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Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 44 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Today, we will continue our study of the conditions faced by asylum seekers.

I confirm that all witnesses have conducted the required technical tests in preparation for this meeting.

Before we get to the witnesses for today, I would like to confirm that the minister of citizenship and immigration is prepared to appear on Tuesday, November 29, on the supplementary estimates (B) and Canada's immigration levels plan, 2023-25. The Tuesday meeting will be with the minister. I wanted to confirm that with everyone.

On December 2, we will have our final panel on conditions faced by asylum seekers, and then a subcommittee meeting to discuss future business, as requested by members at the last meeting.

On December 6, we are planning to begin our study on the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan.

On Friday, December 9, we will provide drafting instructions for our report on the conditions faced by asylum seekers.

Yes, Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Madam Chair, I want to circle back to the minister's appearance next week.

We asked him to come to talk about the supplementary (B)s. We intend to ask him to come and talk about the immigration plan again. Those will be two separate things.

That was not what we wanted for.... We just want the supplementary (B)s on Tuesday.

Thank you.

The Chair: This is the information I received. He is willing to appear and he's prepared to talk on both the supplementary estimates and Canada's immigration levels plan. That's the information we received from his office.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You can circle back with him and let him know that we'll be calling him again for the plan as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to reiterate that point. The committee passed two motions. One was to invite the minister to come for the supplementary estimates and the other was to invite the minister separately for the levels plan. There are two separate invitations.

I appreciate that he can come and talk to things of all manner, which I'm sure committee members will appreciate. However, that said, there are two separate invites. We should make sure that he understands that and that the clerk extends an additional invite for the levels plan.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll have Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and then Ms. Lalonde.

I'm sorry. I can't see everyone. I'm relying on the information I'm getting from the clerk.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair, but Ms. Kwan just raised the point I was going to make so I don't need to comment.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Lalonde, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the comments from my colleagues, but don't think it's up to us to decide precisely what subjects will be addressed by the minister. The decision is his. I'm somewhat surprised by what my colleagues said.

I was proud to see that the minister wanted to make himself available to command see us. We don't know exactly what his future schedule looks like, but I took a great deal of pride in learning that the minister was committed to coming here to talk to us about matters of interest to all of us, including the immigration plan. I think that's very generous of him. I just wanted to make sure people understood that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, the floor is yours.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, I can understand the Liberals taking pride in having one of their ministers appear before the committee, but saying that this is generous is going rather too far. After all, he's not the Pope. The minister is paid to come and see us, particularly as the committee has adopted two motions to that effect. He simply needs to do what the committee, whose decisions take precedence, is asking of him. That's all.

But then it's all right for my colleague to be proud.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I will address this and get back to you as I get more information.

With that, I want to inform you that we will have a few minutes at the end to go through committee business about the issue put for Friday, last Tuesday.

We can now go to our witnesses.

I would like to welcome all witnesses appearing before the committee. Today, we are joined by the Immigration and Refugee Board, represented by Richard Wex, chairperson and chief executive officer; Roula Eatrides, deputy chairperson, refugee protection division; and Gary Dukeshire, senior counsel.

We are also joined by the Canada Border Services Agency, represented by Aaron McCrorie, vice-president, intelligence and enforcement; and Carl Desmarais, director general, enforcement.

We also have witnesses from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, represented by Michael Duheme, deputy commissioner; and Superintendent Martin Roach, acting criminal operations officer, C division.

Welcome to all of the witnesses. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

We will begin with the Immigration and Refugee Board.

Please begin.

Mr. Richard Wex (Chairperson and Chief Executive Officer, Immigration and Refugee Board): Thank you, Madam Chair.

As you mentioned, I'm joined today by Ms. Roula Eatrides, deputy chairperson of the refugee protection division, and Mr. Gary Dukeshire, our senior counsel.

I know the committee is particularly interested in IRB's refugee claims inventory, wait times and projections, so I'll get right to the point and dispense with the usual introduction about our role and mandate in the context of the asylum system. I assume you are well briefed on that.

[Translation]

When I testified before the committee for the first time as the new chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in 2018, the operating environment was very challenging.

[English]

A surge in refugee claims, both regular and irregular, has far outstripped the IRB's annual processing capacity, leading to the largest backlog and longest wait times in the board's 30-year history.

At the time, we assessed that, without interventions, the backlog would reach well over 200,000 claims by 2022-23, with wait times in excess of six years for a first-level refugee determination. The system, in our view, at that time, was on the brink of collapse. As a result, in 2018-19, the IRB responded by developing an ambitious growth and transformation agenda.

• (1310)

[Translation]

As we are now in the fourth year of implementing our plan, I'd like to tell you about some key outcomes, along with a brief summary of future challenges.

I'll begin by talking about growth.

[English]

Since 2018-19, the board has received significant temporary investments by way of successive federal budgets, which allowed us to effectively double our decision-making output and better align IRB's annual processing capacity with the refugee claim intake.

This was a massive scaling-up in a relatively short amount of time for our organization. This growth, coupled with internal efficiencies and pandemic-related border restrictions, led to improved access to justice for existing claimants in our inventory, as measured by the number of claims adjudicated and a reduction in wait times.

Most recently, budget 2022 announced that the funds previously provided in recent budgets to the IRB, on a temporary basis, will be made permanent, and that the IRB will also receive additional funds over two years to process additional claims.

[Translation]

Subject to the approval of Parliament, these funds will allow our organization not only to stabilize at the current levels, but also to continue to build capacity that can handle the increasing number of asylum claims being received.

[English]

As part of our transformation agenda, we've implemented a range of measures to improve both the efficiency and quality of our decision-making.

[Translation]

One part of the program that I would like to point out is our hearings operating model. The board took advantage of the opportunities created by the pandemic to become a digital organization.

[English]

In 2020-21, during the height of the pandemic, the board moved to a paperless and virtual hearings operating model. All files have since been digitized. Adjudicators now work almost entirely with digital files. An electronic portal has been built and well adopted by the counsel community. Over 98% of our hearings are now held virtually.

Moving to a virtual hearings operating posture allowed the board to protect the health of both our employees and those appearing before the board, while maintaining access to justice during the toughest days of the pandemic. It was key to keeping our inventories and wait times in check. In fact, according to the latest UNHCR global trends report, Canada was one of only four countries, over the previous year, that was able to significantly reduce its inventory of asylum cases at the refugee determination stage during the pandemic.

[Translation]

Thanks to new investments and the new measures implemented under our plan, the refugee protection division and the refugee appeal division handled more asylum claims and calls last year than ever before.

[English]

In 2018-19, when I first appeared at this committee in this capacity, in this very room, wait times were at two years and were growing at a pace not previously seen. Today wait times for new claimants are at 16 months, down 25% from where they were in 2018-19 and down almost 30% from their peak in the spring of 2020. At the end of Q1 of this fiscal year, wait times at the IRB were at their lowest since 2016-17, prior to the unprecedented influx of claimants.

Given the operating context over the last few years, by any measure these are solid results.

Despite these positive developments at the IRB, I do need to be very clear: The tide has now clearly turned. The IRB and certainly the asylum system as a whole are once again under real strain. As you've heard, the pending eligibility inventory at IRCC and CBSA is growing quickly. Their intake this year is projected to be some 90,000-plus claims, well beyond the system's and IRB's annual processing capacity of up to 50,000. Referrals to the board are now outpacing our annual processing capacity, leading once again to growing inventories and wait times, reversing hard-won gains.

[Translation]

We therefore need to redouble our efforts to improve system efficiency and move forward with funding strategies that can deal with these realities, improve access to justice and better support the Canadian refugee determination system.

Thank you.

[English]

Roula will answer all of your questions.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up.

Next is the Canada Border Services Agency.

You have five minutes. Please begin.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie (Vice-President, Intelligence and Enforcement, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon. I am Aaron McCrorie, the vice-president of intelligence and enforcement at the Canada Border Services Agency, or CBSA. I am joined today by my colleague Carl Desmarais, the director general of enforcement at CBSA.

● (1315)

[Translation]

I'd like to speak briefly about the role of the CBSA in processing asylum claims, particularly when they are irregular entries, most of which are at Roxham Road.

Maintaining border security and integrity is a role shared by the CBSA and the RCMP.

[English]

The CBSA is responsible for enforcing legislation at designated ports of entry. The RCMP is responsible for enforcing the law between ports of entry.

When a refugee claimant enters Canada to make an asylum claim, the CBSA's role is to determine that person's admissibility into Canada and the eligibility of their claim under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, or IRPA.

