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• (1620)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 82 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Today we are beginning our study on closed work permits and temporary foreign workers.

For the first hour, I am pleased to welcome back the Honourable Marc Miller, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. He is joined by officials from the department: Madam Christiane Fox, deputy minister; and Jean-Marc Gionet, director general, immigration program guidance.

Before I give the floor to the minister, I'll mention that I'm going to be very strict with the time today.

Madam Kwan, you have the floor.

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

I wonder if you can advise the committee, on the public record, on how late the committee will be going in light of the votes in the House.

The Chair: Thank you.

The hard stop today is at 7 p.m. We will give the minister the full hour, starting at 4:20. It will go until 5:20. We will then split the time after that.

One request I would like to make to the honourable members, just to make my life a bit easier, is to have no crosstalk, please. If you think the minister is going a little bit longer on the answer and you want to interrupt, raise your hand and I will acknowledge you, or the minister himself will stop.

With that, I would also love to welcome an honourable member who is just a visitor: Mr. Lehoux, welcome to the committee.

Of course, welcome to Mr. Dreeshen as well. He is substituting for Mr. Kmicc.

With that, I will give the floor to the honourable minister for five minutes.

Minister, go ahead, please.

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

First, I want to acknowledge our presence on the traditional and unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for inviting me to discuss the important role that foreign workers play in Canada's labour market.

There are, as we and this committee well know, significant challenges to Canada's economy in the labour market, whether temporary or permanent. It's worth reminding the committee that 50 years ago, the ratio of worker to retiree was seven to one. It's nearly three to one now. It will approach two to one in the decades ahead if we don't welcome more newcomers, putting our infrastructure, health care and education systems at risk if we don't do so. That's just the reality. We need newcomers to grow our economy and build our country.

[Translation]

Thanks to immigration, we are bringing skilled workers to Canada. Immigration helps employers find the qualified workers they need to address the ongoing labour market shortage. For instance, about half of all degree holders in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in Canada came here from other countries.

[English]

Canada maintains oversight of foreign workers and their impacts on our labour market by making certain work permits employer-specific. That means the permit is associated with one occupation, wage, location and employer.

It's important for the purposes of this discussion to distinguish between the two broad permit programs that exist in Canada. The temporary foreign worker program, or TFWP, is managed by Employment and Social Development Canada and my colleague Randy Boissonnault at ESDC. It provides employer-specific work permits with labour market impact assessment requirements. It includes generally four streams, which are primarily agriculture at 40%, low-wage at 25%, high-wage at 16% and global talent at about 4%. That represents about 147,000 work permits that have been issued in 2023 so far.

The second category, a much broader one, is the international mobility program, delivered solely by IRCC, this department. It exempts employers from the LMIA requirement, which is comprised of over 100 streams. It could be professors. It could be engineers. It could be many categories that we could cover today. Only some of those are actually employer-specific. We've issued to date, under that program, about a million permits this year.

Workers under both programs make valuable contributions to our economy and are essential to employers with short-term labour needs. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. One need only remind oneself of what happened during COVID and the shutdown, and the crisis that imposed immediately on the economy, if people's memories are short.

Employer-specific permits enable us to conduct inspections to ensure that employers comply with regulatory conditions and employment standards legislation—for example, providing a workplace free of abuse, respecting a worker's job description and not engaging in reprisals against workers who raise concerns. Employers who break these rules can incur penalties ranging from warning letters to fines and to bans on hiring temporary foreign workers, even permanently.

● (1625)

[Translation]

The TFW program further takes into account minimum working conditions and other aspects of collective agreements, including wage requirements, which are used to prevent wage suppression for foreign workers and Canadians alike.

It should be noted that certain streams of employer-specific work permit holders receive additional support through the TFW program. For example, employers hiring under the agricultural stream and seasonal agricultural worker program must pay for a worker's round-trip transportation from their home country to their job in Canada, then provide suitable housing that's free of charge, on farm or off site. There are similar requirements for the low-wage streams of the TFW program.

[English]

Any instances of harassment, abuse, or exploitation under the program are absolutely unacceptable, and won't be tolerated. IRCC has introduced measures to allow workers with employer-specific permits to change jobs faster. To stem that abuse through the open work permit for vulnerable workers, we are making it easier for workers to leave abusive situations. We are exploring how to broaden temporary work permits to be sector-specific, as well.

