when people arrive from abroad, like the Syrian refugees, and have health problems. There are also language-related issues, since their first language isn't French or English.

Are you getting the help you need concerning people from other countries—such as the Syrian refugees—with health problems? What has been your experience with those people?

[*English*]

Mr. Carl Cadogan: We have dealt with health issues for 25-plus years.

I think the uniqueness with the Syrians is the numbers. The process we set up involved working very closely with health professionals and having, within the first week, an assessment of families, so the children, the mother, the father, everyone in the family.

We worked very closely with organizations to ensure that we had interpreters. We usually had two or three interpreters per group.

In some cases when there was a health emergency, we were able to help that family or that individual connect very quickly to primary care support. We had many cases of people who were arriving sick, so we very quickly got them assessed and got them connected to a hospital. Lately we have been trying to connect each of those people to a primary health care provider.

It has meant a lot more work for health care professionals in the community, but a lot more coordination of the work. The coordination aspect, to get medical professionals and hospitals working together and to ensure that we had interpreters who could work with the families when they went to the hospital, was very critical.

• (1240)

The Chair: Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming down, educating us, and giving us your perspectives.

Mr. Cadogan, you mentioned the housing issue. Has it been resolved or do we still have issues regarding housing?

Mr. Carl Cadogan: Again, that's a challenging question. We have 1,200 or so refugees who are now in permanent housing. That took a long time.

I think, as I said, traditionally we try to get people into permanent housing within three or four weeks. This took a bit longer because of the high occupancy rates in the region as well as the large families that were typical of the Syrians who we received.

I think the good thing that happened in the community, one of the other good things, was that landlords responded really well. We went out and spoke a lot to landlords. We brought them together. We made presentations and we had opportunities to see a lot of houses and apartments in Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge, Stratford, and all over the region. We were able to really work with landlords to get people into permanent housing, but that took a lot of coordination, again, a lot of focus, and a lot of negotiating with landlords.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are all the refugees in permanent housing as we speak?

Mr. Carl Cadogan: Yes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: That's fantastic.

My next question is very difficult to ask. I just learned in the previous hour of some domestic issues with the Syrian refugees. Are there any issues that any one of you are aware of?

Mr. Carl Cadogan: I think part of the work that we do is life skills and orientation. Child rearing is an example. Because of the committee that Mike and Ken spoke about, we had a very strong connection to the police.

We had an incident in a hotel, as an example, where there was a family out in the courtyard and I think the father smacked the child. Someone was going by and they saw that and they called the police.

The police came, but because we had that relationship with the police we were able to have some discussions about it. We were able the next day, when we did our workshops and the nurses came in, to really focus on child rearing again, about alternative ways to discipline your child, how to support your kids. It's because of our connection to the system we were able to work very closely.

I think people were afraid that they were going to lose their child because there were lots of stories about the Children's Aid taking their kids and everything else, but we didn't have any of that happen. It helped us to reinforce how best to raise kids in Canadian society.

●(1245)

Ms. Lucia Harrison: I want to add a very quick point. One of the things that I have seen in my 18 years in the settlement sector is this concern is raised as various groups come into the community, but at any given time when we've done a survey with family and children's services or our women's shelters, the percentage of people who are newcomers, people of colour, new to the country, has been about 25%, which is about equal to our population.

I think we need to be careful not to be drawn into it. It is still a problem in our society as a whole.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. John Haddock: Mr. Chair, may I have a couple more?

The Chair: Very quickly.

Mr. John Haddock: In our grants committee with the immigration partnership council, we're receiving some applications from organizations like the Muslim Social Services committee that are identifying these cultural issues and looking to provide some intervention on it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for their presentations. It's very useful and helpful.

My first question is to Mr. Haddock. You mentioned the funding cuts and the funding shortfall that you're experiencing, and I wonder whether or not you can be more specific about the areas where the funding shortfall falls and what needs to be done or the amount of dollars that you're looking for to fill the gaps to ensure that resettlement services are properly provided to this large influx of Syrian refugees at this time.

