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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon.

Pursuant to Standing Orders 108(2) and 81(4) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 16, 2017, the committee will now commence its studies on the main estimates 2017-18, with votes 1, 5, and 10 under Department of Citizenship and Immigration and vote 1 under Immigration and Refugee Board; the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (C) 2016-17, votes 1c, 5c, 7c, and 10c under Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and vote 1c under the Immigration and Refugee Board; and the updated mandate letter of the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

I will now call vote 1 under the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and introduce our witnesses.

I'd like to first of all welcome to our committee the new minister, the Honourable Ahmed Hussein.

We look forward to working closely with you in the coming year, Minister.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chairman—and this is addressed to the minister—normally in the past we have had separate meetings for the supplementary estimates and the main estimates. That was particularly the former minister's practice, as it was of any minister who I've seen appear.

Quite frankly, I would hope that the minister would be prepared to.... The main estimates don't need to be reported to the House until the end of May. I guess the question, Mr. Chairman, is whether or not the minister would be prepared to appear in May on the main estimates and to have this meeting specifically for the supplementary estimates and the letter.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): On a point of order—

Mr. David Tilson: No, it's my point of order. You have to wait until your turn.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: A point of order doesn't go into questioning a witness—

Mr. David Tilson: Yes. It's my point of order. You can't interrupt my point of order.

Minister...?

The Chair: Just one second, please.

Mr. Tilson, in response to your question as to scheduling, you're quite right. Certain ministers in the past have scheduled separate meetings. As the chair, I do have the discretion to schedule meetings and the agendas for the meetings. Working with the minister's office and their schedules, we found that this was the best opportunity to be able to bring the minister before the committee to address all of the issues that committee members wish to question the minister on.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, on February 22, there were minutes where it was agreed by this committee that “the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship be invited to appear on the ministerial mandate letter as well as on the Supplementary Estimates...and that the appearance take place forthwith”. There was no mention of the main estimates.

Quite frankly, we're combining a whole bunch of things into one meeting. I think it's more appropriate that the minister, if he's prepared to meet—and hopefully he would be—appear in May for the main estimates.

The Chair: Thank you.

As I said, Mr. Tilson, the chair does have the discretion to set the agendas for meetings. I'm sure the minister, depending on availability, will be happy to come before the committee on various issues. Right now, this is how we've scheduled the meeting for today.

• (1535)

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, I would move that the minister be invited to appear on the main estimates in May, in the early part of May.

The Chair: Unfortunately, you cannot move a motion on a point of order, Mr. Tilson.

Mr. David Tilson: The point of order is over. I am now making a motion.

The Chair: It doesn't have—

Mr. David Tilson: You've ruled on the point of order, Mr. Chairman. I accept that, but now I'm making a motion.

The Chair: Mr. Tilson, you'll have to wait until you have the floor, but at this point—

Mr. David Tilson: I have the floor now, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: It was based on your point of order.

Mr. David Tilson: No. You've ruled on the point of order. I now have the floor, so I'm making a motion.

The Chair: Mr. Tilson, I have ruled on this. If you'd like to challenge my ruling, that is your prerogative, but I've ruled on this and we will continue with the meeting.

Mr. David Tilson: Is the ruling that I'm not allowed to make the motion?

The Chair: You do not have the floor at this time. When you do have the floor, it's up to you to proceed as you wish.

At this point in time, I've made my ruling. If you'd like to challenge the ruling, you're free to do so but the meeting will continue.

Mr. David Tilson: It's going to be an interesting day, Mr. Chairman. I'll wait.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tilson.

As I was saying, we have before us the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. We also have, from the department, Richard Wex, associate deputy minister; Daniel Mills, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer; Mr. Robert Orr, assistant deputy minister, operations; Dawn Edlund, associate assistant deputy minister, operations; Paul MacKinnon, assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; and David Manicom, associate assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy.

The floor is now yours, Minister, for your opening statement.

Thank you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, members of the committee. I'm very pleased today to appear before the standing committee for the first time. It's a great honour and privilege to serve as Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and I look forward to working with all committee members on fulfilling this important responsibility entrusted to me.

As someone who has gone through the immigration system, this file has a very personal significance to me. I'm extremely proud of our country's history as a place of freedom and asylum. In the Prime Minister's mandate letter to me, he indicated that our immigration and refugee policy should reflect the "open, accepting, and generous" qualities of Canadians. I want to assure committee members that I take this commitment very seriously.

As I fulfill my duties in welcoming those who want to contribute to our country's success, I promise to also uphold our proud tradition of openness. In doing so, we will remain a compassionate society, and immigration will continue to play a meaningful role in our country's prosperity and future success.

In recognition of immigration's important role in our country's economic growth and future, one of the priorities identified in my mandate letter is to "Ensure the effective implementation of Canada's increased annual immigration levels." In achieving these immigration levels, it is also a priority in my mandate letter to reduce application processing times and improve the department's services to our clients. In doing so, we aim to make application processes less complicated and more timely for all applicants.

The government appreciates the standing committee's work in this regard. I wish to thank the committee members for their study on client service. The government will take into consideration its recommendations as we work to improve our services for our clients.

As the committee members are aware, our immigration plan for 2017 will maintain the historically high levels from the previous year. At a target of 300,000 new permanent residents, this represents the highest number of projected admissions put forth by the Government of Canada in modern times.

Following Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis, another priority identified in my mandate letter is the important work in resettling the Syrian refugee population. To date, since our initial commitment to resettle these refugees in December 2015, Canada has resettled more than 40,000 Syrian refugees.

Our continued focus is on helping these Syrian refugees integrate and succeed in Canada. The government will continue to work with provinces and territories, service providers, community groups, and partners to help these newcomers improve their official language skills, find employment, build a social network, and establish other vital connections in order to participate in all facets of Canadian life.

Indeed, the government wants to ensure that all newcomers—not just refugees—are given the best possible chance to succeed and to become fully participating members of our society. That is why another key priority in my mandate is to work with provinces and territories to renew our focus on delivering high-quality settlement services. We will employ a rigorous approach to our data to accurately measure newcomer outcomes. This will help us to determine whether our settlement services are responding effectively to the needs of newcomers and will enable us to make improvements accordingly.

The government is also committed to advancing the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which include changes to the Citizenship Act and the oath of citizenship. To that end, I will work with my colleague, the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, and expect to bring forward legislation to modify the oath in the coming months.

Mr. Chair, I appreciate this opportunity to outline some of the priorities identified in my department's mandate letter. As I've said, I look forward to working with the committee members as we fulfill these commitments and support our ultimate shared goal, which is to ensure that our immigration system best supports newcomers and Canadians.

In support of our commitments, I am pleased to present to the committee today some of the highlights of my department's supplementary estimates (C) for 2016 and 2017 and the main estimates for 2017-18.

With respect to supplementary estimates (C), the most significant allocation is the \$33.2 million for the Canada-Quebec accord on immigration, which is an increase compared with previous years.

• (1540)

As this committee is aware, under this accord the Government of Quebec maintains responsibility for immigrant settlement and integration services in return for an annual grant. The grant amount is calculated using a year-over-year escalator that has two variables: the total increase in federal expenditures and the number of non-francophone immigrants who settle in Quebec.

Another increase in these estimates is the \$10 million in additional funding for the interim federal health program, which was fully reinstated on April 1, 2016. As you know, the interim federal health program provides limited, temporary health coverage to resettled refugees, asylum seekers, and other groups until they are eligible for provincial or territorial health care plans. One of the primary cost drivers of the program is the number of asylum claimants that enter Canada each year, which is simply not foreseeable.

The department is also seeking \$6.9 million in additional funding to support our increased levels for immigration. This funding will enable us to ramp up our operations here at home and abroad in order to meet the new admissions target of 300,000 immigrants in 2017.

For 2017-18 our department's main estimates amount of \$1.6 billion represents a net decrease of \$3.9 million from the previous year. This decrease is mainly due to the sunsetting of several projects as well as program transfers to other departments. For example, as this committee is well aware, Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis was an exceptional circumstance that required a designated level of funding. This resulted in an \$80.1-million decrease in our annual budget for 2017-18.

Among other decreases for this year is the funding for the electronic travel authorization. As the eTA was successfully implemented in November 2016, this resulted in another \$8.7-million reduction in our annual budget.

With respect to our funding increases for 2017-18, among the largest allocations are the following. We will require \$33.5 million in 2017-18 to resettle 10,000 additional government-supported Syrian refugees. Under the Canada-Quebec accord, the Government of Canada will require \$33.2 million for this fiscal year. We will also require \$18.1 million to support an increase in the immigration levels plan related to the settlement program.