IRCC will continue monitoring and improving its policies and programs to ensure they serve the best interests of temporary foreign workers.

[Translation]

Our whole-of-government approach to developing the immigration levels plan, which I tabled last week, also involves taking a closer look at temporary resident immigration levels and making sure they align with our capacity and needs, to ensure sustainable growth, today and into the future.

[English]

Thank you, and I'm happy to answer questions.

The Chair: Thank you. You were right on the clock for five minutes.

We will start the first round with Mr. Redekopp, for six minutes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome Minister Miller.

As you're aware, this committee was going to hear from the UN special rapporteur on slavery. As per usual for you and bureaucrats, Mr. Obokata has said a variety of inflammatory things about Canada, such as that we need to legalize prostitution, get rid of human trafficking laws, and things like that.

On the issue of the temporary foreign workers program, he said "certain Temporary Foreign Worker Programs make migrant workers vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery". He hasn't released his final report yet, but based on this preliminary report, we know what the final will say.

First, did you, or your department, meet with him to help him better understand the TFW program, and perhaps soften his position?

Hon. Marc Miller: I did not meet personally with him, but our department did.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

The terrorist regime in Tehran jumped on this report. The Iranian foreign ministry issued its own statement on this and said that "the scourge of slavery is still present in the Canadian government's policy."

Do you agree with Iran and the special rapporteur's conclusion that your TFW program is a form of modern slavery?

Hon. Marc Miller: Without putting words into his mouth, I think the special rapporteur would probably be the first to be outraged at the weaponization of that statement by the Iranian regime. At the same time, the special rapporteur did put some work into this, whether I agree with his characterization or not in those terms. It's something we have to take seriously because, at the end of the day, we're talking about individuals who were allegedly suffering some conditions that, by that description, would be entirely inhumane, particularly in a country like Canada.

I don't want to inflame the situation further, or further give fuel to an opportunistic regime to point fingers where it should really be pointing fingers inward at the abuses of their own citizens. As a mature country, we can all agree that we can criticize each other and have critiques from international organizations like the special rapporteur. I may not agree with his turn of phrase, but my focus is on the people whom he felt were subject to those conditions.

● (1630)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Just to be clear, this a modern form of slavery statement. Are you saying you disagree with that?

Hon. Marc Miller: I would need to understand what that actually means. I don't know what the descendants of former slaves would think of that characterization compared with the abuse of their forefathers and foremothers. It is something that makes people jump at, but, again, I focus more on the facts, and the material statements of the people who were covered by that. Obviously, if our departments can do something to make their working conditions better, or if Randy's department can, we absolutely should.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Canada's ambassador to the UN is Bob Rae. I would assume you've instructed him to refute this report in some ways, and to push back on it.

When can Canadians expect to hear Ambassador Bob Rae give a rebuttal to this report?

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't know whether Ambassador Rae beats to anyone's drums. He has his own mind and thoughts on things. I certainly endorse a number of his views.

I'd be glad to speak to him about that, but I haven't done it yet.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Are you saying he's free to have his own opinion on this, and that there will be no instruction coming from your department?

Hon. Marc Miller: He obviously takes direction from our government.

Our focus is not on directing our diplomats, in this case, but rather on engaging with the special rapporteur to express our concerns about where we agree and disagree with the report, and on the way we do things in that forum—which is in a diplomatic way.

Again, my job is to focus internally on the people who were targeted by this report and who are the subject of this report. Ultimately, along with my colleague Mr. Boissonnault, it's to improve their working conditions.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The basis for Mr. Obokata's conclusions go back to the closing of the work permit. You referred to that earlier as employer-specific permits, I think. As you know, this type of permit means that a temporary foreign worker can only work with one specific employer and not move around to other employers.

Thinking specifically of the farmers and producers who employ seasonal temporary foreign workers, do you think closed work permits should be allowed, or should they be phased out?

Hon. Marc Miller: That is a subject this committee will be seized with, as will a committee of the Senate. I'm very eager to see the product of that work. I don't think we should phase them out entirely, in my view, based on the facts I have at hand.

It's important to remember that farmers, large or small, or anyone who employs these folks, put significant investment into their coming. Often, with the seasonal nature of things and such, they are dependent on them for their bottom line.