To date in 2022, the CBSA has received over 2,400 regular refugee claims, mostly from claimants arriving by air. In comparison, this year the CBSA has received over 32,000 irregular arrivals. Of those, more than 97% are in the province of Quebec. Most irregular arrivals are crossing the Canada-U.S. border at Roxham Road. It is not an official border crossing.

Under the safe third country agreement, people seeking refugee protection must make a claim in the first country they arrive in—in this case, either Canada or the U.S.—unless they qualify for an exception. This agreement applies to those making refugee claims at designated ports of entry, but does not apply to asylum seekers entering Canada outside of official border crossings.

[Translation]

That means that unless their ineligibility was previously established, the CBSA cannot deny entry to asylum seekers arriving from the United States at Roxham Road.

[English]

When the RCMP intercepts a person entering between official ports of entry, the person is brought to the nearest port of entry to make a refugee claim. In this case, the nearest port of entry to Roxham Road is Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle.

Before refugee claimants can leave the port of entry, they first undergo robust health and security screening. This includes biographic and biometric checks, as well as the initiation of security and criminality checks.

[Translation]

The CBSA is committed to processing all asylum claims in a timely manner, but the process can take a while. The time required depends on a number of factors, such as the amount of detailed information supplied by the claimant, the availability of additional information, and whether or not further research is required.

Security screening is an important aspect in assessing eligibility to enter Canada. The process ensures that anyone who wants to enter Canada has not committed any serious offences and does not constitute a security risk to Canada or Canadians.

[English]

Several factors are used to determine an individual's admissibility, such as participation in criminal activities, human rights violations and organized crime activities.

Besides admissibility, CBSA officers must decide if a claim is eligible to be referred to the IRB for a hearing. Factors that determine a claimant's eligibility include whether the claimant has committed a serious crime, made a previous claim in Canada or if the claimant received protection previously in another country.

To ensure that refugee claimants from Roxham Road have a safe, comfortable, and appropriate waiting space while their claim is processed, the CBSA invested in short-term accommodations. We ensure that claimants have access to beds, showers, meals, and medical care, if required, while they are being processed. These are at the regional processing centre near the Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle point of entry. In light of the unprecedented demands in this area, this is the only CBSA office in Canada that uses temporary structures to accommodate refugee claimants.

The CBSA encourages refugee claimants to enter Canada at designated points of entry. This is to ensure their personal safety, as well as respect for the law. However, the number of irregular arrivals continues to increase. As I have already noted, since January 1, the CBSA processed over 32,000 irregular arrivals in Quebec, mostly at the Roxham Road crossing. We are working very hard to address this surge in volumes, including the reallocation of resources from other regions to support our colleagues in Quebec, sharing the workload with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and creating a digital portal.

In addition, to help speed up processing times, the CBSA began a new process for low risk claimants on November 1. This process allows applicants to be admitted to Canada under conditions during which time they can access social benefits and a work permit. Ap-

plicants are then guided to the Canadian refugee protection portal to complete their refugee claim within 45 days.

• (1320)

[Translation]

Whether or not asylum seekers choose to present their claim at an official point of entry, CBSA is committed to treating all those who seek protection in Canada with care and compassion.

[English]

We look forward to answering your questions and working with you to improve our refugee processing centre.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McCrorie.

We will now proceed to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Deputy Commissioner Michael Duheme (Deputy Commissioner, Federal Policing, Royal Canadian Mounted Police): Madam Chair, committee members, good afternoon. My name is Mike Duheme. I'm the deputy commissioner for federal policing in the RCMP.

I'm accompanied by Martin Roach who oversees and manages the situation at Roxham Road. Today, we will speak about the RCMP's law enforcement activities at the border.

Canada, like other western countries, is faced with the task of managing increasing irregular migration flows, which involves addressing humanitarian needs while also ensuring that those who could pose a public safety or security threat are not admitted into Canada.

[Translation]

No one is likely to question the fact that the illicit movement of people between points of entry, including the illegal entry of asylum seekers at the border, is an ongoing problem. However, it must not be forgotten that at the heart of this matter we find vulnerable people, including refugees and asylum seekers who have often undertaken a long and perilous voyage to get to Canada. These people are easy prey for human traffickers, operated by transnational organized crime groups known for their acts of violence and other criminal activities.

That's why the RCMP makes every effort to strike a balance between performing its mandate, which is to keep Canada secure, and its responsibility for ensuring that people like these who have been apprehended are treated with compassion and respect, and have access to recourse under the act.

[English]

I would like to take a few minutes to provide some context on the RCMP's approach to enforcing the law at the border to clarify how and when the RCMP's interactions with individuals take place.

With respect to Canadian law, anyone found crossing the Canadian border without reporting at an official port of entry may be arrested by the RCMP. That said, when individuals are intercepted by the RCMP entering illegally between the ports of entry, they are arrested under subsection 11(1) of the Customs Act, but their intentions are not immediately known. As such, a preliminary risk assessment is conducted to determine if there is any threat posed to Canada or Canadians. Background checks are undertaken to see if there has been any prior involvement in illegal activities, including, for example, drug trafficking, connections to organized crime or links to terrorism.

Each situation is assessed individually before a determination is made on how to proceed, that is, whether an individual should remain in RCMP custody pending further investigation, be referred to another police service jurisdiction, or be transferred to the CBSA for the asylum claim to be assessed. It is the totality of the information obtained by the RCMP through a preliminary risk assessment that a search of personal documents is utilized and reviewed to make an assessment of the risk individuals may pose.

It is important to note that the RCMP does not charge those intercepted who are attempting to enter Canada to make an asylum claim, as this would be in contravention of the Immigration Refugee Protection Act, which states that individuals may not be charged with certain offences related to their illegal entry while their refugee claim is being processed.

[Translation]

As for Roxham Road, the RCMP, in compliance with its border integrity role, deploys teams in those areas where the highest levels of activity occur in order to apprehend asylum-seekers, more and more of whom are crossing between the official points of entry.

At the moment, the largest number of illegal migrants is in Quebec, at Roxham Road. From 2017 to 2021, approximately 95% of RCMP interceptions were at this location. As is the case at other locations, each person apprehended by the RCMP at Roxham Road undergoes a thorough background check before the RCMP decides what action to take.

[English]

While the screening process is necessary to effectively discharge the RCMP's mandate to protect the integrity of our borders, our members ensure that these processes are undertaken with humanity and compassion, respecting the rights of irregular migrants and their human dignity.

In order to ensure that balance is met, Canada's approach has been, and continues to be, examined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Canada.

In the spirit of transparency, the RCMP in Quebec has facilitated several visits and offered briefings to UNHCR. We are proud of the fact that the RCMP resources on the ground are doing the job that

they are mandated to do, and they are doing it in a professional and exemplary fashion.

[Translation]

Nevertheless, the RCMP's main interest is the ongoing improvement of its efforts to enforce the act at the border. A coordinated border management approach is essential to long-term success, and it would enable the RCMP to achieve its multiple operational objectives, including measures to combat cross-border drug and weapons trafficking, in addition to trafficking in persons and human smuggling.

• (1325)

[English]

We look forward to working with our international partners and our national partners, such as the CBSA and the IRCC, to continue implementing this approach while prioritizing the safety of Canada and Canadians, ensuring the compassionate treatment of irregular migrants.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak about these important issues.

I'm now happy to take any questions.

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to our round of questioning, beginning with Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Redekopp, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. You can begin, please.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today. Thanks for all of the important work you're doing with migrants and newcomers to our country. It's great work that you do.

I want to start with the RCMP.

As you know, Quebec has its own police force, so the RCMP is focused on drug awareness, organized crime, national security, those types of things and, of course, border law enforcement.

If you don't know the answers to my questions as follow, please submit them in writing within a fairly short time. We have a report to do, so maybe seven days would be helpful.

Can you please tell the committee how many members make up the C Division of the RCMP?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: There are about 700 to 800 altogether in the division.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: How many members are currently assigned to border enforcement in total?

Superintendent Martin Roach (Acting Criminal Operations Officer, C Division, Royal Canadian Mounted Police): At present, there are, give or take, depending on pressure, probably about 120 or so.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Of those 120, how many are at Roxham Road?

Supt Martin Roach: The vast majority of the 120 would be concentrated at Roxham Road. They patrol the border. There are other pressures along the border, but they—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Would it be ninety percent?

Supt Martin Roach: Yes, let's say 90%.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: What do the officers actually do at the border crossing at Roxham Road?