Mr. Chair, since I already spoke to many of these initiatives, I would now like to focus on some of the remaining initiatives in our main estimates. As you know, biometrics are an important tool to verify the identity of individuals. They strengthen Canada's immigration system in the process. Building on the success of the temporary resident biometrics project to expand biometrics screening to all visa-required travellers, this year IRCC will require a \$15.4-million increase in funding.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada is also seeking \$4.4 million in 2017-18 to support the removal of the visa requirement for citizens of Mexico. The government is very pleased that the visa-lifting has already resulted in more Mexican travellers to Canada since we removed the visa on December 1, 2016. Within the first month of the visa-lifting, the number of trips to Canada by

Mexicans almost tripled. The December volumes represent almost double those seen in December 2015.

While this is good for our bilateral relations with Mexico and our country's economy, we also recognize that there is some level of risk involved, as is the case with any visa lift. This is why we continue to monitor migration trends, including the number of asylum claims from Mexico.

The Government of Canada is committed to ensuring the success of our immigration system. We want to make sure our immigration system meets the needs of newcomers and best serves the interests of all Canadians. We must be welcoming to those who wish to help build our country and help us succeed. At the same time, we must ensure the safety, security, and health of all Canadians, that this remains paramount, and that we maintain the integrity of our immigration system. The estimates we are discussing today will help us to meet these goals.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I would now be happy to answer any questions the committee members may have.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here in front of the committee today. I congratulate you on your new role.

I wanted to mention something from your statement. I'll read back what you said. It was to "reduce application processing times" and "improve the department's services to our clients" and make it "less complicated and more timely for all applicants" in their applications.

I would like to focus on the global skills strategy, which is a part of the department's priorities. I'm from the Kitchener-Cambridge-Waterloo area. Many of the high-tech companies, as well as the universities, rely on attracting global talent. Just to give you a few figures about the high-tech sector—these are stats from 2015—1,845 new technology start-ups have formed, raising \$650 million in investment in a region of just over 500,000.

I've sat down with a lot of officials in Communitech and around the high-tech sector. Their main issue is about getting global talent and getting these skills in our region, which is expanding rapidly. Without this talent, we won't be able to further expand and get that talent and knowledge.

Could you elaborate on how the global skills strategy will benefit Canada in terms of access to global talent and what positive outcomes you see as a result?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you. It's a really important question.

As you know, Canadian workers and Canadian companies have some of the best skilled workers in the world already here. In addition to that, for their future growth, development, and innovation, sometimes they need to attract the best and the brightest in the world, in addition to hiring Canadians. Those folks, in addition to their coming here and having jobs with the Canadian companies, in turn create jobs for Canadians.

It's important in the global race for talent for Canada to be well-positioned in that race and to continue to have mechanisms in place to facilitate the attraction and retention of that talent. The global skills strategy is the exact mechanism we need to make it easier for companies that are desperate for that global talent to get that talent to Canada quickly. As part of the global skills strategy, we're setting an ambitious two-week standard for processing visas and work permits for low-risk, high-skilled talent. In addition, the department will develop a dedicated service channel to help meet the foreign talent needs of companies seeking to make a significant investment in Canada.

In addition to that, we also plan to introduce a new work permit exemption for work terms of very short duration: 30 days or less. This will help sectors such as university-based research sectors to attract people on a temporary basis, enable them to get here quickly, assist the university or the company with the work that needs to be done, and then go back to their original country.

• (1550)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: You've touched on my second question. When I sat down with these officials, they said that it's very complicated and not timely to process an application to get this global talent here. What they've mentioned in these round tables is that if they're trying to get a top official in the high-tech sector in Singapore or in eastern Asia, it's taking too long to process their application a lot of times, and they're being grabbed by other areas, whether that's Australia or the U.K.

Can you elaborate a bit more on the two-week standard for processing visas? How will that be achieved and how will that be a benefit?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Before I get into that, I'll talk about the overall strategy behind this initiative. It's to facilitate not just faster processing for global talent but more predictable processing, so that companies know what the application process is like and have more predictability in the process.

The two-week standard is what it is. It is a goal to have that ambitious two-week standard for processing the visas and the work permits for low-risk, high-skilled workers.

I can have Richard comment further on this.

Mr. Richard Wex (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thanks, Minister.

Just by way of introduction I'll say a couple of words, but I think Mr. Manicom can fill out the details.

As the minister said, the global skills strategy is aligned with the government's innovation agenda. A number of elements in the global skills strategy are intended to spur innovation, development, and employment. The exact details are being worked out right now between officials and various stakeholders in terms of which professions and under what circumstances.

The three elements with respect to the two-week standard, the dedicated service to help firms trying to scale up, and the new work permit exemption for short-term stays are the key elements of the global skills strategy. As I mentioned, further details will be crafted over the coming months with key stakeholders.

With that, Mr. Manicom, are there further details you would like to provide?

Mr. David Manicom (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you.

I think the minister and Mr. Wex have covered most of it. We've been in very intensive consultations across the country, including in the Toronto-Waterloo corridor. I was in British Columbia last week at B.C. Tech, at the big fair there.

We are designing a package of proposals that we hope to implement in June. At that time, we do indeed intend that all high-skilled, low-risk work permits will be done within two weeks as one of the key services. The whole objective here is to make sure that when companies need to grow talent or invest in Canada, access to the skills they need is not an obstacle, and that we, therefore, can grow these sectors in Canada, attract investment, and permit the upscaling we need.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I don't have time to get into my last question, but that's exactly what I was... It's great to hear that, because this is something I can send back to my constituents who are looking for this global talent. To have that two-week period will be a positive thing, and it will be very well accepted.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would move that the minister be required to appear in the month of May to answer questions with respect to the main estimates, for the reasons I've given, and I would ask for a recorded vote.

The Chair: Mr. Tilson, we are currently studying the main estimates. We've heard an opening statement and questions. Since your motion deals with something that is currently under way, I'm ruling that it's not in order at this time.

Mr. David Tilson: I would challenge the chair.

•(1555)

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Shall the decision of the chair be sustained?

(Ruling of the chair sustained: yeas 5, nays 4)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Rempel will ask the questions now.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): How many government-assisted refugees have been admitted since November 2015, and of that cohort, how many have found full-time employment?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Before I answer specifically on the numbers—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Actually, I only have six minutes. Are you able to provide the committee with a specific number right now?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I heard your question. If you would let me answer it, I would appreciate it. Thank you.

I will defer to Dawn Edlund to speak about the specific numbers of landed government-assisted refugees, but I will comment on the issue of jobs. From our analysis and our data—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I actually don't have enough time. How many refugees have been admitted since November 2015 and how many have found jobs?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As I said, I heard your question. You don't need to repeat your question. I'm happy to answer it, if you let me.

On the issue of employment, our analysis indicates that the employment figures and the employment pace for government-assisted refugees within the Syrian refugee cohort is precisely the same as for previous waves of refugees. They tend to take a little bit longer than privately sponsored refugees, so—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you. I asked you for specific numbers, how many—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: If I could finish my answer, I would really appreciate that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: No. I would actually like an answer to my question. How many of the Syrian cohort have found a job?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm trying to answer your question. I would really appreciate it if you would give me the time to answer your question.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I would like a specific number, not your answer to this question.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm trying to answer your question.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Well, you're not doing an appropriate job of it.

The Chair: Order.

Committee members, I would ask that we do try to maintain decorum. It makes it very difficult to answer questions with interruptions.

Yes, Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, on that point, I do appreciate that the minister is trying to talk the clock out on this particular issue. I have asked him a very specific question, because we're dealing with supplementary estimates.

My question pertains to numbers, because I want to figure out if the budgetary estimate they've included in here accurately covers the cost of the cohort they're bringing in. Within the supplementary estimates there are another 10,000 refugees they want to admit. There's a budgetary estimate of \$33 million for the same. If the minister cannot tell the committee how many refugees have come in and how many have found jobs, it's difficult for the committee to evaluate whether or not the budgetary estimate is adequate.

I would appreciate—on the point of decorum—the minister answering my question, which is the technical number of how many refugees have come into the country and how many have found employment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for the question.

As I was saying earlier, we have definitely met our target of 25,000 government-assisted refugees, to resettle them in Canada, for the Syrian refugee cohort. In terms of the number of government-assisted refugees who have found employment, it's 10% for government-assisted refugees. It's much higher for privately sponsored refugees. That number is about 53%. That is par for the course, because in previous waves of refugees we've seen the same trends. But over a number of years, the two actually converge and you have the same amounts or—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —rates of employment for both waves of refugees.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

By your numbers, 22,500 Syrian refugees have not yet found full-time employment, and many of those will see their “month 13” funding running out. What is the total anticipated cost of social assistance payments over the next fiscal year related to the 22,500 refugees who have not found full-time employment?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As I said earlier, for government-assisted refugees the percentage of employment tends to be lower than privately sponsored refugees. That is because they tend to be more vulnerable—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, just so I don't get in trouble for decorum again—

The Chair: Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —I asked a very technical question because, again, we're evaluating the supplementary estimates, which deal with budgetary measures. I realize that the minister would like to provide some talking points on why he can't provide this answer, but again, I'd like to be able to evaluate whether the budgetary estimates are adequate.

Mr. Chair, I would encourage...or perhaps I'll ask through you that the minister provide the committee with the technical answer for what I just asked.