The cure for this is not to do multiple program reforms without addressing the core issue at hand, which is potential abuse. First, the abuse must be addressed. Whether a more open or regional form of permit is desirable is something I'm glad to look at, but I don't think this signals the end of closed work permits.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You've had meetings with farmers and agriculture stakeholders. Do you understand their issues?

Hon. Marc Miller: I have.

The individuals who come to mind, with whom I recently met, spoke about the importance of treating their employees well. They're quite proud of how they treat their employees—as if they were part of their own family, in their words.

It isn't about casting aspersions on a whole industry and practice. However, on the margins, there is some abuse. We have to recognize it and address it. There are some bad apples, for sure, and we have to make sure the incentives for people to behave badly are not in place.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Is it widespread, or is it somewhat restricted?

Hon. Marc Miller: To be honest, there have been challenges in entirely quantifying it. It does exist. Recognizing that it exists means we have to address it.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Madame Kayabaga for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome again, Minister, to our committee.

I think there is a lot of confusion regarding the roles of IRCC and ESDC when it comes to the work permit programs. You mentioned the temporary worker program and the international mobility program in your remarks.

Could you expand on those a bit?

Hon. Marc Miller: ESDC is responsible for the temporary foreign worker program, which is on a one-to-seven ratio or a one-to-eight ratio. What we're talking about here tends to be in the agricultural space, but it's not limited to the agricultural space. It's one that is largely administered by my colleague Randy Boissonnault in his department.

There is also the international mobility program, as I mentioned in the introduction, which generally covers more open permits that deal with various specialties. They could be anywhere from engineers to university professors, or people here on a temporary basis who are sometimes free to change jobs.

● (1635)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: We know a lot of temporary foreign workers come to Canada to find better opportunities for themselves and build their families here.

Could you touch on the pathway that temporary foreign workers may have to establish themselves in Canada?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, we do stress—and it is important to remind people—that a temporary work opportunity in Canada is not a guarantee for permanent residence or, by extension, citizenship, but there are opportunities.

It's, for example, why there is a bit of confusion when we talk about our levels plan, which we have fixed at 465,000 for this year, 485,000 for the next and then 500,000 for the next. Thirty-five per cent of those are people who are already here. I would say that about 100,000 plus or so come from one or two of these streams. They qualify under any of our public policies dealing with a pathway to permanent residence as part of people's experience here.

As we are looking at some of the reforms to public policy, it's important to say, as I've said publicly, that Canada is to some extent addicted to temporary foreign work. It does create perverse incentives—no need in denying that. One of the ways to make sure we don't continue on a bit of a vicious cycle is to offer people who have the expertise, talent and desire to stay in Canada—and not everyone wants to stay here—the opportunity to do so.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: On the seasonal agricultural worker program, you talked earlier about the “bad apples”. What do you think are the obligations of the employers in terms of housing when they're hiring under the agriculture stream? Also, in addressing this “bad apple” situation that we're talking about, what are the already outlined obligations of the employer?

Hon. Marc Miller: The obligations of the employer are very similar to what any regular employer of Canadians or Canadian permanent residents would have. I think that because of the temporary nature aspect of things, in a sense, sometimes people are bound to a particular situation, and given sometimes as well their own socio-economic condition in their own home countries. They feel beholden and sometimes are unable or unwilling to speak up if something bad happens, even something small, for fear of being sent back without being paid.

That leads to a lot of people not exercising their rights and therefore having no ability to enforce their rights. It varies depending on the program, but as I mentioned in my opening remarks, there is an obligation to bring people here and to pay for that and to return them. There is an obligation to house them in good living conditions.

Also, I think there are new and stronger protections to make sure employers know that they're not able to recover and charge recruitment fees, and for making sure that labourers have information on their rights and access to health care as well, all as part of the context of mandatory employment agreements. Those are more robust elements that will help safeguard the integrity of the system.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: The UN special rapporteur, in his recommendations, did mention creating “a clear pathway” for residency for temporary foreign workers. What kind of work is IRCC doing right now to ensure that is one of the recommendations that is respected?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm looking at a number of options.

Again, with what I mentioned to your colleague from the Conservative Party, we are currently looking at a number of options to make sure that in the temporary foreign worker space—whether it's

in the construction space where we need more people and they have to come from abroad as we cannot generate that domestically entirely—there is a pathway to permanent residence, for example, and then, by extension, Canadian citizenship.