Mr. John Haddock: I can tell you that on April 1, 2015, our agency, which is primarily a federally funded organization for settlement in the region, received a 10% funding cut. Since then, our intake has increased by 30%. That's without the Syrian refugees. That would be the primary basic settlement services. An area that has been a high need, as was indicated in the previous presentation with the young lady, is our young people. There has been a lack of funding for youth. Most of the settlement services get directed towards the parents and the needs of the adults, which is fine. The settlement needs of the youth, which are somewhat different from the parents, have never received funding, or if they have, it's just been episodic. It hasn't been ongoing funding.

As has been mentioned, I think by Lucia as well, the language assessment and the ESL is critical. It's probably the critical initial component of settlement. Right now, we're having delays because of the volumes. I know back in the Kosovo situation about 15 years ago there were some extra resources for a period of time to help with the influx. I have not seen that yet relative to the Syrian refugees.

Hopefully, that's answered your question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much. That is very helpful.

I wonder, at a later time, if we could receive a submission from you detailing the specifics in terms of actual dollars, and what amount of dollars you think would be necessary in order for the programs to be delivered, and where the shortfalls are or where there are no programs available. I extend that to all of the witnesses.

I will turn to the point around domestic violence. It was an issue that was raised in the last set of witnesses. Again, in terms of providing the necessary supports in education and information to the families, that would be very essential as well. Can you tell us whether or not the current programs you have in place are sufficient for doing the work that's necessary?

What we want to do here is to understand what the needs are, and then advance to the minister and to the government where the gaps are and where we need to do things far better, efficiently, in addressing the problems. As well, where there are funding shortfalls and gaps in program delivery, those holes need to be plugged.

On the question around language training, this is widespread across the country, I think, where there are huge wait-lists, and particularly in the provision of child care as well. I wonder if you can elaborate with respect to that challenge that you might be faced with. I open that up to anybody on the committee.

Mr. Carl Cadogan: Well, I think it's very simple, the federal LINC program, as an example, has attached to it child minding. The other option for us is the provincial government ESL programs, which don't have child minding. If there's a wait-list for LINC, and you're looking at the provincial program as an option, you have to find child care somewhere, and if it's not on site as you're learning the language, then it has to be somewhere else. Right now, there isn't the capacity for that.

As John says, language training is very critical. I think timing is very important and getting into employment is very critical, and language training is key to that.

●(1250)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I ask a quick question with respect to the federally funded LINC program? Have you had a funding cut in that stream?

Mr. John Haddock: We had a cut on April 1, 2015. We did not have a cut on April 1, 2016, but there was no increase as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's consistent across the country, because that's what I've heard. Across the country there was a 10% cut for LINC programs. Thank you.

On housing, it's great that landlords have stepped up, and I understand that is the case for some other locations as well. Do you know if that commitment is made for the 13th month going onwards? Is the reduction in the rent that's being offered just for this first 12 months, or is it for beyond? Because there's a real problem that I'm worried about, the 13th month and beyond.

Mr. Carl Cadogan: We can have Mike speak to that, but my quick comment about it is that even if the rent stays the same, the allowance, the money that the refugee has, lessens, so you have the same impact. If they are now not supported by the federal government any longer and they have to go on Ontario Works, as an example, what they will get will be less than what they had been receiving, and they're going to be faced with an issue.

Mr. Mike Murray: I might just reinforce that. As a municipal government, we are really quite concerned about month 13. Several things may happen. Rents may go up. For some landlords who have done this out of the goodness of their hearts, their approach may change. That may be one thing. The settlement assistance will expire, so if somebody isn't attached to employment, there is a question about what their source of income is going to be. In Ontario that may mean people going on Ontario Works, which may have an impact on municipal government.

There are several things that are potentially problematic as we look ahead to month 13. There is an ongoing question about whether the settlement provision allowance is adequate regardless.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Murray.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Chen, I understand you are splitting your time with Ms. Zahid.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want first to say how heartening it is to learn about the incredible work that's being done by the Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge community, both at the social service agency level and at the government level.