• (1600)

The Chair: Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As a point of clarification, the 10,000 refugees that the honourable member refers to are from 2016. We're not admitting an additional 10,000 government-assisted Syrian refugees. I just wanted to clarify that for the record.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I will restate my question, Mr. Chair.

Of the 22,500 refugees that have not found full-time employment, what is the total anticipated cost in terms of social assistance payments that will be required to support the 22,500 who are not employed?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: In terms of the month 13 question, it's common for government-assisted refugees to lose their income support after the first year of support by the federal government. The responsibility after that falls to the provincial government in terms of social—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So there's no answer for that.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm trying to answer the question, Mr. Chair. I would appreciate not being interrupted.

The government-assisted refugees do have access to social services. In addition to that, these are permanent residents of Canada. They have access to other supports—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll proceed to my next question.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: They have other supports—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: My next question relates to the *Canada Gazette*—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: They have other supports, including the Canada child benefit, that they use—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —to help—

The Chair: Order.

Ms. Rempel, please proceed with your next question.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The *Canada Gazette* posted the statement that the net cost to Canadians of lifting the Mexican visa initiative will be \$261.9 million. Why has the government proceeded with lifting the Mexican visa in light of this particular piece of information?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for the question. I will defer to my officials for the answer.

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you, Minister.

The member is correct that the net monetized cost for the lifting of the visa, net of the cost and the benefits, is \$260 million over 10 years. However, those are the quantified costs—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Mr. Richard Wex: —and if I could just complete, there are additional—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With regard to the supplementary—

Mr. Richard Wex: Excuse me—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I only have a minute.

Mr. Richard Wex: There are additional benefits that have not yet been quantified.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With regard to the supplementary estimates, \$13 million has been allocated for the lifting of the Mexican visa requirements. Was this figure included in the \$261.9 million that was quantified in the *Canada Gazette*?

Mr. Richard Wex: In terms of the supplementary estimates and the main estimates, the costs, I believe, were \$4 million and \$1.3 million. Those operational costs are for increased traveller screening, increased processing of eligibility claims for asylum seekers, and interim federal health benefits. To answer the member's question, yes, they were included in the costs.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How long do I have, Chair?

The Chair: You still have 40 seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With regard to that, can the minister please provide an estimate of the cost differential between one government-assisted refugee from the Syrian cohort and one privately sponsored... Actually, no, there's a better question. This year, of the additional cohort coming in as government-sponsored refugees, how many of those will be LGBTQ from Iran, Yazidi refugees, or persecuted ethnic and religious minorities?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You have asked three questions. I don't know which one is more of a priority, so I'll just go down the list.

The Chair: Please proceed, one question at a time.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: In terms of the LGBTQ2 community, we work very closely with the UNHCR, with private sponsors, and with other stakeholders to make sure we identify vulnerable populations to be resettled in Canada. That obviously includes members of the LGBTQ2 community. We continue to do that. We have a policy of vulnerability as a check and, obviously, membership—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With the five seconds I have remaining—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Membership in the LGBTQ2 community—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With the five seconds I have remaining, is it correct, sir—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Membership in the—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —that the government has not set a target for LGBTQ communities [*Inaudible—Editor*].

The Chair: Unfortunately, the time has run out for this round of questions.

We'll proceed to Ms. Kwan, please, for seven minutes.

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

I thank the minister and his staff for being here today and I congratulate the minister on his appointment.

I'll first ask a quick question on cessation claims. I'm sure the minister knows what they are.

Your predecessor, the former minister, Mr. McCallum, agreed at this committee that the government would be bringing in legislation to address that issue. I'm asking a quick question of the minister as to whether or not that commitment is still on the table.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Everything related to asylum, including cessation, is under review, and I'm happy to look at that. All the commitments the previous minister made are still a priority for me, including looking at cessation.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm going to ask a quick question on legacy claims. The chair of the IRB, Mario Dion, said:

The IRB had reallocated available internal funding to reduce the backlog of legacy cases from 32,000 to 6,500 since coming into force of the new refugee... system. In 2016-17, the Board's ability to reallocate funding internally will be severely limited....

He went on to say:

As a result, commitments made by the Board in relation to refugee protection claims that are not subject to statutory time frames, such as the remaining 6,500 legacy claims, will have to be revisited unless additional temporary funding is made available.

I see nothing in the supplementary estimates to support legacy processing claims, and I don't see anything specific, with respect to the main estimates, about dealing with the specific backlog. There's a huge backlog. The minister knows about that as well.

How will this be dealt with, and will there be additional funding so people are not in limbo? Their lives are literally in limbo.

I'd like a quick answer if I may, because I have one other area I want to get into.

• (1605)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Very quickly, the department has been working with the board. As you know, the board is independent, but we've been working very closely with it to address the issues around backlogs and specifically the legacy cases.

It has implemented some efficiencies to make sure it addresses the backlog. However, doing that has somewhat been hindered by the increase in asylum claims this year.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, so my question is this. Are there additional dollars allocated to it? Their problem is, as stated by the chair, that unless additional resources are made available to it, it can't deal with it. That's the reality. It will do efficiencies and do all of this stuff as well as it can, but the reality is that it doesn't have enough resources to process these claims.

Will there be additional resources? A yes or no would be great.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I think the approach should be efficiencies plus extra resources. I don't think this is exclusively a resource issue.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It is doing efficiencies, so my question to you, Minister, is will there be additional dollars?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We're working with it for even more efficiencies. We are always happy to look at its request for more resources.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Will there be additional dollars?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I can't commit to that at this current time. What I can tell you is that any request from the IRB for extra resources will be considered by my department.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. I take it to be no, because so far there haven't been. I will look very carefully at this year's budget, the budget that's going to come down on Wednesday, as to whether or not there will be additional allocations, because if there aren't, those cases are just going to be stuck. People's lives are on hold. The minister, I know, understands that.

I would like to move on to the safe third country agreement. I know the minister falls back on the notion that UNHCR says everything is all cool, but in reality things are not so cool, and the minister knows that as well. The border communities are struggling. The Premier of Manitoba has raised the need for additional resources to deal with this situation. The minister himself acknowledged that there are additional claims coming through, which, therefore, create a further backlog with the legacy claims.

I believe the minister's insistence on refusing to suspend the safe third country agreement is wrong. Will the minister reconsider this given the fact that Harvard has issued a report on this, given that there are some 200 law students who have issued a report on this, and given that Amnesty International has interviewed some 30 individuals who have crossed over, all of whom have said it was not their intention to come to Canada until Trump?

This is having a real impact on Canada, and my question to the minister is whether he will reconsider suspending the safe third country agreement so people will go through the front door instead of the back door, so there can be order with respect to those who are seeking safety.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As you know, your assertion that we should eliminate the safe third country agreement to have order is actually going to do the opposite. If we eliminate that agreement or suspend it, we will have disorder.

That agreement between Canada and the United States allows us to handle asylum claims in an orderly manner.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With all due respect, Minister, if I may, the reality is this. When people go through a border, they can actually do so legally if the safe third country agreement is suspended, but right now they are being forced to go through illegal channels to go to the unsanctioned borders to do this, and they are risking life and limb in order to do this.

If you think that's order, I really have to question what you think, because that troubles me greatly, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: What I am relying on is our review. We review this agreement constantly, and we have an obligation to do that. From our analysis, the U.S. domestic asylum system is fair. It has due process, and therefore the agreement applies.

• (1610)

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, please finish your question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, I know, but that is the minister's opinion. The reality on the ground is something very different, and the people on the ground are telling the minister, and everyone else who cares to listen, that it's very different. They are not trekking through the snow for fun. They are not taking a toddler for fun.

There was a report out there. I don't know if the minister saw it. A young toddler, a two-year-old, said to his mother, "I can't go on anymore. It hurts too much. You go on to Canada on your own." This is not a joke. This is not something you can say is normal. People don't do this unless they feel the urgency and the desperation to do it. That is the reality, so I would urge the minister to reconsider this.

I want to ask a last question on transportation modes.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds left.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The former minister said they would review this for all refugee claims. Nothing has come forward with respect to that. Can you give us a quick update?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You didn't actually let me answer your previous question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I am asking this question.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Were you just making a statement?

The Chair: Minister, there was a question, but unfortunately the time has run out for this round.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I didn't get a chance to answer your question.

The Chair: There will be another round. Perhaps we can follow up on that very specific question.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much, Minister. Thanks to the whole team for being here today.

My first question is about the work for temporary foreign workers. In my riding of Davenport I have a large number of union workers, and many of them are temporary foreign workers. They are mostly in the building trades, and they are very much here working on the heavy infrastructure investment that our government is implementing. Many of them have been here for a few years, and they're looking for pathways to citizenship so that their families can more fully contribute to Canada.

I wonder if the minister can give us a very quick update, or just give us a sense of the timeline for putting a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship into place.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: One thing we have done as a government is get rid of the four-years-in, four-years-out rule, which was very much an irritant to stakeholders and members, folks who had participated in the temporary foreign worker program. That's a key deliverable we made.