I'm really eager to look at the report of this committee and that of the Senate to see what other recommendations come out, because, again, we're not dogmatic about things. If there's something that makes sense, we're willing to explore it.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, honourable member.

We'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again for being here, Minister. It's a pleasure to have you.

I want to revisit what the UN special rapporteur said. It is significant, after all. You were questioned about it, and in response to a Conservative member's question, you tried to skirt the issue. You said that you didn't know what the descendants of former slaves would think of that characterization. The UN special rapporteur referred to contemporary forms of slavery, and that's exactly what this is. It has nothing to do with what happened in the past. You don't need a Ph.D. in nuclear physics to understand what is meant by contemporary forms of slavery.

Do you see nothing wrong with the UN special rapporteur describing practices in Canada as contemporary forms of slavery? If you think it's okay, do you agree with what he said?

Hon. Marc Miller: Let me be clear, and I believe I said this earlier. I don't necessarily agree with what he said.

My focus is on the facts behind his statements and his conclusion. The UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery is certainly entitled to his opinion. I'm not trying to demonize or diminish him in any way by disagreeing with what he said, but I want to look at the facts behind his conclusion. If anything at all even smelled of contemporary slavery, it would be deeply concerning to me.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: For your information, Minister, I'm going to read out a definition of contemporary slavery: work exacted from a person who is being coerced, physically threatened, dehumanized or deprived of their freedom of movement. We've seen media reports of people who came to Canada on a visitor visa and had their passport taken away from them. They were told that, if they didn't work, they wouldn't get their work permit. For every case of abuse we hear about, there are probably 20 more we will never know about, because people are scared to say anything. Obviously, they don't want to jeopardize their family's financial situation.

You can disagree with what the UN special rapporteur said, but I think the practice of issuing closed work permits creates a breeding ground for this kind of abuse.

I don't know everything and I don't have all the answers. That's precisely why the Bloc Québécois proposed this study to the committee in the first place. I'd like to know what you think. There's no right or wrong answer.

All we know is that the status quo can't go on if a UN special rapporteur says Canada's practices resemble contemporary slavery. Do you agree with me?

It's a straightforward question. Should we keep doing what we're doing and not change anything?

Hon. Marc Miller: It disturbs me tremendously. Obviously, the status quo can't go on, especially for the people who were the subject of the study. As I told the Conservative member, however, I don't think doing away with closed permits will help us get where we need to be.

A lot of farmers take great pride in their work, and they are exemplary employers. I don't want to make all employers out to be villains, but clearly, there is somewhat of a breeding ground for abuse. We have to take a reasoned and reasonable approach, and put measures in place that will truly stamp out the issues flagged by the UN special rapporteur.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We agree on that, then. This isn't a partisan debate.

Giving everyone open permits does carry an element of risk for good employers, who invested a lot of money into bringing those workers here. Workers with open permits can quit if some business owner offers them a dollar more an hour, as soon as they get here.

There's a lot of talk about sector-specific permits. A lot of people in Quebec are talking about region-specific permits, which would be issued according to administrative regions in Quebec.

Is the department exploring those possibilities?

• (1645)

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, we are.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

I'm going to switch topics, Minister.

I was surprised to learn that, in your consultations on the immigration levels plan, only 6% of the respondents you surveyed were from Quebec. You consulted only organizations with a Canadian mandate. This is a quote from your report: "By virtue of the Canada-Québec Accord, IRCC only engages organizations that operate in Québec with a national mandate, as Québec is solely responsible for immigration planning in its own jurisdiction. As such, a smaller proportion of organizations were invited to participate in this year's online survey."

What I take from that is that organizations with a Quebec-only mandate that wanted to provide input were tossed aside.

Do I have that right?

[English]

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

[Translation]

Hon. Marc Miller: They weren't tossed aside, but—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: They were denied the opportunity, were they not?

Hon. Marc Miller: The reason I'm smiling is that Quebec told us specifically that it didn't want us to consult those people. The minister told me personally that she preferred I not reach out directly to universities, which I didn't agree to, obviously. We have to be able to talk to who we want to talk to. The reality, however, is that, in order to adhere to the accord with Quebec, we had to limit our interactions with Quebec organizations.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're saying that Quebec is the reason why you didn't speak with those stakeholders.

Hon. Marc Miller: That's partly why.

[English]

The Chair: Your time is over.

We'll go to Madam Kwan.