We've heard you talk about the importance of providing information and ensuring that the Syrian refugees have an opportunity to succeed. With respect to the long-term goals, and particularly in month 13 and beyond, I am concerned about specific groups of refugees that might not be able to achieve success. We've seen through the research that government-sponsored refugees versus privately sponsored refugees are more likely to access services. They access settlement services at 87% versus privately sponsored refugees at 69%. Further, we know that particular groups of refugees that are marginalized might find it difficult. For example, Focus for Ethnic Women has reported that women particularly have barriers to accessing health services and employment.

My question is for anyone on the panel. What can you suggest the government do to help your work, especially in providing information and support to reach out to those marginalized communities as well as to privately sponsored refugees who may not have access to the same level of service?

Mr. Carl Cadogan: Lucia might have a comment as well. My quick response to that is that part of what we have done—and Reception House has always given a bit of support to families who

have privately sponsored refugees—because of the large numbers, as Tara said, is that we have tried to involve more families who have privately sponsored refugees in discussions. We've tried to ensure that they are aware of the services in the community. We certainly can do a lot more, but that again is a resource-driven focus, because the staff do it, bodies do it. Meeting with families and bringing them together to provide a bit of orientation to the services in the community takes time. As a small agency, we don't have resources for that, but more can be done.

I think it's a lot better this time than it was in previous times, but there are still gaps.

● (1255)

Mr. John Haddock: I'll answer that one. Part of the 10% cut to our funds on April 1, 2015, the majority of the funds that were reduced, was for information and outreach. We chose to keep the majority of our funding for the actual settlement work itself, so that's been a consequence.

To Carl's point, it would be important particularly in the early stage but also once you get into months 13 and beyond. We're not very well connected with the publicly sponsored refugees in our region, as an example. Somebody needs to have a focus on it and it's an issue, but a lot of us aren't able to just tackle that one head-on.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Haddock.

Ms. Zahid, you have three and a half minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank all of you for joining us today and for all the work you are doing in the Waterloo and Kitchener region.

I will open this question to the panel. I know that younger children are very resilient. They are often able to adapt more quickly to a new situation and a new culture. It can be harder for teenagers to make adjustments. Being the mother of two teenagers, I know that moving to a new high school is a challenge for that age group, let alone for those who are traumatized, who are new to this country, and who are adapting to a new culture, a new school system, and a new language. They face even larger educational and social gaps when compared with the younger kids.

Could you discuss the unique challenges facing teenagers and what we can do to assist in that?

Mr. John Haddock: I'll respond first.

As I think I mentioned in my remarks, 15 years ago the YMCA, with grant support from the United Way, started trying to do some work specifically with newcomer youth, with teens. As you indicated, teenage times are turbulent even in well-established formalized families. At a time of significant change, the needs are only exacerbated. I applaud your recognition of that.

Over the last 15 years, we've received significant support from the community. The YMCA has invested a number of dollars in terms of providing opportunities for our newcomer youth, in each of our three health and fitness centres in our region, to come together weekly, to spend time together, to grow together, to learn together, and to help with their integration into Canadian society and schools.

It's a huge need that's currently unfunded, by and large, except by organizations and individuals who decide to take that need on themselves. Funding is not there.

Mr. Carl Cadogan: I'll echo what John just said.

We have entered into a partnership with another community-based organization to respond to this issue. We have been lucky to secure some funding from Ontario Trillium Foundation. We recognize that teenagers, young people, need a lot of support, and different kinds of support from their parents. We're looking to set something up,

hopefully starting in the next week or two. There was no funding from the federal government, so we looked to other sources of funding to make sure we had some programming for young people.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, Ms. Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Okay. I'll pass.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank all the panellists for appearing before the committee today. On behalf of the committee, thank you for all the tremendous work you're doing to help resettle Syrian refugees.

We will now suspend the meeting. We have an item of business that needs to be dealt with in camera.

Thank you once again.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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