Supt Martin Roach: At Roxham Road, our mandate for the RCMP is to ensure there is no national security risk, that there are no links to organized crime, transnational criminality.

We do have individuals who will cross the border who may present a risk to the country or may attempt to commit a crime, so the officers will be arresting the individuals under the Customs Act. They will be conducting the initial background checks and interviews of the individuals to make sure there is no risk to the country, no national security risk.

If there are no elements of criminality, then the individuals will be transferred over to the CBSA. That work is done in co-operation with our American partners and, obviously, the CBSA and the national partners as well.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: What time frame does that involve, from intercepting a person to handing them over to the CBSA? Are we talking about hours, days, weeks?

Supt Martin Roach: If somebody committed an offence and we were to lay charges, we would have to do it within 24 hours. All our processes are in place to make sure that we respect those 24 hours as per the legislation.

In terms of the time frame, it varies depending on the workflow. Sometimes it is prolonged to 18 hours because of the volumes that are coming through, but we ensure that we have the number of resources...and we adapt our processes to respect the legislation.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Just so that it's clear to me, your piece of this takes a day or two days. Is it that kind of time frame?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: Yes, it does, but it ebbs and flows.

If someone comes with a lot of personal belongings that we have to go through and assess to confirm their identity, it ebbs and flows. It varies. To put a specific time on it is difficult, but as Martin said, our role is that the first contact with the person is by the RCMP.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's fair enough.

For those members who are at Roxham Road, could they be used for other activities such as counterterrorism or organized crime if they weren't being used at Roxham Road?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: Some of them, yes, and some of them actually were a part of those units that we had to mobilize to the party already at Quebec's Roxham Road to increase our capacity.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I'm going to assume that you don't have excess manpower in C division. Is it fair to say that if your members were not at Roxham Road they would be investigating drug traffickers, gun smugglers and other similar criminals?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: They would be assigned to other priorities under the federal policing mandate in the province—correct.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Given that, is it safe, then, to assume that other criminals are not getting investigated to the extent they might be if officers weren't spending time at Roxham Road?

• (1330)

D/Commr Michael Duheme: Our mandate is fairly complex and with the resources we have we prioritize what needs to be done and assign the right resources to the priorities.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If Roxham Road weren't a priority, would that be better for the overall rate of crime in Quebec and in Canada?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: You'd redistribute the resources within the other units that we have in the province: serious and organized crime, financial crime and national security.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Mr. Roach, you worked at Roxham Road, or you're very familiar with Roxham Road. I want to talk a bit about smuggling. You mentioned smuggling in your statement. When you were interviewing people, did you uncover evidence of smuggling?

Supt Martin Roach: There'll be evidence of coordination, of definitely coordinated efforts at smuggling. Sometimes it's links to individuals who are already in Canada. Sometimes it's individuals in the States or abroad internationally. That all comes out through the interviews, depending on the individuals we're interacting with.

We've had many cases of smuggling where we lay charges in Canada against groups that were already established in Canada, or sometimes, yes, they were in the States.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: On that, if you have 100 people coming across, what is the percentage? Is it 10% or 20%? How many charges have you laid for smuggling?

Supt Martin Roach: I don't have the exact number of cases where we laid charges. In terms of the percentage, it's not a vast majority, but there is the presence of human smuggling.

D/Commr Michael Duheme: If I may, Madam Chair, just to add to that, once the people are across, it's a challenge to get them to talk, because they have reached their goal—they're across. The idea is, how do you intercept them beforehand so that you can get them to talk a little more? It is a challenge, once they're on Canadian soil, to get them to talk about the process and the structure that's in place.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

How much time do I have, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Your time is up.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we will proceed to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question is for the IRB.

Thank you to all of you for the presentations—the CBSA, the IRB and the RCMP—and for the work that you fellows are doing in people's lives.

For the IRB, Mr. Wex mentioned that even though the wait times are the lowest since 2016-17, we are still hearing that there is a long wait when it comes to processing the claims for the asylum seekers. Could Mr. Wex tell us what are some of the things the IRB can do to alleviate the time taken to process these applications?

Mr. Richard Wex: Through the chair, first of all, the wait times for new claims as of, let's say today, for anybody making a new claim at the IRB will be processed within the next 16 months, based on current inventories and trends.

Second, we have about 65,000 in our inventory right now. A third of those are not actionable because we're waiting for either documentation, security screening or this or that.

That leaves about 45,000 in our claims inventory right now that are actionable. They have been heard. They are on the schedule or will be placed on the schedule within the next 11 months. From the IRB's perspective, with what is in our inventory and with what is actionable, they have been or will be scheduled within 11 months.

In terms of things that can be done, the IRB over the past number of years has taken on a pretty ambitious transformation agenda, which I alluded to in my opening remarks, with a real focus on a culture of performance and results. We understand what the asylum seekers have been through. They have a very long journey. It's been a very challenging journey to them. They have faced many challenges on their way to the IRB, including long processing times throughout the process. We've taken that on board. It's been a tough problem, and we've looked at everything from intake to recourse to try to expedite our processing times.

One initiative in particular that I'll speak to, although there are many, is with respect to the task force on less complex claims. This is an initiative that tries to best allocate our resources based on the complexity of the claims in question. This task force is a group of individuals, members of the refugee protection division that Roula heads up, and 10% of the complement are currently dedicated to this group. Over the past four years or so, since this group was established, they have finalized about 20% of the hearings.

What this does is increase access to justice more quickly for those individuals in our inventory and better utilizes our resources. That is one example of many where we have tried to instill and initiate new ideas and new approaches to expedite processing times with good effect.

• (1335)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

Now my question, Madam Chair, will go to all three organizations.

What I am hearing from many people is that they are asking us to declare the entire Canada-U.S. border an official point of entry.

They are also mentioning that there are almost 2.5 million people who have illegally come through the Mexico-U.S. border into the U.S., and if we did not have the safe third country agreement in place, what would be the consequences moving forward?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: There aren't any consequences that come to mind other than, as I said in my introductory remarks, that the reason we do the background checks is that we want to know who these people are.

For the most part, there is not much on the criminal side of things, but obviously, if people start pouring in like those doing so south of the border where you see the Americans and Mexico, there is a concern about who is coming in. That's why, at Roxham Road and other places across the country, we try to put as much rigour as we can in doing the checks of the people who are coming in, using the various data banks, as well as with our international partners when we can.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: If I understand the question correctly, from my point of view, the biggest concern I have is the safety of the individuals coming into Canada. The safest way to come into Canada is at an official point of entry.

If you're crossing between points of entry, regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the conditions, you're taking on additional personal risk that may not be warranted.

I think, regardless of whether the STCA is in place or not, we encourage people to come across at points of entry primarily, first and foremost, for their own personal safety.

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you.

If I understand the question, it's that, if the safe third country agreement were not in force, what would the major implications be?

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Yes.

Mr. Richard Wex: There are a couple of implications I'll speak to quickly.

First and foremost, obviously the incentive to proceed irregularly would no longer be there. That would encourage people to cross at the border, which would disperse the impact on any one area like Roxham Road, which I think people are very familiar with. There are other other aspects to it, obviously.

The safe third country agreement was created for certain purposes: promoting safety, promoting international responsibility sharing and so on, so those things would no longer necessarily be there.

From an operational perspective, obviously the concern is that it's going to result in additional pressure on the asylum system. An operational perspective is different from a humanitarian perspective.

There are basically three buckets. There are irregular border crossers—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Wex.

The time is up for Mr. Dhaliwal. We will have to proceed to the next member.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you are up next. You will have six minutes for your round of questioning.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here with us today.

I believe you are all doing remarkable work. You're trying to do the best you can. Moreover, I've heard nothing but positive comments about the RCMP officers who deal with migrants at Roxham Road. I want you to know that your reputation on that score is good.

Mr. Wex, I may have misunderstood you. Did you say that if the safe third country agreement were to be suspended, there would be an increase in the number of asylum seekers at border crossings?

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: If we were to suspend it and it were no longer in force, then, obviously, the purposes of the safe third country agreement would no longer be there.

Hence, yes, there is a concern held by some that in suspending the agreement, there would be a pull factor. Nobody knows.... I shouldn't say "nobody knows". Instead, there are projections; there is some conjecture associated with the degree and extent to which that pull factor would materialize. Nonetheless, we understand that the projections are that there would be a material impact at the border.

When you look back 20 years ago, prior to the safe third country agreement, one of the reasons why the safe third country agreement was put in place was the security perimeter negotiations taking place between Canada and the United States. Those took on more force after 9/11.