We continue to look at this situation with an eye to creating pathways to permanent residency for these people. I don't have a specific timeline on this, but I can assure you that this is something

we are working on. We feel very strongly that we should have pathways to permanent residency for these individuals.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

I'll follow up a bit on the 6,000 or 6,500 legacy cases. In my riding, I have two wonderful refugee houses, Adam House and FCJ, which are huge advocates for legacy refugees. We talked a little about efficiencies, Minister, and I wonder whether you could let us know if there is a commitment to processing these legacy cases during this mandate.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Addressing this legacy backlog is included in the asylum reform. It is a very important matter that is within the line item for asylum reform in my mandate letter.

The IRB is already moving ahead with a lot of reforms and efficiencies within its system to address this particular issue, and backlogs generally. Part of that will be a need for extra resources so that they can process many more cases even faster. That is certainly something we are looking at in order to assist them to do that. We work very closely with them. I meet with the chair of the IRB very frequently to follow up on some of the work they are doing to tackle the backlog in general, and specifically the legacy cases.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

Many people don't know this, but my mom is actually from Mexico, so I consider myself a Mexican Canadian, and I am very proud that we have lifted the Mexican visa.

Mr. Wex responded to an earlier question about the \$261-million cost to government over 10 years to lift the visa. I wonder if I could get Mr. Wex to just finish his answer in terms of the benefits, just because I felt I didn't get a complete answer to that. To me, this is very important because it is a point of pride for me. I am very proud that Canada has done this, and I think it is very beneficial for Canada.

● (1615)

Mr. Richard Wex: What I was proposing to say was that while there are net costs that have been included in the lift, they are offset by some monetized benefits, which are essentially \$172 million over 10 years. That's related primarily to increased tourism, which was easier to forecast than some other non-quantifiable benefits such as increased trade and investment, business-to-business and people-to-people ties, and quite frankly this was a major political irritant between the two countries so there were a number of indirect benefits once that political irritant could be resolved.

When you factor all those things in, they add to the benefits but we were not able to cost those benefits for the purposes of the regulatory impact assessment, which the member previously was referring to when referring to the operational costs associated with the lifting of the visa.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I appreciate that. My next question is about settlement agencies. I have a lot of settlement agencies in my community. I am very anxious that they get the resources they need to be able to do their job, not only to settle refugees and immigrants as quickly as possible but also to help them fully contribute back to Canada as soon as possible.

I worry a little bit. Sometimes I wonder whether they have the resources they need in some areas, or whether they have too much in other areas. I wonder if the minister could update us on where his priority lies around settlement agencies. I know that two-thirds of our budget is actually spent on settlement agencies. I wonder whether there is a bit of a review that's going to be under way and whether we can make sure that they have the support they need to settle our new Canadians.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: On settlement, I can't agree with you more on the importance of settlement services for refugees, newcomers, and everyone who is new to Canada to restart their lives here. It's critical, those services that settlement agencies provide, such as language training, job support programs, and so on. It is why in 2017 we are allocating \$664 million for settlement programs. That is outside of Quebec. That is an increase of \$76 million over the previous year. It shows you that we take settlement services very seriously and that it's a key priority for our government.

In addition to those extra resources, we are always looking to make sure that the delivery of those services has the best impact for newcomers and refugees. The way we do that is to have a very rigorous data collection system. We are implementing an improvement in that area. We also consult widely with settlement agencies and other stakeholders in the settlement business. It's one area in which we also work with provincial and territorial governments to have a better delivery in our system.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister and the entire staff. Congratulations to the minister for this promotion.

Minister, last week we had an off week, and we had this stuff coming in—from the people, not from me—which I will squeeze into five questions. First, as you know, my riding is the most diverse riding in the country, and 60% of the people are of Chinese descent. People are losing sleep over border issues. Is there any way you can assure them that they are safe and that the country is safe? Do you have a plan and how are you going to fix it?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: On general border questions, I usually defer to my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, but what I will say from my perspective and my responsibility is that we have international obligations to people who are seeking asylum. Our obligation is with respect to giving them a fair hearing so that they can make their case. Having said that, we have very rigorous standards for security screening people who cross our borders. They go through health, criminal, and background checks to make sure that anyone who is a threat to Canada is not let into this country.

Having said that, for folks who need protection who claim asylum, we have international obligations that we can't simply walk away from. We have to maintain our tradition of being a compassionate country, and these are people who are in need of protection and they get to make their case in front of the Immigration and Refugee Board.

• (1620)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Minister, the second question comes from one of my constituents. This person has a networking contract in the United States and also has a company that has maintenance contracts and software networking contracts there. He came to see me yesterday and this was his question. He said that when he goes across the border, he has all his clients' information on his phone, and he wants to know what happens when the immigration officer asks for his phone and looks at the details on the phone. In the meantime he's breaking the law, giving private information to the immigration officer. What should he do? If he says no to the immigration officer, he'll be sent back. If he says yes, he's breaking the law.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a very important question. Unfortunately, it falls within the purview of the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, so I wouldn't be able to answer that question.

Mr. Bob Saroya: One of the things in your mandate letter from the Prime Minister is to grow the economy and create jobs, and to bring more families into the middle class. In the meantime, in 2016, the economic and business category was cut by 47%. Do we have a plan this year to bring it back to the 2015 level?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Under our levels plan for this year, we have 300,000 expected landings in 2017. The vast majority of those landings are in the economic class. There are 172,000 in the economic class, so that shows you that we have a particular focus on economic migration within our overall historically high levels.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Minister, I'm looking at this, and according to the Immigration website, it was cut by 47%.

Anyway, I can move on to the next question. This question comes from a senior citizen who needs a caregiver. He is having a rough time finding a caregiver. Do we have a plan to bring the caregiver program back to the 2015 level?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Since 2014, historically high permanent resident admission levels have been in place for caregivers and their families. This is a particular program that has had a lot of applications, and basically there is a backlog in this program. But I want to highlight for you two new streams within the caregiver program that allow for much, much faster processing of those applications. I'll actually bring in my official Robert Orr to speak to that.

The Chair: You have ten seconds, Mr. Orr.

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): As the minister said, there are two new categories—the caring for children and the high medical needs cases—and at the moment those applications are being processed for permanent residence within three months of applying.

The Chair: Thank you. Unfortunately, the time is up.

Mr. Sarai, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Minister, for coming in for your first visit.

We've been discussing something that is kind of common knowledge. It has come up in our meetings as well and I believe it was in our election platform; that is that siblings or those who immigrate to Canada have an easier time integrating and settling if they have siblings here. That has been documented and has been brought up in the testimony of many witnesses. There was discussion that economic class applicants who have siblings or family members in Canada would get extra points in order to qualify. Has that been studied any further? Are there any plans to implement that anytime soon?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: There's no definite plan in place to implement that anytime soon, but we have been looking at that issue and receiving input from affected stakeholders. I can tell you it's something that I was aware of prior to assuming this new role and subsequent to that, but there's no definite timeline for an announcement. It's something that is being looked at carefully.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

The main estimates include an increase of \$18.1 million to reduce application processing times and achieve higher admission levels for permanent residents. Budget 2016 included \$25 million for reducing processing times for family sponsorships. What results were achieved with the money identified in budget 2016?

• (1625)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for the question. I'll let my official answer it.

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you, Minister. I'll turn it over to Mr. Orr in a moment.

The \$25 million from budget 2016 was dedicated to attacking the inventory and reducing the processing time for the family class. At the time when this was announced, the processing times for family class both within Canada and outside of Canada, in terms of sponsoring a spouse or a partner, was 18 months to 26 months respectively. The previous minister announced in December of 2016 that those processing times will come down to one year. For existing applications, they will be completed by December of 2017, and any new applications will be completed within 12 months.

The results achieved from the \$25 million in budget 2016 included two things: a major reduction in the inventory, and significant improvement in processing times associated with spousal applications.

I don't know whether Mr. Orr might like to add anything.

Mr. Robert Orr: Very specifically on that—I think it largely has been covered—since June 13 when the announcement was made about spousal processing times, the inventory of the in-Canada spouses has been reduced by 49.3%, which is a very significant increase. We're well on track to 12-month processing for 80% of cases by the end of the year.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Higher admission levels require increased spending on application processing and settlement services at IRCC, as well as costs for external partners.

How much of the \$18.1-million increase that was identified in the main estimates is to support higher admission levels, and how is this funding going to be allocated?

Mr. Richard Wex: In terms of the \$18 million—I'll have my colleagues correct me if I'm wrong—it was actually part of a three-year investment, starting in 2016, to deal with the 300,000 new admissions target. Specifically, the \$18 million in the main estimates is going to be dedicated to settlement services as a result of the increase in the admission levels. There are additional monies in the main estimates of about \$8 million that allow the department to ramp up to prepare itself operationally to admit the additional numbers in the 2017 levels plans.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: There is an evaluation of the settlement program that has been under way by IRCC. How will the 2016-17 settlement program evaluation inform the delivery of high-quality settlement services?