You have six minutes. Go ahead, please.

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

The UN rapporteur actually said that Canada's temporary foreign worker program is "a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery". He called on the government to do better to protect workers' rights. He also offered that he was "deeply disturbed by the accounts of exploitation and abuse shared with [him] by migrant workers." He got that information from the people on the ground with that direct experience.

One thing he highlighted was that "employer-specific work permit regimes...make migrant workers vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery, [and] they cannot report abuses without fear of deportation."

Those are his words.

In 2019, the immigration committee actually studied this issue. It issued a report on temporary foreign workers and non-status workers. It recommended that the government discontinue employer-specific work permits.

In 2016, the HUMA committee also did a study and made a report on the temporary foreign worker program. It found that employer-specific work permits "place migrant workers in a vulnerable position with negative implications for their physical and mental well-being." It recommended that "immediate steps" be taken to eliminate employer-specific work permits.

In 2019, when it implemented the open work permit for vulnerable workers policy, Canada acknowledged that employer-specific work permits create a power imbalance that "favours the employer and can result in a migrant worker enduring situations of misconduct, abuse or other forms of employer retribution."

We have seen numerous reports and recommendations to the government to take this action. Here we are in the immigration committee in 2023 studying this issue once again.

I think the evidence is there. If the minister talks to the migrant workers and the advocates from that community, he will hear from them that one thing that needs to be done is for the Canadian government to get rid of the closed work permits. Better still, they're calling on the government to give them landed status on arrival and regularize the workers who are here.

As a first step, would the minister actually bring forward the recommendation that has already come from multiple committees to minimize the abuse that migrant workers face, which is to give them an open work permit?

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, without getting ahead of myself, I think it's safe to say that my colleague, Randy Boissonault, speaks with me. He does administer the program.

It's something that we are looking at and considering. I've mentioned to your colleagues that we're willing to revisit the conditions of the issuances of closed work permits and maybe even consider a more regionally natured one.

I do also want to stress that the nature of the work permit may create conditions that create a sentiment that people can't speak up. The abuse can exist independently, as well. We need to address that first and foremost.

There have been regulatory changes in the last few years, so I wouldn't say that nothing has happened, but clearly once these instances get documented again and again, we need to do something.

• (1650)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have spoken with migrant workers who have been subject to this abuse. They feel that they can't speak up.

By the way, for some people, the abuse was so extensive that they couldn't stay in that employment anymore. Then they go to apply for open work permit and guess what. IRCC tells them they're not qualified because they left their employment.

We're saying to the migrant workers to stay there and continue to be abused while we process and investigate whether or not they're really being abused.

You can understand how impossible that is. If they lose that employment, people are without any resources. They are here alone. What are they supposed to do?

The current programs, no matter what the fix is, have not worked so far. We have been talking about this for decades now. I've been here for eight years. Prior to this, studies were done. Now you're saying that the government is looking at it again. How many decades does a person have to wait for the government to do the right thing?

I'm simply saying to the government that the time to act is now. It's not time to say that we'll do this study some more because we have done this over and over again at different committees through different decades.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't really disagree with you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The other thing I want to get to is this. In 2021, the temporary foreign workers numbers jumped to 770,000. That is a staggering number. We're bringing in more temporary foreign workers than we're bringing in those with permanent resident status.

When you do that, the minister knows—and I know you know—that when we deprive people of their status and their full rights, they're subject to exploitation.

Would the minister agree with the sentiment and the principle that if you're good enough to work here, you're good enough to stay? If a person comes to Canada, wants to work and if they want to stay, shouldn't they be given the opportunity to have landed status on arrival?

Hon. Marc Miller: Not necessarily; the reality is that there are people who come here and there is no intention for them to either stay—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, but if they wanted to stay.

Hon. Marc Miller: If we believe in international labour mobility, we have to look as well at partner countries and how they welcome similarly situated people who come to them from Canada.

I think, in a sense, with great respect, you are mixing apples and oranges. Whether we're talking about international students who may or may not want to stay here—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, I'm talking about temporary foreign workers.

Hon. Marc Miller: Well, you cited numbers that have nothing to do with temporary foreign workers. Temporary foreign workers are only [*Inaudible—Editor*]—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No. Those are temporary foreign worker numbers.

The Chair: No crosstalk, please.