One of the files that was discussed at the time was the safe third country agreement, because at that time, about a third of Canada's—

• (1340)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'll have to interrupt you here, because I really don't have much time left.

In short, there are no reports or studies to indicate that the number of asylum claims would increase if the safe third country agreement were suspended. These are personal insights, but without any corroborating studies.

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: No. I didn't say that. I'm sorry.

I am not aware of the exact impact that suspending the safe third country agreement would have on various ports of entry. I know that—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay, I'm going to stop you there. I apologize, but I really don't have much time left.

I now have a question for the RCMP representatives.

On September 28, in the House, the Minister of Public Safety answered a question about human trafficking networks. On behalf of the government, he said the following:

Mr. Speaker, we recognize that the situation at Roxham Road poses challenges. That is why we are investing more than \$40 million in a strategy to address the problems associated with human trafficking. That is why we continue to add resources at our borders to protect the rights of refugees and to bring to justice those who abuse the system. We will continue that work.

That's what he told us, in the House.

To my knowledge, no criminal involved in a criminal network operating at Roxham Road has ever been charged. Am I wrong?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: To my knowledge, no.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You know that there are human trafficking networks, and you told us so. The Minister of Public Safety is aware of this, as is the government. We are being told that discussions are under way with the Americans and that people are going to be charged.

Is the RCMP currently conducting investigations into human trafficking networks?

Supt Martin Roach: Absolutely. Several investigations of human trafficking networks are in progress. We have integrated teams that work along the border, from Valleyfield on the Quebec side to Champlain in the State of New York, where there is a detachment that covers the Roxham Road area. There are some in Estrie and Beauce as well. That covers the entire area, along an 810 km border.

So we have been conducting investigations in partnership with our American counterparts. There have been cases in which we arrested people and filed charges against them for human smuggling.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So there have been some, but not at Roxham Road.

Supt Martin Roach: We haven't had cases like that at Roxham Road specifically, but there have been some elsewhere in the area.

At Roxham Road, however, there have been cases involving people linked to other criminal offences, like child pornography or organized crime, for example. We had cases in which people had warrants against them in the United States for other criminal offences. There were a few instances of that.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I just want to make sure that I understand properly. I don't know whether you saw the CBC report about traffickers. I understand that although they are breaking the law in Canada, the offence is considered to have occurred in the United States. In fact, it appears to have been relatively easy for the journalist to follow these people all the way to Florida.

You've probably been having discussions with your American counterparts on this, but allow me to repeat that the white vans involved go through on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. They make two or three trips a day, with about a dozen people at a time.

There's just one thing we're having trouble understanding, and that is how these people can continue trafficking when the information has been made public.

D/Commr Michael Duheme: It is indeed public information. But it's important to understand that it's sometimes easier for journalists to investigate than for the police to obtain the kind of information that would allow them to launch a proper investigation.

As I said earlier, once people get to where they want to be in the country, it can sometimes be difficult to find help.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand. So the work should really be done on the other side of the border. That's where the people who make the trips ought to be caught, but it's impossible for you to do it.

D/Commr Michael Duheme: There's a joint effort under way not only at the national level, with the provincial police and the RCMP, but also at the international level.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My next question is for the representatives of the Canada Border Services Agency.

Could you explain to the committee members what the process for an asylum claim used to be for someone from the United States, prior to the safe third country agreement?

[*English*]

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Through the chair, thank you for the question.

Our processes that are in place are the same, regardless of whether or not the safe third country agreement is in place. It's a question of how and when they arrive in the country. I'm not familiar with the processes that were in place pre-STCA in 2014—

• (1345)

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes. Please begin.

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

I also want to say thank you to all of the departments for the work they are doing for our country.

With respect to the safe third country agreement, one issue, of course, is that the numbers will ebb and flow with the arrivals of people wanting to cross into Canada irregularly. I wonder if after this meeting the IRB could provide the committee with the data on the actual numbers over the years. If we could get the numbers perhaps prior to the safe third country agreement and then since that time to current, we could see the fluctuation that's occurred within the borders. Is it possible to get the numbers for the 10 years prior to the safe third country agreement?

Mr. Richard Wex: Through the chair, thank you for the question.

The board will undertake to do what it can for the member's request. I just want to make sure I understand the question. Is it with respect to the numbers currently identified as ineligible? I'm just trying to make sure I understand the question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry. It's about the numbers of people who've arrived at the border crossing irregularly.

Mr. Richard Wex: We have those numbers, yes. I can provide them to you now or another time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps you can provide the numbers to us after the committee meeting.

Mr. Richard Wex: Absolutely. In terms of numbers that have come to the IRB or are referred to the IRB that are irregular, we can provide those numbers to you. Since 2017 it's 72,500.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I'd like to have the breakdown year by year.

Could you also provide information, if you have that information, on the demographics of the people coming across the border?

Mr. Richard Wex: We'll provide what we can. Thank you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

My next question is for the CBSA/

With respect to processing, one issue that was brought to our attention by a witness was about the asylum seeker getting their documentation, what they call the "brown paper" document. Because of the influx of numbers, I understand that there is pressure on the CBSA in terms of staffing. Now there's a practice of providing an "entry for further examination" document.

Can you advise the committee on how long it's taking for people to get the brown paper document so that they can move on to the next phase of their asylum claim?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Maybe I'll take this opportunity to reiterate that our processes are in place regardless of whether the STCA is there or not. At Roxham Road, in an effort to deal with volumes, initially we were processing in two parts. We did an initial assessment upon arrival, and then we adjourned the claim for a later date to be finalized in an eligibility interview at the urban processing centre.

As a result of that, what we've seen with the volumes...and we're doing that because it takes four to six hours to do a claim in person. We've seen that eligibility backlog increase due to this two-step process where it's now taking up to 18 months for somebody to get that eligibility interview and to get their documentation.

To address that, we've done a couple of things. One, we've introduced, as I alluded to, what we call our one-step process, where low-risk people and people with full documentation are fully assessed upon arrival. They're allowed to leave. They're given the documentation they require so that they have rights to employment and they have rights to social and medical care. They have to complete their paperwork on our online portal within 45 days. The effect of that is to reduce the growth of the eligibility backlog.

The other innovation we put in place is the use of this digital portal. I've said it takes up to 18 months. That's a worst-case scenario. If individuals provide their information via our online portal, which is more user-friendly, more reliable, and more accurate, they can get an interview within 90 days. That would then close their eligibility claim and they'd move forward in the system.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I ask this question because currently...actually just this week we had a witness who works with The Refugee Centre advising us that people are waiting for a prolonged period. They are not actually getting their brown paper document.

Since when has this expedited process that you mention been in place?

• (1350)

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: We launched on November 1 and we're already seeing immediate benefits from that. The portal has been in place for a couple of months and again we're seeing immediate benefits there.

The portal is available to anybody in that up-to-18-month waiting list. The benefit of the portal, from our point of view, is that it's more user-friendly, it's plain language, it's more accurate and it's quicker.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. I'm limited on time.

Maybe you can provide the committee this data as well: How many asylum seekers are in what stages of the wait period? If you can provide that information to us for Roxham Road, that would be appreciated.

With respect to your comment, I appreciate that as well. If people went through the official ports of entry, it would reduce the dangers people encounter on the journey to try to get to Canada to seek asylum and safety. That is an important point to note.

From that perspective, would it also create better organization in terms of the management of the current situation for CBSA, and for the RCMP for that matter?

My question is for the RCMP and for CBSA.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Arriving through the port of entry—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan. The time is up.

We will now proceed to our second round. Based on the time, we will have two and a half minutes for Mr. Maguire and then Ms. Lalonde, and then one and a half minutes each for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Ms. Kwan. Then we will end this panel.

We will go to Mr. Maguire.

You will have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to the witnesses.

I just had my time cut in half, so we're going to run here. I need some yes or no answers.

Mr. Wex, thank you for all of your testimony.

According to the latest statistics published on the IRCC's website, the number of people who have irregularly crossed over the

border to claim asylum are now higher than ever. I think 31,003 is the number I have here today for those who have been intercepted by the RCMP in 2022. There are reports that up to 50,000 people might walk across the border this year.

Has the IRCC or any other department provided the IRB with any estimates of the number of people they expect to walk across the border for the remainder of this year or in any future year, yes or no?

Mr. Richard Wex: The testimony that was given by the deputy minister of IRCC, I think last week, is consistent with the numbers that we have seen as well. We have a good line of sight. They share with us the number of irregular border crossers they have in their inventory.

Mr. Larry Maguire: In light of the time here, can you table that or relevant documents with the committee?