The Chair: A 30-second answer, please.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It will really help us, because we will be able to better measure outcomes, not just outputs, and see how we can deliver settlement services even better with more efficiency, more impact on newcomers. We think this is the way to go.

We believe that getting settlement services right is critical for people to restart their lives well in Canada.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Minister, in my riding, my office has been trying to assist a prominent and well-established group of constituents since 2012 with their application for a refugee family from Sudan.

Why is the department telling us that there is an average 16-month processing time on refugee applications when we know that 45,000 refugees were processed in mere months?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for the question.

The issue of processing privately sponsored refugees or government-sponsored refugees always takes resources. It takes time. I can tell you that the privately sponsored refugee allocation for 2017 is almost quadruple what has existed in the past. That is to allow us to reduce the backlog that exists within the private sponsorship refugee backlog, but also to allow more Canadians to bring in privately sponsored refugees.

Mr. David Tilson: I understand that, Mr. Minister. The problem is that the reputation the department is getting is that some refugees are simply jumping the queue. You've given an answer to it, and I do understand. I also know you probably don't want to discuss private applications in a public forum such as this. I'm going to have my assistant give you a letter that we wrote to you last month, and hopefully you and your assistants will look at it.

Ms. Rempel has some questions for you.

• (1630)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

In the IRCC departmental plan, it's stated on page 23 that the department plans to "Implement changes to the Citizenship Act following Royal Assent of Bill C-6, including corresponding updates to the Citizenship Regulations."

Can the minister describe what the corresponding updates to the citizenship regulations will be?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: On Bill C-6, we anticipate and are hopeful that the Senate will pass C-6 so that we can move very quickly on removing obstacles to citizenship brought in by Bill C-24. Whatever is in C-6 that would require changes to the regulations is something that we will also move very quickly in the—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Again, Mr. Chair, I'm asking the minister what... There is a very technical statement on page 26 of your department's report. What are those changes and what are the anticipated costs?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I can't speak to the anticipated costs. What I can speak to is that Bill C-6 remains a priority for us because it removes the obstacles to citizenship that were implemented by Bill C-24.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: A point of clarification, Mr. Chair...

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Once Bill C-6 passes, we will be able to look at whatever corresponding changes that we need—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I have a point of clarification for the minister.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm not asking about Bill C-6. Just to clarify for the minister, and perhaps his departmental officials would like to show him this, it says that following the royal assent of Bill C-6 there would be "corresponding updates to the Citizenship Regulations".

Can he please tell the committee what these updates would be?

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, we could follow up afterwards with respect to this question. Normally after there is legislation, there are subsequent pieces of regulation to support the legislation and to fill in the gaps and provide more detail. I'm not particularly aware of this issue. I'd have to read it in context, and the department will be following up with the clerk according —

The Chair: So that's an undertaking by the department?

Mr. Richard Wex: It is an undertaking, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Could the department officials give a cost differential between a privately sponsored refugee who came in through the Syrian refugee initiative versus a government-sponsored refugee as it pertains to social assistance payments and language training services, if there's an actual cost differential between those two streams that has been done?

Mr. Daniel Mills (Assistant Deputy Minister, Chief Financial Officer, Finance, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): The cost for a government-assisted refugee is normally about \$25,000 to \$26,000, which includes the settlement and the resettlement costs. For privately sponsored refugees, it costs about \$13,500.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: There is roughly a \$10,000 or \$12,000 difference here.

Why is the government focusing on government-sponsored refugees as opposed to clearing the backlog of privately sponsored refugees that are in the system right now? My understanding is that there are tens of thousands.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I don't agree with that assertion. We are doing both. We are resettling government-sponsored refugees and we're doing—

The Chair: Time is up on this particular round.

Mr. Anandasangaree, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, I'm very proud to see you in this new role. I want to congratulate you and your family for this great responsibility. I know, of all the immigration ministers, you probably appreciate this role in a unique way. Thank you for your leadership on this, and thanks to your incredible staff in the minister's office as well as your colleagues.

A number of issues are currently brewing. I know one of the major issues that has come to our attention is the issue of legacy cases. I want to see if you can maybe elaborate a bit on what the plan is for the 6,000 or so that are currently pending and if you could offer some options going forward.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I will start the answer and also bring in my officials to give you even more detail on that.

The asylum reform is a key part of my mandate letter. We have to reduce the backlog and work with the IRB to reduce the backlog generally of asylum claims, also specifically on the issue of legacy refugees. These are individuals who have been in limbo for the last number of years through no fault of their own, and they need to have certainty with respect to their cases. I have been working very closely with the chair of the IRB to make sure that we address this. Part of it is efficiencies, faster processing, and internal mechanisms within the IRB. There is definitely a request and a need for resources. We're considering that within the overall framework of the budget.

I would also allow my officials to add some input into this.

● (1635)

Mr. Richard Wex: I don't have much to add beyond what the minister has said—I'll turn it over to Mr. Manicom if he wants to add anything—other than to say that this is a very serious issue, one that I know the minister and the department take seriously. We've discussed this with the Immigration and Refugee Board. Proposals are under consideration, and at this time there's nothing further that we can share with this committee.

That said, Mr. Manicom may want to fill this request.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: If I could probe a little further, do we have any legal options with respect to procedural fairness with delays? Has the department sought any advice on that, and maybe looked at other options the department has exercised in the past to clear backlogs of this nature?

Mr. Richard Wex: Very quickly, with this particular cohort we have looked at a variety of options, again in collaboration with the IRB. As always with tough challenges, there are numerous different types of program and policy responses, and legal approaches as well. We are looking at the full range of options available to us.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. Minister, I just want to bring to your attention the TRC's calls to action. I would like to get a sense of a timeline with respect to amending the citizenship oath.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We moved very quickly on that. My department officials have met with all the major stakeholders within the indigenous community—the representative organization of the Inuit community, the Métis National Council, and the AFN—and they've all indicated agreement with us on our proposed desire to move forward on revising the citizenship guide, but also the oath. I am also meeting those stakeholders to do the same, and have another meeting to make sure that they're all on board and they're in agreement with where we're heading on this. Once this happens, we'll move very quickly to introduce legislation to make that happen.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: With respect to processing times, I know inland spousal sponsorship was quite problematic when we took office. Can you maybe offer some timelines as to how we've improved that efficiency and other improvements since taking over government in October?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I spoke about this earlier, but I'll let Bob Orr talk about it.

Mr. Robert Orr: I think there's been some very real success since the announcement on June 13 of the new spousal process. We did a very fundamental review of the entire process, looking at the kits, the forms, the various aspects of it, the various steps involved. As a result, we are bringing it well within the 12 months. We're well on track for that, and also we brought down the inventory of cases in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr.

Ms. Kwan, you have three minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

CCR made recommendations with respect to legacy claims: to create a regulatory class for legacy claimants; that legacy claimants be landed if they apply and meet minimum requirements, i.e., they have worked for at least six months or have been in some form of education for at least six months in Canada; and that applicants for this class not be required to withdraw their claims. I just want to put this on the table for the government to consider and to move forward on.

Very quickly, on the safe third country agreement, I see that in the supplementary estimates there's \$1.2 million to address irregular migration pressures as a result of the lifting of the visa requirement for Mexican nationals. In addition to that, there's a \$5-million allocation to the IRB, mostly designated for funding to address

irregular migration pressures as a result of the lifting of the visa requirement for Mexican nationals.

On that question, given the Trump situation, and the impacts for us at border communities, why is there no allocation for the irregular migration pressures being put on our communities?

• (1640)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you for the question.

I'll let Mr. Mills answer that.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: Why isn't there a request for additional funding for this? The reason is that Mr. Trump's new order has just been implemented. According to our estimates, the money requested in the supplementary estimates (C) and the funds from the main estimates are enough to meet current needs. We haven't yet assessed the additional amount that will be required.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. Then, as my follow-up question, Mr. Mills, when will you have some estimates? Is your department undertaking that work right now to provide estimates, and will you make them public?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: According to our estimates, the money we're requesting is enough to meet current needs. At the moment, no additional needs are anticipated.

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: Just as a point of clarification in terms of the question, was that with respect to the department or the IRB?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The IRB.

Mr. Richard Wex: Okay.

Mr. Daniel Mills: Sorry, yes, that's—

Mr. Richard Wex: In terms of the IRB, that's not within the department's purview, of course. But to go to the member's question with respect to that, the IRB, as the minister previously said, is already facing a number of pressures and recent events will only give rise to further pressures. As we indicated earlier, this matter is under active consideration by the government. When the government is in a position to share that information in terms of a decision, that will be made—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I take that to mean there's no allocation. That's what it means right now.

Mr. Richard Wex: There is no allocation in the supplementary estimates (C) or in the main estimates with respect to your question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Zahid, you have seven minutes, please.

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

Thanks, Minister, for coming and for appearing before the committee. I will take this opportunity to congratulate you on your new role.