Mr. Richard Wex: They not our documents. They are IRCC's documents.

I'll just be five seconds. They receive the referrals first and then it comes to IRB. Sometimes that could take six to 12 months, so there is a lag.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Has IRCC provided any of those documents to IRB?

Mr. Richard Wex: Which documents would those be?

Mr. Larry Maguire: The documents on the number of people who are going to be crossing the border.

Mr. Richard Wex: We're already at the 10th month of 12. They've identified in previous testimony that up to 45,000 or 50,000 irregular border crossers could cross between January and December of this year.

Mr. Larry Maguire: All I'm looking at is a number for estimates for those people coming across. I'm sure there is a document somewhere.

Mr. Richard Wex: I haven't seen a document necessarily, but I have been briefed on that.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

I'll move on.

The most recent department performance report on the IRB'S target to process cases within the legislated timelines was only 50%. That's a tremendously low target to meet legislated timelines. The worst part is that the actual results were only 17%. After the last influx of irregular border crossers, the Auditor General tabled a troubling report that found many deficiencies in the IRB.

As you were the chair at that time and are now, I'd like to get some clarity on the IRB's implementation of the Auditor General's recommendations that the IRB accepted. The first one would be, as requested, whether the IRB updated the performance targets used to report on intake capacity and productivity.

I believe you said yes in your testimony, so thank you.

Can you please table that process of how the IRB implemented that recommendation?

Mr. Richard Wex: Yes, I can. Very quickly—

Mr. Larry Maguire: Can you just table that with us for our information?

Mr. Richard Wex: I'm happy to table our operational plans for the year with performance targets, yes.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

The Auditor General discovered—

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time is up, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now proceed to Ms. Lalonde.

Ms. Lalonde, you will have two-and-a-half minutes. You can please proceed.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I'd like to begin by thanking all the witnesses for being here.

On behalf of our entire group, I'd like something clarified.

Mr. Wex, I believe you mentioned 50,000 people. Who are these people? Is that only those who cross at Roxham Road or everyone who requests asylum in Canada?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I really don't want to speak for IRCC's intake and CBSA's intake; I can really only speak to IRB's intake. Again, they're further upstream in the system and we're downstream, and there is a six-month to 12-month lag.

I can report and share with this committee that from January to November of this year, we received a total of 47,600 asylum seekers. We have a pending inventory of about 66,000, a third of which are non-actionable, as I testified earlier.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Just for clarification, Mr. Wex, are these numbers for all asylum seekers within Canada?

Mr. Richard Wex: The numbers that I'm referring to are the numbers, yes. For both regular border crossers and irregular border crossers, we received 47,000 at the IRB this year. IRCC would have received something else.

To be very clear, the board does not make any distinction in the adjudication of claims between regular claimants and irregular border crossers. It's of no consequence from an adjudicative perspective. It has other consequences across the system that we're discussing, but I want to be clear on that point.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I appreciate that actually, because that is very relevant to what we were talking about.

To continue, you are responsible for granting status for refugee claimants who arrive in Canada and make an asylum claim. As

such, can you tell the committee how the IRB has modernized and innovated its responsibilities to refugee claimants who have crossed at Roxham Road since the pandemic, please? Did you encounter any setbacks during this time?

Mr. Richard Wex: In terms of the various measures that are in place to deal with the influx at Roxham Road, we've introduced a number of measures over the past number of years. We're very much alive to the journeys they have undertaken over the past number of years at Roxham Road.

I would point out too that with respect to our basis of claim form, which is our main form, we have extended the timelines for filing, and also a bridge—what is required to be filled out—recognizing that there is so much pressure at Roxham Road, it is difficult for many of these claimants to have access to counsel—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. Can you please wind up?

Mr. Richard Wex: —in as timely a manner as they used to. That is but one of many measures that was taken.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for 90 seconds. You can please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

If possible, I'd appreciate a yes or no answer.

Is it a crime to take money from people to get them across the border?

I'm asking the people from the RCMP.

Supt Martin Roach: Are you talking about individuals in the United States who are asking people for money?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes.

Supt Martin Roach: Law enforcement is different for our American partners. They don't have the same powers. In Canada, for example, if someone commits or intends to commit an offence in the United States, we can lay charges. In the United States, things don't work quite the same way and there are slight differences.

I can therefore not comment on how the Americans would enforce the law in a case like that.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: According to Canadian law, it's a crime to ask someone for money to take that person across the border. Is that correct?

D/Commr Michael Duheme: That would be assisting with smuggling, so yes, it's a crime.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Has the RCMP submitted requests to United States authorities to arrest people who have committed offences of this kind?

Supt Martin Roach: As I was saying, the legislative framework in the United States is different. We do, nevertheless, keep in touch.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand. So you haven't yet found a way of accomplishing that.

Are you worried when you see more and more of these white vans arriving at Roxham Road?

Supt Martin Roach: There are quite a few, but it's important to know that the dynamics have changed a lot over the years. Among these people there are also some charitable organizations giving assistance.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In short, it can sometimes be complicated to tell which is which.

Excuse me for rushing you a bit. I don't want to be rude, but I don't have a lot of time.

Mr. Wex, could you please explain what the process used to be for an asylum claim from the United States, before the safe third country agreement was signed?

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: Do you mean in the United States?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Before the safe third country agreement was signed, what was the process followed for people from the United States to make an asylum claim?

• (1400)

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: My understanding—and I stand to be corrected—is that the process would be the same. There wouldn't be an agreement that would necessarily require that the individual be returned to the United States for processing—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have 90 seconds, and then we will end this panel.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

To build on that, prior to the safe third country agreement, people crossed over at the regular border crossings. Is that right?

This is for Mr. Wex.

Mr. Richard Wex: Yes. That's definitely my understanding, in the vast majority of cases.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

With respect to the IRB's projections and the numbers you anticipate coming in.... To process the IRB asylum applications, what sort of funding do you project you will require in order to process them in a way that will not create the extended delays and backlog that we previously had?

Mr. Richard Wex: Right now, as you're aware, we're funded most recently to 50,000 claims per year. We're expecting about 75,000 claims to come in this year. That's an additional 25,000, which will add six months to our processing times.

For every 10,000 that there's a difference between our intake and our processing capacity, it will cost the IRB about \$45 million

or \$50 million per year. That's basically our funding formula. The math can be done.

Right now, there is a delta of more than 10,000.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

When I was first elected back in 2015, there was a huge backlog in the IRB. There were a whole bunch of problems, including the lack of resources in a financial sense, as well as in staffing levels at the IRB. The IRB went through years of hiring people only on a part-time basis.

Has that now ended? Has the IRB hired people on a full-time basis and on a permanent basis to address the processing of applicants?

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you very much for the question.

With the monies received in budget 2022, we will be able to make permanent about 1,000 FTEs at the IRB who were previously funded by temporary funds through budgets 2018 to 2020.

We are going through the stabilization exercise now. For the past few years, over 50% of our organization has been temporary. The government investments now will allow us to stabilize the organization, which is very important for recruitment, retention, morale and productivity.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, this panel comes to an end.

On behalf of all the members of this committee....

Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: This is extremely interesting testimony. I know there are a number of questions that my colleague and I still have. I'm going to table these with the clerk and ask that the witnesses provide us with answers to them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you to all the witnesses for appearing before the committee. Whatever information the committee has requested, it would be great if you can submit that. If there is anything you were not able to discuss because of the time limit, you can always send us your written submissions.

Mr. Maguire, the clerk will send that information to them.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, this panel comes to an end.

The meeting is suspended, so that the clerk can do the sound checks for the other witnesses. Two witnesses will be appearing virtually.

Thank you.

• (1400) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1405)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for appearing before the committee.

Today we are joined by Mr. Stéphane Handfield, as an individual, a lawyer from Handfield et Associés, avocats. We are also joined by Mr. Yannick Boucher, the director of strategic development and research, representing the organization, Accueil liaison pour arrivants. Our third witness today is Madame Marzieh Nezhakat, manager, refugee settlement and integration program of the Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities.

Once we have remarks from all three witnesses, we will go to our round of questioning. We will begin with Mr. Handfield.

Mr. Handfield, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can please begin.

• (1410)

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Handfield (Lawyer, Handfield et Associés, Avocats, As an Individual): Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation.

I've been a member of the Barreau du Québec since 1992. I was a member at the Immigration and Refugee Commission for 11 years. From 2012 to 2015, I was a lecturer at the Cégep de Saint-Laurent in the administrative techniques program, more specifically in the immigration consultancy program.