Minister, my first question is with regard to the caregiver program. During the campaign we made a number of commitments with regard to the caregiver community. Some of those commitments are also reflected in your mandate letter. I hear regularly from caregivers about their concerns, which include processing times for permanent residency and especially the time to be reunited with their families.

Could you discuss your plan to fulfill your mandate letter's responsibilities with regard to caregivers and the progress made in clearing the backlog in this category?

Mr. Robert Orr: Perhaps I can respond to some of the points. I'll just give you a few to situate the caregiver program.

The department is currently very much on target to meet its 2017 targets, which will be 18,000 caregivers landed this year. Closing inventory at 2016 was 31,000 persons. That's down from 57,000 at the end of 2014, so that represents a 46% reduction already. The processing times are very high, but that's because we're processing very old cases. Inevitably, as they've been sitting there that long, the processing times are very long. In 2018 we expect to see a major drop in the applications. In fact for those submitted to us from 2015 onwards, the processing time is down to 12 months.

The minister also referred to the new programs that are in place with three-month landing. Eligible applicants in the larger live-in caregiver program inventory can indeed apply under the new program if they qualify, in which case their processing would be quite quick.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Is there any targeted date by which we can clear the backlog you mentioned?

Mr. Robert Orr: We continue to bring it down, with the high levels that are being assigned to this program, and in 2018 we'll see major advances. Particularly we will see the processing times come down, because the oldest legacy cases within that category will have been dealt with.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

My next question is in regard to the supplementary estimates (C). Your department has budgeted \$1.4 million for government advertising programs. Could you outline what programs are being advertised specifically with this funding? Is it foreign or domestic advertising, what are the target audiences, and finally, which advertising mediums are being employed?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a great question.

Some of that money went to help advertise and spread information with respect to the electronic travel authorization. As you know, the eTA has been very successfully implemented by our government. Part of that success is related to our ability to advertise it widely to the visa-free countries in Europe. I personally saw some of the cards and the advertisements at various airports and travel agencies while I was travelling in Europe.

The second advertising piece with respect to the \$1.4 million is related to advertising for settlement services to potential clients so that they can access these services. You would agree with me that it's important for newcomers to access critical services for their success in Canada, and that whatever we can do to facilitate their access to those services we must do. Some of the advertising went to that, but definitely a lot of it also went to the eTA.

●(1645)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thanks for that. I totally agree with you that we need to inform the new immigrants of what services are available. Specifically with regard to the funding we are using for these new immigrants, was the advertising in the newcomer's package they get, or was it, for instance, in community papers or some ethnic newspapers?

Mr. Richard Wex: There are various ways in which this information was disseminated to newcomers. Ms. Edlund is motioning to me, so it sounds as though she has some details, or perhaps Mr. Mills does.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: The advertising campaign was conducted in Canada on social media, in the newspapers and on the radio. These three means of communication were used.

[English]

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I hope we are integrating the ethnic media, because I know that a lot of newcomers who come here rely more on the ethnic media than on the national or local media. Those are the newspapers they use and read, so I hope we use those.

My next question is also in regard to the supplementary estimates. There is funding of \$10 million for the interim federal health program, which provides temporary health insurance primarily to refugees and refugee claimants. Do you have the figures on how many beneficiaries used the interim federal health program in 2016-17 and in the year prior? What is the projected budget for this program for the year 2017-18?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We don't have the total number of individuals who have actually used the program. We can certainly get that number to you. The \$10 million addresses an increase in the number of people who have been using the program. The more asylum seekers you have, the more that program will be used, so as the costs rise, we always have to go and get extra funding to address that gap.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Mr. Wex.

Mr. Richard Wex: I would just reiterate what the minister said. It's a quasi-statutory authority. It starts at about \$50 million, and throughout the year we access additional funds as required. What you see reflected here in supplementary estimates (C) seeks to access an additional \$10 million as a result of the increased volume of refugee asylum seekers.

The Chair: You have twenty seconds.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I'll just make a quick statement rather than asking a question.

There was a backlog of some 6,300 so-called legacy claimants in our asylum system. You have touched on that and some other colleagues have talked about it, but the volume of new asylum cases has been increasing sharply. The people I have talked to have pointed to changes to the system made by the previous government causing these cases to slip through the cracks, so I hope we will actively engage these people and get them a fair hearing.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zahid.

Mr. Tilson, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Minister, can you tell us the status of the visa lift for Bulgaria and Romania?

Mr. Richard Wex: As was announced, the visa lift for Romania and Bulgaria will come into effect on December 1, 2017, but there is a phased lift to Romania and Bulgaria, such that an advanced form of electronic travel authorization will come into effect May 1 for so-called low-risk travellers from Romania and Bulgaria. These are defined as individuals who have had a Canadian visa over the past 10 years or who currently have an American visa. Those so-called low-risk travellers will be able to get an electronic travel authorization as of May 1, and then the full lift will come into effect on December 1, 2017, as previously announced.

•(1650)

Mr. David Tilson: I ask that, obviously, because of the voting by member states that will be going on specifically with regard to CETA. Are the Romanians and Bulgarians happy with what you just said? In other words, will that help with the discussions that Romania and Bulgaria will be having, presumably, regarding voting for provisions of CETA?

Mr. Richard Wex: I can't—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I can answer that.

Mr. David Tilson: I know that has to do with another department, but the visa issue is dependent on Bulgaria and Romania. I know that, because they've told me. If the visa issue isn't resolved, they're not going to vote for CETA.

I'd like to know whether they're happy with that, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The way we have approached this is to have an assessment based on our relationship with both countries and with the European Union broadly. We didn't tie one to the other. We didn't tie the visa lift to CETA, but we have approached this issue as being one that should be looked at through the calculation of the importance of our relationship with both Bulgaria and Romania and with the European Union in general.

Mr. David Tilson: It would be a shame if CETA is affected as a result of that voting, Mr. Minister.

What is the status of the review of the visa policy framework?

Mr. Richard Wex: As the minister indicated in his opening remarks, the Prime Minister in his mandate letter to the minister asked that a review of the visa policy framework be undertaken and that review is now being initiated. It is part of the standard practice to take a look on a regular basis at the approach, the criteria, and the manner in which we go about imposing or lifting visas. That is what we will be undertaking over the course of the rest of this mandate.

Mr. David Tilson: How will it impact the situation with respect to Romania and Bulgaria?

Mr. Richard Wex: At the end of the day, although we'll take a look at the approach going forward with respect to the visa policy framework, decisions that have already been taken have been taken. I cannot see how the review of our approach to considering visa lifts or the imposition of visas would have any impact on decisions that have been taken by the government with respect to the lifting of the visas for Bulgaria or Romania.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, a number of items from the minister's predecessor's mandate letter went unfulfilled, including the establishing of an expert human rights panel on designated countries of origin, reforms related to caregivers with respect to eliminating the \$1,000 labour market impact assessment, and organizing a system of regulated companies to hire caregivers on behalf of families.

Are you able to tell us, Mr. Minister, why these were not achieved?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: First of all, just as a major point of clarification, any item that was in my predecessor's mandate letter remains a priority for me and for my department. I want to clarify that.

On the DCO countries, as we just discussed, that matter is still under review. When it comes to caregivers the lead ministry is ESDC. We, obviously, have a role to play in that file. My department official has just spoken to you about the two new categories under the caregiver program that have resulted in a processing time of three months or less.

We're obviously attacking the backlog from the existing caregiver program. That's my response to your question.

Mr. David Tilson: So you're working on it.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, and all the items in the previous mandate letter continue to be important to us. We haven't abandoned anything.

•(1655)

Mr. David Tilson: With respect to the 2017 levels plan how has the department been coping with the existing backlogs already in the system?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: May I ask if you can be more specific, the backlog in which stream of immigration?

Mr. David Tilson: All streams.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll let my officials be more specific than I can, but I can tell you that there has been a lot of success in some of the streams in not only reducing but sometimes dramatically reducing the processing times in the backlog and the inventory, but for the remaining streams that have backlogs and issues around volume that's also ongoing work.

There has been a lot of success, dramatic reductions, but also we're continuing to attack the existing inventory.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. David Tilson: Welcome to the committee, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you.

Mr. David Tilson: I hope you're enjoying yourself today.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I am now.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tilson.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to follow up on a budget question with respect to the live-in care workers program, those who are actually in the system waiting for years and years and years for their application to be processed.

Your predecessor, Minister, had said that of the \$25 million allocated for processing spousal and fast-tracking spousal applications, none of that money will be allocated for the live-in caregiver program, not one cent of it. Is there any money in the budget here in the supplementaries, because I don't see it and I don't see it in the main estimates as well, that would put special allocation of dollars to deal with the backlog, not the new applications but the backlog, of the people who have been waiting in some cases 10 years to be reunited with their children?

Mr. Robert Orr: Perhaps I can respond to that.