I am a member of the Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration and the Association des avocats de la défense de Montréal. I practice exclusively in immigration law at Handfield et associés, avocats. I also work as an inspector on behalf of the Barreau du Québec's professional inspection service.

I contributed to *Démantèlement tranquille*, published by Éditions Québec Amérique in 2018. I also wrote two works published in 2020 and 2021, respectively, by Wilson et Lafleur, *Immigration et criminalité au Canada: quand l'expulsion devient inévitable*, and *Fatima: le parcours d'une réfugiée*.

With any issues connected to the reception of refugees, it's impossible to ignore the safe third country agreement.

Under the agreement, anyone who comes to a Canadian-American border crossing will have their asylum claim deemed ineligible and sent back to the United States, unless they are covered by an exception provided in the agreement; this could, for example, involve an unaccompanied minor or having a family member who lives in Canada.

However, if this person crosses the border irregularly, that person will not be covered by the safe third country agreement and the asylum claim will be considered eligible. That's why so many thousands of people have decided to cross the border irregularly in

cent years in order to request Canada's protection. Since January 2022, 99.3% of these arrivals are in Quebec.

Under the safe third country agreement, people are not entitled to appeal to the refugee appeal division in the event of denial of the asylum claim if the claim was made at a land border crossing for regular entry. However, if they cross the border at Roxham Road, they are entitled to appeal the denial of their asylum claim by the Immigration and Refugee Board.

In short, all these factors combined to encourage asylum seekers to cross the border irregularly because their claim will be deemed eligible, they won't be sent back to the United States, and they will have a right of appeal in the event their claim is denied.

The government is aware of the situation, which has lasted for years.

From January to October 2022, more than 30,000 people crossed the border at Roxham Road. If the trend continues, there will be 50,000 by the end of the year. The previous record was set in 2017, when 18,836 asylum seekers crossed the border in this way.

In early October 2022, the mayor of New York City, Eric Adams, said that he expected his city to receive over 100,000 migrants expelled from the state of Texas. He said that approximately one third of these migrants wanted to go to other destinations. We have good reason to believe that one of these destinations will be Roxham Road. In Portland, Maine, there are hundreds of migrants dreaming about Roxham Road.

It's the system, not the people, who need to be condemned. In many instances, these people are being exploited by unscrupulous human traffickers. It's important to know how to welcome them, and even more important to know how to integrate them appropriately and effectively, within our capacity to do so.

In view of the housing crisis, the shortage of openings at day care centres, the shortage of family doctors and teachers, and the challenges of francization, combined with the fact that the immigration system is full of cracks, some people have been talking about a potential humanitarian crisis. Many asylum seekers will also, in spite of themselves, become homeless.

The number of asylum seekers crossing the border at Roxham Road will also have an impact on claim processing delays, and also on the work of the refugee protection division members. It's an issue of interference and deteriorating working conditions for them.

The time has come to firmly shut down this irregular and unofficial access point at the sadly famous Roxham Road.

It's important to underscore the fact that the government of Canada has the power to unilaterally suspend the safe third-party country agreement, under article 10 of this agreement which states: "Either Party may, upon written notice to the other Party, suspend for a period of up to three months application of this Agreement. Such suspension may be renewed for additional periods of up to three months. Either Party may, with the agreement of the other Party, suspend any part of this Agreement."

The status quo is therefore not the answer. All that is needed is a bare minimum of political will. It's high time to do something.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1415)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Mr. Boucher.

Mr. Boucher, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yannick Boucher (Director, Strategic Development and Research, Accueil liaison pour arrivants): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon.

We really welcomed today's initiative to draw Parliament's attention to the situation of those who have chosen Canada as a safe haven, as was just mentioned.

As other speakers before me have outlined, the issues and challenges experienced by asylum seekers throughout their settlement trajectory have many implications, human, economic, and, most importantly, structural. I'm referring here to access to employment, housing, legal services, health care, early childhood services and the like.

As an organization that has been on the front lines of immigration and integration for 38 years, today we will present a synthesis of our observations on the ground regarding the realities asylum seekers face in Quebec.

Our objective is to recommend four courses of action that would greatly facilitate the integration of asylum seekers: First, promote access to quality jobs, particularly by granting work permits upon arrival; second, facilitate access to health and psychosocial services for asylum seekers housed in federal hotels in Quebec; third, develop an awareness campaign on the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP); and fourth, develop transitional housing models to facilitate access to housing.

First, to promote access to quality jobs, we believe it's important to support initiatives that value the skills of asylum seekers and make employers aware of their potential in an unprecedented labour shortage environment. We mustn't forget that the term "asylum seeker" is a status that says nothing about the career trajectory of these individuals.

With support from Services Québec, our organization will be holding the first job fair for asylum seekers this coming December 13. It's a great opportunity for them to break away from informal employment networks that make them vulnerable. It's very important that we point that out.

While we would like to applaud the establishment of a new temporary measure to expedite the issuance of work permits, some questions remain. According to public policy, to obtain a social insurance number, individuals must have their refugee claimant document. Can they get a social insurance number without their refugee claimant document, knowing that claimants can wait up to a year to get an eligibility interview to obtain this document? This interview

used to be done on the day the claimant arrived or within 24 hours. That's a year's wait, and it contributes to them working under the table rather than for our businesses in need of workers.

These long processing times take a toll on the psychological health of asylum seekers. We have observed an increase in anxiety and distress due to administrative procedures, particularly those related to legal services, which are currently under pressure in Quebec. They must therefore face uncertainty in addition to the trauma related to their experience in their country of origin and the long road that led him to Canada.

We'd like to point out that asylum seekers housed in federal hotels in Quebec need health and psychosocial services, much like those housed under the provincial initiative Programme régional d'accueil et d'intégration des demandeurs d'asile (PRAIDA).

Furthermore, we recommend that a campaign be developed to raise awareness among frontline health care workers of the Interim Federal Health Program, which is not very well known in Quebec. This program fills a service gap by providing insurance coverage. We also recommend that reference tools be created for administrative officers to help them better understand medical coverage. Such tools would make it easier for them to understand IFHP procedures.

Greater consistency between the IFHP and the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec would also facilitate processing and prevent some professionals from giving up on the IFHP because they find the reimbursement process too cumbersome. Service providers' lack of awareness of the IFHP has a direct impact on the health of asylum seekers, which is already precarious.

Finally, we feel that developing transitional housing models for six months to one year as a complement to PRAIDA's temporary housing would support asylum seekers in their search for housing. Quebec is the only province to offer temporary accommodations upon arrival. However, how can someone obtain housing in three weeks without any credit history or references from previous landlords, all in the midst of an affordable housing crisis?

Rising homelessness among asylum seekers is a visible and tangible sign of the difficulties they face in gaining access to affordable housing in Montreal. Transitional housing models can provide a buffer when asylum seekers come out of temporary accommodations to make it easier for them to understand how rentals work and also help them establish a tenant history.

I will stop there.

I'm willing to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

• (1420)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to our third witness, Madam Nezakat.

Please begin. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Marzieh Nezakat (Manager, Refugee Settlement and Integration Program, Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrant Communities): Thank you for the opportunity to appear on this very important subject.

My name is Marzieh Nezakat, and I am the manager of refugee settlement and integration at MOSAIC.

MOSAIC is one of the largest not-for-profit organizations in Canada, serving immigrant, refugee and mainstream communities throughout the province of B.C. and overseas via online programs. MOSAIC is also one of the largest organizations funded by the province to serve refugee claimants in partnership with other agencies across B.C.

At MOSAIC, I oversee programs that serve approximately 2,000 refugee claimants each year. I also oversee the B.C. refugee claimant housing referral and data management system, BC CHARMS, the first of its kind in western Canada. This province-wide centralized housing referral system aims at connecting refugee claimants with safe and affordable housing across the province of B.C.

Today, I would like to take time to highlight some of the experiences of refugee claimants served by MOSAIC relating to their safety, security and health.

At Christmastime 2021, I received a call from the Red Cross about a family of 11 who had irregularly crossed the border and were intercepted by the RCMP. They were covered in mud, hungry and robbed and looking for shelter and food.

A young woman in her twenties, crossing the border irregularly and not intercepted, had somehow found her way to MOSAIC's office in the late afternoon. She was soaking wet and shaking, repeatedly asking in her native language if we were going to send her back to the border or if she was going to be deported.

After irregularly crossing the border and being intercepted by the RCMP, a pregnant woman in her seventh month, whose husband was deported at the U.S., was sent to MOSAIC to receive support for food and shelter. She was then called to the CBSA office, detained for the night and sent back to the U.S. Her cousin told us later about her difficult situation at the immigration holding centre the night before she was sent back.

A single mom and three young children were found by the VPD on the streets of Vancouver around midnight. A VPD officer had a connection with a church that took care of them for the night before sending them to MOSAIC.

Over the past two months, MOSAIC has received two families who, as indicated by the STCA, were found ineligible to make a claim in Canada. With an exclusion order banning them to re-entry Canada for a year, they crossed the border irregularly and found their way to MOSAIC for help.

The amount of trauma these families with their young kids have gone through is beyond expression, considering the fact that many

of these individuals might have been subject to human trafficking to make their way to Canada. Not having their status, the guilt and shame of having crossed the border irregularly and having been denied a refugee claim has a toll on these refugee claimants.

According to IRCC statistics from January to October of this year, the number of refugee claimants intercepted by the RCMP in B.C. has increased by 133% compared with the same time last year, and 30% compared with the prepandemic time in 2019 for refugee claimants who crossed the border without being intercepted or having made a claim inland.

When claiming at official ports of entry, claimants can immediately apply for income assistance, which is received in less than three weeks, and receive a deadline of less than two months for their eligibility interview. If found eligible, they can anticipate receiving a work permit in three to four months. However, when making a claim inland, the claim process takes months longer and claimants are left with no income assistance and delayed work permits of up to 18 months, which makes earning a living nearly impossible.

Knowing these drawbacks to making a claim inland, why would refugee claimants take the risk of irregularly crossing the border? The answer is the risk of being deported or returned to the U.S. The majority of individuals who cross the border have exhausted their financial resources in making their way from their countries of origin into transitory countries and on to South America, continuing through the U.S. and eventually reaching Canada.

By not being able to obtain a work permit in a timely manner, they are left with seeking aid by the community or settlement agencies, or, as their last resort, working illegally, which by itself is a whole different story about getting exposed to discrimination, stigmatization and all sorts of potential abuse by employers.

In closing, I want to remind the respective committee and community that despite all the challenges refugee claimants face, they have contributed and continue to contribute immensely to Canada's social fabric. MOSAIC recognizes that seeking asylum is a human right, along with the humanitarian principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality that we seek in our daily practices.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to your questions.

● (1425)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nezakat, for your opening remarks.

We will now go to our rounds of questioning. We will have one round of questioning of five minutes each. Then we will go in camera for the committee business for the last 10 minutes.

We will start our round of questioning with Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Berthold, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning. Please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

First off, I'd like to thank the committee members for giving me the opportunity to take the floor and ask questions today.

Whether it happens at Roxham Road or elsewhere in Canada, as Ms. Nezakat just pointed out, irregular immigration is a major concern. We're talking about people crossing the border illegally. What we tend to forget is that, first and foremost, these are people and families who have gone through difficult times before they decided to come to Canada. These are, above all, human stories. Unfortunately, we overlook that reality a little too often in the whole process.

I can confirm that we hear sad stories every day in our constituency offices. I'm thinking of a recent example where an individual who had entered Canada at Roxham Road with their family and was well integrated into the community was just ordered deported. This leads me to say that we probably have issues in terms of how we welcome people; we're not giving them a proper welcome.

Roxham Road is an alternative that you seem to disagree with, Mr. Handfield, since you're calling for the suspension of the Safe Third Country Agreement. In practical terms, what would suspending the agreement change for people who cross the border illegally?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: People will be able to go to an official checkpoint in Quebec or anywhere else on Canadian soil.

Due to that agreement, asylum seekers have no choice but to go through Roxham Road, otherwise they become ineligible for refugee status and they are returned to the United States. Suspending the agreement will redirect this flow of asylum seekers to official checkpoints, where they can be properly processed by Canadian authorities in Quebec and across Canada, as things were done before the agreement came into effect in 2002.

Mr. Luc Berthold: That's precisely my concern. Right now, our capacity to accommodate is not up to par. We've seen it and all the evidence points to it: We can't take in more people.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm concerned that suspending the Safe Third Country Agreement would send out a message that Canada's borders are open, you can cross anywhere, let's get moving, and that smugglers or other bad people all over the U.S. and all the way down to South America will take advantage of that opportunity. Unfortunately, I don't believe Canada is in a position to take in that many people in such a short time.

Mr. Handfield and Mr. Boucher, I'd like to hear what each of you has to say about this.

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: Actually, the message going out to people right now is that they can come to Canada through Roxham Road. There's currently nothing preventing thousands of migrants, regardless of where they are, from coming to Canada using

that route. The message we're sending is that they can come to Canada, but instead of the usual route, they can choose the irregular one, because that way they will have more rights, including a right of appeal.

Mr. Luc Berthold: You're saying we're going to open even more doors to get a lot more Canadians.

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: That's not what I'm saying. We're going to spread asylum seekers across Canada, like we did before.

As you know, Article 10 of the agreement allows the government to unilaterally suspend the agreement for up to three months, and the suspension can be extended for further periods of up to three months at a time. So the government may well suspend the agreement and see how things go on the ground. After that—

Mr. Luc Berthold: I understand that, Mr. Handfield. Sorry to interrupt you, but my time is running out fast.

• (1430)

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: Okay, I understand.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I want to make sure we understand.

I fear that the message we're sending out will bring on an influx of asylum seekers. To avoid that, it would have to be coupled with a campaign to explain what people need to do to be properly welcomed into Canada.

I'll go back to the specific case I cited earlier. It takes a very long time for a refugee claimant to know whether their claim has been accepted or not. In fact, the outcome may only be available two or three years later. As a lawyer, you know that it can take a very long time. It's not easy for an asylum seeker to have their claim rejected and then return to their country of origin after living on hope for so long. I'll say it again: we're talking about human beings. It's dreadful to put people who are hoping to find a home in Canada in situations like that.

Time is running out fast, but I'd like to hear your comments, Mr. Boucher.

Mr. Yannick Boucher: I kind of agree with my counterpart. I'm not so sure that Canada can't take in more people. Canada doesn't even to 5% of the world's refugees, and that number has declined over the years.

Personally, I think it's a good idea to spread it out, so that the responsibility is shared among the provinces and not concentrated in Quebec. Quebec is low on resources right now and everyone is at the end of their rope.

[*English*]

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Mr. Boucher. The time is up.

We will now go to Mr. El-Khoury.

Mr. El-Khoury, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

My first question is for Ms. Nezakat.

Ms. Nezakat, thank you for your testimony. You gave some very touching examples. It was heartbreaking to hear them.

I'd like to ask you why you feel so many more people are using the services of your organization, MOSAIC.

[English]

Ms. Marzieh Nezakat: MOSAIC has always received many refugee claimants, as I mentioned. We are one of the major organizations in B.C. working with refugee claimants. We have a specific stream of services for refugee claimants. Like any other organization, we had decreasing numbers during COVID, but then as the borders opened in November 2021, we started receiving many more refugee claimants.

As I mentioned—and I shared the statistics from B.C.—the number of people who are now trying to cross irregularly and are intercepted by the RCMP has increased. I believe one reason is.... Compared with the past two years, we are past COVID and the borders are now open, but when you compare this with prepandemic times, the numbers have increased, but not to a degree that is unprecedented.

One of the major reasons for this increase would be the refugee crisis all around the world. When you compare the situation of the world today with three years ago, you can see that many different crises are happening around the world, so more and more people would want to seek protection in Canada. I would see that as one of the major reasons for the increase.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: What do you think could be done to make people less inclined to use the regular routes to cross our border?

[English]

Ms. Marzieh Nezakat: As a settlement agency that provides services, we would really support a dignified claim process for refugee claimants. We all know that when they try to cross irregularly, it is contrary to being dignified or having dignity.

If there were encouragement, or a certainty, that could be given to asylum seekers that if they crossed regularly through the official ports of entry, they would be processed faster in a dignified manner, and would be able to stay in Canada if they were found to be eligible, they would not really risk their lives going through forests and putting themselves and their families in danger, as we see today. There has to be this certainty, or reassurance, for these people that if they cross regularly through the official ports of entry, they are not going to be returned or deported. They should do what is safer for them and their families, and with a bit more dignity, of course.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you, Ms. Nezakat.

My next question is for Mr. Boucher.

Mr. Boucher, you mentioned health program that is not well known to stakeholders in Quebec. Can you elaborate on what our government can do to maximize the benefits in that province?