The fact that the levels have gone up to 300,000, and include a significant number for live-in caregivers, with 18,000, being the target for this year, indicates.... Some of that money does indeed come out of this money being discussed today. That allows us to move forward and to reduce the backlog. As I've said, the backlog has come down 46% since the end of 2014, and with the continued high levels, we continue to bring it down.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How much money is being dedicated to reduce the backlog? That's additional money then, if I could have that specific figure.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I can answer that question.

Part of reducing backlogs and providing resources is to create allocations. Those allocations come with a resource commitment from our part. With higher levels there are more expenditures. That tells you that those extra allocations mean we are prepared to put resources behind it.

I can't give you a specific figure, but it is a priority for us and we are tackling the backlog. The new streams are resulting in much faster processing times.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister, with the exception though that for spousal sponsorships there are dedicated amounts of new monies. Your predecessor stated as much as \$25 million. In this stream, I don't see a line item that specifically says that. What you're talking about overall, I get it. Overall that applies to everything, but there is no dedicated amount of money to deal with the backlog.

I urge the minister to talk to the families who are impacted by this. Families are breaking up because they have not reunited with their children and spouses. Why? Because they've come here to take care of our children in Canada. That is the reality. I'll park that there.

I'm going to move on to the safe third country agreement issue. Has the department undertaken a legal analysis with respect to the

safe third country agreement? On March 10 a report was prepared by 845 of Canada's law students from 22 Canadian law schools across the country, involving 3,143 hours of legal research. They released their conclusion, and it stated that the safe third country agreement needed to be suspended.

They go on to say that Canada is in breach of the Canadian charter, and that it violates the fundamental rights of asylum seekers, who in Canada have been refused in accordance with the agreement. This finding happens to match up with the Harvard law school's finding with respect to that. They raise a number of issues, and I will put this on the record. The report echoes Harvard's finding that the U. S. is in violation of the non-refoulement principle in the 1951 refugee convention. The report further states:

The right to non-refoulement also falls under Canada's domestic obligations under section 7 of the Charter which guarantees the right to life, liberty, and security of person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.

They also state this is also recognized by the Supreme Court. The report goes on to say that if an asylum seeker is denied entry based on the safe third country agreement, and if that individual is then "refouled" by the United States, Canada has committed indirect refoulement by refusing entry. The document goes on to raise the de facto U.S. practice of punitive measures for asylum seekers, who are then subject to human rights violations and not given adequate access to legal counsel. This amounts to a violation of the 1951 refugee convention.

As a result of all of this, it therefore is a violation of our own rights in sections 7 and 9 of the Canadian charter. To quote their document again:

By returning asylum seekers coming from the United States to that country, the government of Canada is complicit and responsible for this mistreatment of refugees. Such action is in contravention of the Charter and therefore contrary to Canada's constitutional obligations towards asylum seekers.

Based on the legal arguments that have been advanced by both of these reports, has your department undertaken a legal opinion with respect to this, and if so, will you make that public?

• (1700)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: First of all, our department, under the safe third country agreement, is always and regularly obligated to conduct a review of the United States compliance with that agreement. That work is ongoing. UNHCR has looked at this agreement and says it still applies. The U.S. domestic asylum system remains in place. The executive order that you referred to is currently under immigration—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. I'm just going to interrupt you for one minute. I don't mean to be rude, Minister. I have one minute left.

My question is very specific. Has your department undertaken a legal opinion on the safe third country agreement in light of the Trump situation, and if so, will you make that legal opinion public?

Ms. Dawn Edlund (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): What I can say is that the constitutionality of the safe third country agreement is actually under a litigation challenge at the moment. We have litigation cases before the federal court, so we are working with our lawyers and our legal teams, but that would be covered by litigation privilege and solicitor-client privilege.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You are saved by the courts, so you don't have an answer to the question—

The Chair: You have fifteen seconds, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think it's really important, then, for the minister to undertake this work.

Let me ask the minister these quick questions.

Has the minister read the Harvard report as well as the report from the students?

The Chair: Unfortunately, the time is up.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'm just wondering if we can split our time three ways.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: That's okay?

I'll let Gary go ahead.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

Minister, I just want to be very clear. How many people have come to our border and been turned away because of the safe third country rule?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We can get you that. We don't have the numbers to calculate that but we can certainly get that information to you.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Do we have...?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I do have the numbers of claimants through Manitoba, for example, or the overall inland claims, and so on.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Sure. What are those numbers?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: In Manitoba, for example, we looked at 143 claims made by people who irregularly crossed the border in February 2017. Of those, 65 are from Somalia; 60 are from Djibouti; and five are from Ghana. The remainder are from other countries.

Of the 60, 49 are U.S. visa holders. These are not people who lived in the United States for a long time. They came to the U.S. with the understanding that Canada would be their destination, and 97% of them spent less than two months in the United States. They are mainly males and most have not filed a U.S. asylum claim.

Again, it puts into context the claim made by many that this is a result of the U.S. administration. In fact, there has been a small and steady increase in asylum claims through the border since 2015 and for most of 2016, so this is definitely not specific to the incoming U.S. administration.

• (1705)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Do we have a sense if any of those people were detained prior to their release?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I don't have those numbers. What I can tell you is that they are processed by CBSA. They undergo background, criminal, and other checks, and if they are not a threat to Canadian society, they are released pending their hearing date. If they are considered a threat, then they are detained.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you, Gary, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, continuing with jobs and investment in the high-tech sector—and I know I'm pushing this a lot—I really want to focus on attracting investment. Just to give you a number here, Communtech has hired, in the high-tech sector, 2,782 new employees.

I understand that we are developing a service channel to help attract investment to meet the needs of companies seeking to develop significant job-creating ventures in Canada. Can you just elaborate on that for me?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: David Manicom will take that.

Mr. David Manicom: Sure. We're working closely with the new "invest in Canada" office that's planned at Global Affairs, with provinces and territories, and with sector councils such as Communtech and others, to develop a dedicated cadre of staff whose job it will be to work with companies that are planning to invest in Canada or to upscale their operations in Canada. We will sit down with them at the front end of the process to make sure that they have the staff they need to establish, ramp up, and make their operations in Canada flourish. That's the concept.

We'll work with objective criteria such as the amount of investment, but also with referral partners to make sure that exciting companies that look small now but will become big later can also have the dedicated handling by our staff.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you. I'll be sharing the rest of the time with Randeep.

The Chair: Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you, Chair.

In line with that question, this government has already made it a priority to track down the workers who come to Canada. We talked about it in the global strategy.

The riding I represent is home to Surrey's Innovation Boulevard. In the last 90 days, over 22 companies, like Surrey's Safe Software company, have joined Surrey's new high-tech sector.

I want to know how we are making it easier to track potential H-1B visa holders from the U.S., and if there's a particular stream that makes it easy to track them if they already have a U.S. H-1B visa.

Mr. David Manicom: We don't yet have a specific channel based on those who are currently in the United States.

However, certainly the global situation, whether it's the current context in the United States, Brexit discussions in Europe, or a broad desire of professionals in countries around the world to look for a good place for them and their families to live, our focus is on rapid and predictable processing, a dedicated office to help companies navigate our processes, and a package of work permit exemptions for those who are coming for very short periods of time, which are often the crucial seed visits that will drive investment.

There's a package of services, as well as changes to our permanent resident programming through express entry, to make sure that those who are adding to innovation and growth in Canada and wish to stay permanently have a fast pathway to do so.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Do you have a mechanism for those who are work permit exempt to get short extensions? As with all of us members of Parliament here, immigration is a big concert of our work.

With regard to those who are coming in for 30 days, if they need another 15 days or 30 days, an expedited process to alleviate a lot of bureaucratic red tape, can they extend, not for years but for short terms?

• (1710)

The Chair: Twenty seconds, please.

Mr. David Manicom: The dedicated service channels right now apply to initial entry.

My colleague Mr. Orr and his team work to ensure that we do the work permit extensions quickly, not through what we would call bureaucratic red tape but to make sure our rules are followed and that those who genuinely have an extension to their contract can stay.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes, please.

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

Thank you again, Minister. Coming from the community, you and I worked with the community long before we became MPs. These are the habits we have developed over the years.

Regarding the client services, as you know, much of our money gets spent on the immigration files on a daily basis. If you talk to one client or to 50 clients, the answer is basically the same. They will probably tell you that the process is taking too long, unsatisfactory answers, dropping of phone calls, and the list goes on. What can you tell them, Minister? What have you done to improve this, and is there something coming soon?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you. That's a really great question.

Client service is not just about faster processing and reducing backlogs or eliminating them. It's also about how we interact with people. It's about how the immigration system deals with the client in terms of how they feel after going through a phone call, or how they find the complexity of the forms, the website, and so on. All those things are on the table with respect to client service, so it's not just the question of processing times and backlogs.

Client service is our focus and we meet frequently about this. I get weekly updates on the progress we're making with respect to client service.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Minister, we have talked about the crooked consultants. We heard the horrible stories. I personally want you to watch one of the videos that I'm going to give you on how people get ripped off. They are talking about committing suicide and so on.