• (1435)

Mr. Yannick Boucher: It's the Interim Federal Health Program, and it's an insurance program that covers certain health services. It's kind of the equivalent of the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec.

There is a huge lack of awareness of this program in the Quebec health care system. Frontline workers are not accustomed to treating people with refugee status. When a situation arises and the refugee claimant wants to seek emergency care, the staff is unaware of what to do. Asylum seekers are not eligible for coverage under the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec. However, they are eligible for the IFHP, but they need to be registered beforehand.

What the federal government can do, really, is launch an awareness campaign and develop tools so that people understand what they need to do. It would have to be upstream, so that a number of health care professionals are on the list for this federal program. That way, asylum seekers who come to our hospitals could be handled quickly, instead of being turned away and waiting until their condition requires urgent care before they go back to the hospital.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Boucher. Thank you.

Now we will proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for five minutes.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you can please begin.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses who are here for the second hour of our meeting.

Mr. Handfield, last week I asked the deputy minister of IRCC to tell me how the asylum process worked for people coming from the United States before the Safe Third Country Agreement came into effect. She was unable to answer me. Today, the Canada Border Services Agency officials could not answer that same question, nor could the Immigration and Refugee Board officials.

First of all, do you find it normal that those senior officials are unable to answer that question?

Second, can you tell me what it was like before the agreement?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: You will understand that I can't comment on what they do or do not know. However, having been an IRB Commissioner for 11 years, I can tell you what I know.

Before the Safe Third Country Agreement came into effect, people from the United States who wanted to seek asylum went to an official checkpoint, which was any of the border crossings within Canada, in British Columbia, Ontario, Manitoba or Quebec.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So they would come in through the front door and be greeted with dignity, rather than coming in through the little back window we call Roxham Road today.

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: They were greeted by the Canada Border Services Agency and the Canadian government, and they didn't have to sleep in trailers on the side of a highway.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Some people feel that suspending the Safe Third Country Agreement would lead to a huge spike in asylum claims. As you saw, some members were concerned about that.

First, are there any studies to prove that?

Second, I'd like to hear your opinion on it. Can you clearly explain the effect that suspending the agreement would have on the volume of asylum claims?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: Personally, I'm not aware of any studies that show that suspending the agreement would result in 100,000, 200,000 or 300,000 new asylum seekers annually.

You have to look at what was happening at the time, before the Safe Third Country Agreement went into effect. We were not getting disproportionate streams of asylum seekers. It was pretty much the same from year to year. So I don't see how suspending the agreement would worsen the situation, quite the contrary.

I would remind members that, so far in 2022, 99.3% of asylum seekers who enter Canada irregularly have done so through Roxham Road. This means that virtually all irregular entry into Canada happens at Roxham Road. If the agreement were suspended, asylum seekers would no longer converge there. In addition, people would no longer be forced to deal with smugglers. We forget that claimants will spend tens of thousands of dollars dealing with unscrupulous smugglers to get them to Roxham Road. Instead, asylum seekers could simply show up at any checkpoint and be properly handled by Canadian authorities, the way it used to be done.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm trying to understand what's going on. When it comes to this, most experts like yourself in the field, immigration law associations, migrant advocacy groups or community organizations tell me that the agreement absolutely must be suspended. Yet, the government refuses to do it. For four years, we've been told that they want to modernize it, and nothing gets done.

Your opinion, why hasn't the government made a move? Is it afraid it will offend the Americans?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: That's a tough question to answer.

I've been working on the Roxham Road issue since 2017. It's important to reiterate the government's position on this issue. In the summer of 2020, following a challenge, the Federal Court struck down the Safe Third Country Agreement. The government could have acknowledged the decision at that time and acted accordingly. Instead, it appealed. That went all the way to the Supreme Court and we're awaiting the decision, which is expected in the next few weeks.

Why hasn't the government budged on this issue, when all the stakeholders are advocating for the suspension of the agreement? As I said at the outset, Article 10 of the agreement allows the government to unilaterally suspend the agreement for three months, without even requiring authorization from the U.S. government. It would therefore be very easy for the government to suspend the agreement and see how things play out on the ground. If some people's fears are realized and Canada were to receive 100,000 or 200,000 new asylum seekers, government could opt to reinstate the agreement. The situation may also remain stable.

We could do that. Why don't we do that? You would need to ask the minister that question.

• (1440)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We did ask him, actually, and we got no response. His response to us was that he anticipated an increase in asylum seekers. However, as you said, we could always suspend the agreement for three months and, if necessary, reinstate it later.

We're told they are working on modernizing the agreement and negotiating with the United States. In your opinion, wouldn't suspending the agreement be a way to speed up negotiations with the Americans?

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Handfield.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will now end our panel with Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses for their presentations.

I'd like to continue with Mr. Handfield on this line of questioning.

With respect to the safe third country agreement, some would argue that the United States is a safe country and, therefore, the people who are trying to get to safety here in Canada are asylum shopping.

I wonder what your response is to that. What is the current state in the United States at the moment for asylum seekers?

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: I think it's a mistake to compare the two asylum systems. The situation in the United States is quite different from that in Canada. Canada is much more open and has much more flexible criteria for recognizing that a person is a refugee. Let me give you some examples.

First, sexual orientation. A person seeking asylum in the United States on the basis of sexual orientation could not be recognized as a refugee by the U.S. immigration court. Conversely, in Canada, membership in what's called a particular social group is grounds for recognition as a refugee.

Then there's the fact that a person fears certain crime groups in their country of origin. That is not a recognized ground in the United States, whereas it is in Canada. Those are obviously major differences.

The two systems also have different views on the detention of migrants. In Canada, this is the exception: migrants are detained in purpose-built immigration detention centres that house women, children and families. In the United States, migrants seeking asylum are instead held in common law prisons, alongside criminals, sometimes even hardened criminals like murderers.

The two systems are completely different. In fact, that's why the Federal Court struck down the agreement in 2020. The system was seen as different, and, contrary to popular belief, the United States was not a safe third country for people who feared persecution if they were to return to their home country.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much for that.

I'd like to turn to the representative from MOSAIC, Ms. Nezakat.

There is a lot of focus on Roxham Road, of course, because of the volume of people crossing over irregularly. In British Columbia, we also have numbers.

Do you have any sense of what the impact is on people crossing over irregularly at the British Columbia border?

Ms. Marzieh Nezakat: Thank you so much for asking that.

As I mentioned a little bit earlier, when they cross the border irregularly and they are not intercepted, they need to claim inland. When they claim inland, the whole process of the refugee claim is way more difficult and longer because of the backlog we see with legal aid. It would take, at times, one or two months for a refugee claimant to be able to start working with their lawyers to put their claim in. Then it will take some time to receive income assistance and work permits are delayed for up to 18 months or more.

During this time they do not really have any other financial resources and the stress of not having legal status, of not receiving results on their eligibility interview and from the risk of being denied and found ineligible after more than a year of being in the country puts a lot of pressure on refugee claimants. We receive refugee claimants every week in need of counselling services and one-on-one sessions for the trauma they are going through. They are stressed out.

We're seeing families being separated because they cannot take the pressure any longer because of the uncertainty. It has a toll on these refugee claimants.

• (1445)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Does MOSAIC receive any federal funding to provide support to asylum seekers?

Ms. Marzieh Nezakat: That's a very good question.

In the province of British Columbia, all of the services directed to refugee claimants are only provincially funded.

There is only one federally funded program, which is called Reaching Home by IRCC. It is only for some of the transitional houses. We do not have many transitional houses for refugee claimants in B.C. That is a small program, so I would say that nearly all the funding is provided by the provincial government and not by IRCC.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So effectively all of this pressure is offloaded onto the province. We see that happening in Quebec as well, in Manitoba, and we see it in British Columbia.

Because immigration after all, even if it's asylum seekers, is a federal issue, would you say that the federal government should be supporting provinces in trying to manage the situation, and of course doing it on a compassionate and humanitarian basis?

Ms. Marzieh Nezakat: I am not really sure of the reason for the federal government not funding refugee claimant services in B.C.—that is a question I do not have the knowledge of—but, of course, I would say yes.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Madam Nezakat, but the time is up for Ms. Kwan.

With that, our panel comes to an end.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for appearing before the committee and providing important information.

If there is something you would like to bring to the committee's attention, you can always put it in writing and send it to clerk of the committee. That will be circulated to the members of the committee as we finalize the report.

With that, this panel comes to an end. I thank all of the witnesses. They can leave.

For members of the committee, please log off from this public meeting and then log in for the in camera meeting so that we can do the committee business.

With that, the meeting is suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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