I think many of us believe that if the application were made easier to fill out, people could do it themselves. Because the application is a bit harder, they end up going to the crooked consultant and this is

where they get ripped off. Is there any way we can shorten it? Can something be done?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Doing something with respect to lessening the complexity and making it easier to use forms, the website, the phone, and the 1-800 number is absolutely part of our focus, making sure that, not only is it easier to use the various aspects of the immigration system, but also having the client, once they interact with the system, feel much better than they did coming in. That means putting them first, putting the client central to everything we do.

Does that mean faster processing times? Absolutely. Does that mean reducing wait times? It also includes the fact that some people don't mind waiting a little bit longer if they know what the status of their file is. Therefore, that may also include communicating more regularly with the client and letting them know the progress of their file.

Mr. Bob Saroya: From time to time—we hear this on a regular basis—people who fill out their own applications make a mistake. They're trying to save \$1,000 or whatever the cost is.

We asked this question many times in the last committees. If there is a smaller issue, for example, data is filled out wrong, filled out in the wrong spot, or minor variances, why can't we call or email the client to tell them to fix it?

Mr. Robert Orr: We're making real efforts so that we're not rejecting applications for minor issues of that nature. We're also getting better at communicating with our clients, be it by email, by phone, or face-to-face interviews, indeed.

We're also using technology more effectively. For many applications that are not electronically lodged, we now have a mechanism where people can register, and then they can submit supplementary material very rapidly. This is making the turnaround for applications much faster. It's growing, but we're seeing very positive results from that.

• (1715)

Mr. Bob Saroya: I have one last question, and maybe you can give a shorter answer.

According to the news, most of the people crossing the Canadian border get their visas from Saudi Arabia. They come to the U.S. and then come across. In other words, they're breaking the queue or breaking the line. Is there any truth to that or anything we can do about it?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: There is data, especially from the Lacolle crossing on the Quebec side, that suggests a substantial number of the people coming through Lacolle do possess valid U.S. visas. That is definitely a concern for us and it shows us that there needs to be more conversations had with our American counterparts to address that particular issue.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you have five minutes.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you so much for your perseverance today and your patience.

I have a couple of questions. One of the key things that always puzzles me in my riding is when I have people coming and saying to me that, when they're applying for permanent residency, they sometimes fail because the language level is too high. I think it's at a grade 5 level, and in the past it's been at a grade 3 level. I've thought about this, and I thought that we want to keep it at a decent level because understanding and knowing how to speak the language, either French or English, is a key measure of success in this country.

It has made me think a little bit about settlement agencies and their basic capacity to help us settle our new Canadians or permanent residents. My question to you is an extension of what I started with before. How are we ensuring that the settlement agencies are now delivering the programs that are needed to settle either refugees or to settle our new immigrants? Do we have a way of evaluating success?

Do we have a special evaluation of ESL classes? The people in my riding are hard workers. They're working if they're temporary foreign workers. They want to become permanent residents, but some of them are just not able to pass that test because they're working, and I'm not quite sure whether those services are available to them. I wonder if you might have an answer to that for me.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Just as a point of clarification, as far as I'm concerned, I'm not aware of the tests being at the grade 3 level. I think that's too low. I'm not—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: When I say grade 3, there might be a different evaluation, so it might be a level 5 versus level 3. I might be saying it incorrectly.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Right.

There are a number of things. Language training is critical to integration but also for access to jobs for newcomers, whether they be refugees or immigrants. We have actually invested a substantial number of resources to make sure there are enough language training spaces for people who need them. We will continue to do so. Since April 2016, we've created 7,000 new spaces for language training. We have an evaluation coming up in the spring on the effectiveness and the availability of these language training facilities. I agree with you that language training is key to integration.

Dawn can also add some remarks on that.

Ms. Dawn Edlund: I would just add that for the situation of a temporary foreign worker, we're not able to offer them our funded language training because it's not part of our terms and conditions, the criteria under which we run our programming. However, some provinces and territories do provide their own language training, which would help. It's complementary to our language training, but it's done under their own funding. Sometimes it's done by the province or territory itself. I know that Ontario, for example, has some funding that goes to temporary foreign workers. Some municipalities do and sometimes voluntary church groups do, but the TFWs themselves can't get our language training under our programming.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you. That actually might be where the issue is.

Minister, this is about one of the questions that one of my colleagues across the way asked earlier, but I wonder if you might elaborate a little on it, just because if the public were to hear this,

they might not have the whole story. There was a question around what percentage or how many of the Syrian refugees have found jobs.

You mentioned that around 10% of the GARs have found jobs and about 53% of the privately sponsored refugees have found jobs. You said that this is pretty much in line with what's normal in terms of immigration waves. I wonder if you could elaborate a bit on that, just because I think that would give comfort to the public and comfort to us that this is just part of the process. Maybe you can elaborate a bit more on that.

● (1720)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes. Previous data suggests that, in comparison, where Syrian refugees are now in terms of their journey of integration is exactly where other refugees were in the same time period in terms of their presence in Canada. If you look at previous waves of refugees, you see that privately sponsored refugees always tend to do better faster than government-assisted refugees, but the data also suggest that at the 10-year mark the two converge and then usually become the same in terms of their access. It's nothing unusual to find those numbers.

It goes back to the point about settlement services being key to allowing these new refugees and other newcomers to restart their lives in Canada and succeed.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, please, you have five minutes.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you.

One of the most popular questions that members of Parliament get is on the topic of status updates. They're having trouble getting status updates. Our recent study on client service modernization revealed some serious shortcomings exhibited by the department in terms of communicating with its client base. Most of the complaints that the committee heard were about how hard it is to obtain status updates, and of course, when they don't get them, the constituents contact us, the members of Parliament, to get answers for them.

Can you, Minister, give us some concrete actions that you and the department are taking in trying to improve this situation?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Very quickly, I'll start by saying that my ministerial office staff and I are very quick and responsive to members of Parliament when they are approached. I understand that not all requests that come to members of Parliament are based on a lack of communication from my department. It's mainly to do with constituents seeking MPs to seek intervention from the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

On what we've done and what we intend to do in terms of processing times and communication, I'll leave that to Mr. Orr.

Mr. David Tilson: I'm just telling you, Mr. Minister, that in my office—other members can speak for themselves—that's not true. Constituents, at least in Dufferin—Caledon, simply are not getting status updates. I appreciate what you're trying to say, but I'm throwing it back to you as to what we get when people come into our office or are on the telephone.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, perhaps I could point to three things.

First of all, faster processing times will hopefully lead to fewer needs for status updates. The second point is that we're putting more information online so that clients are able to go online and get a better status of what's going on. That's still very much a work in progress, but that's improving quite significantly and there's a lot of effort going into that. The third thing I would say is that there's been a major reworking at the call centre so that we're able to respond and provide better information to clients when they do contact us, and, frankly, just the tone is more welcoming and helpful to our clients.

Mr. David Tilson: I'll ask a question with respect to the Syrian refugee issue. This was covered to some degree by previous questions and comments that you made. It has been reported that the costs for the Syrian refugee initiative are soaring significantly beyond the funding allocated for last year. We are well past month 13 for the bulk of the arrivals. I know you're talking about privately sponsored versus government-sponsored, and I appreciate that, but the provinces are under significant strain in terms of providing the services they are mandated to provide. It is even difficult for the municipalities and their settlement agencies. Housing is stretched to the limit. Many of the arrivals have yet to find employment or enrol in language training.

I'd like you to comment on this. It's fine to say, “Well, it's the problem of the provinces and the municipalities now”, but they don't like that very well. For political or humanitarian reasons, the government brought over 45,000 Syrian refugees, and now there is a problem.

● (1725)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I want to communicate to the honourable member that I disagree with the premise of the question. The Syrian refugees who were resettled in Canada are progressing on their journey of integration in the same way other refugees have done. There are always growing pains with respect to starting a new life in

Canada, especially when you don't have proficiency in one of the official languages, but we, on the federal side, are very dedicated to ensuring that people succeed in Canada—all newcomers, including refugees—and that is why we have spent a record amount of money on settlement.

We are spending a record amount of money on settlement for 2017—\$664 million outside Quebec, which is \$76 million more, with 7,000 new language spaces. When it comes to the provinces, we are not abandoning the provinces. We do provide funding, under the Canada social transfer, in the billions of dollars for those costs. Those are based on populations, including asylum seekers. We have also provided \$504 million for housing, which includes shelters.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we conclude our round of questioning.

We will move to votes 1, 5, and 10 under Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and vote 1 under the Immigration and Refugee Board.

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$545,294,901

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$23,756,038

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$1,170,171,545

(Votes 1, 5, and 10 agreed to)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$113,251,545

(Vote 1 agreed to)

The Chair: Shall I report the main estimates 2017-18 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to thank the minister and the department staff for appearing before our committee today. I know I speak on behalf of not just Mr. Tilson but everyone when I say that we look forward to seeing the minister before the committee in the not-too-distant future.

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

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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