Hon. Marc Miller: There weren't 700,000 temporary foreign workers in that program in the last year. If you're talking about the international mobility program, we're talking about a million. That's a different regulatory category with open work permits.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Time is up.

We will move to the next round.

Mr. Maguire, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, you have been in your position for three months. Congratulations.

Have you visited a farm that employs temporary foreign workers?

Hon. Marc Miller: As I mentioned to your colleague, I have met with representatives, but I have not visited a farm, no.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Neither has the special UN rapporteur.

You stated in a recent interview that the government needs to "cohesively and comprehensively" respond to the reality that temporary foreign workers are often exploited in the agriculture sector. You must have hard data to back up that claim.

I'm just looking for a number. Since 2015, how many farmers have been banned from using foreign workers?

Hon. Marc Miller: We do have statistics for you, Larry, on various levels of enforcement, whether it is a ban or a regulatory citation. Just for reference—it's worth reading into the record—there are 310 employers that can't access IMP or TFW for a variety of reasons, one with a permanent ban and 18 with a temporary ban.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thanks.

A recent government report stated, and I think your number has just confirmed it, that almost 95% of businesses are fully compliant with the temporary foreign worker program. For the ones that are not, many of the concerns were administrative in nature, from the reports that I've read, and only a handful were deemed to be of a serious nature.

I'm just looking for a yes or no: Under your watch, do you believe there is wide-scale abuse being conducted by farmers?

Hon. Marc Miller: Look, I don't know who you're trying to defend here. We're trying to get the people who have committed some bad acts. I don't want to cast aspersions on an industry. Neither do you, but feel free, if you want.

Mr. Larry Maguire: No. I'm just asking—

Hon. Marc Miller: And I'm just answering.

Mr. Larry Maguire: —if you have any kind of a number. I mean, 95% of your own businesses are saying they're compliant.

Hon. Marc Miller: But 1% is too much. I mean, that's the issue that we have to drive at. I'm not trying to attack an industry. There are some really good actors. That isn't the intention of anything that we're saying, but if there's one bad actor, we have to crack down on it. We're Canada.

The Chair: No crosstalk, please.

• (1655)

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

To follow up on what my colleagues have said, the UN special rapporteur has said that the temporary foreign worker program constitutes "a breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery".

Under your watch, are you allowing forms of slavery to happen?

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't agree with the sentiment. I don't agree with the statement, but as I have said, I am concerned about the people he spoke to. That's something I think we need to focus on as a government.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm glad of your answer.

With regard to the Criminal Code in Canada, the government passed three parts in 2017—section 279.011, section 279.02 and section 279.03.

How many cases of slavery are under investigation by the RCMP in Canada today?

Hon. Marc Miller: You would have to ask the RCMP.

Mr. Larry Maguire: You don't know.

Hon. Marc Miller: You would have to ask the RCMP.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Is slavery happening in Canada today—yes or no?

Hon. Marc Miller: That is a loaded question, Larry. It's ridiculous for you to ask that type of question. You should be ashamed.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm just—

Hon. Marc Miller: Come on, Larry. You can do better than that.

Mr. Larry Maguire: You're looking at a rapporteur's—

Hon. Marc Miller: You're the one asking me if there's slavery in Canada, for God's sake. I mean, you're better than that—really.

Mr. Larry Maguire: So it's an easy answer.

Hon. Marc Miller: What's your answer? What do you think, Larry?

Mr. Larry Maguire: I think "no", but the UN rapporteur—

The Chair: No crosstalk, please.

Mr. Larry Maguire: All I'm saying is that [Inaudible—Editor] not following his rapporteur.

Hon. Marc Miller: Okay. Next question.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Once a worker comes to Canada, informing them of their rights under the program is paramount. Your government has stated that this is currently happening.

Can you please confirm, yes or no, whether your government is ensuring that the workers are being informed of their rights?

Hon. Marc Miller: We're doing our utmost. We've made a number of regulatory changes to make sure that employers are doing a better job of making sure that people are informed of their rights, including in the context of an employment agreement.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm pleased to hear that too, because that disagrees with what the special rapporteur said.

Your government implemented the migrant worker support program, which includes a safe and secure environment for the workers to report abuse and then change jobs.

I'm looking for a yes or no: Has your government failed to give workers the process to change jobs if claims of abuse are confirmed?

Hon. Marc Miller: There is a process we have to allow people to switch. For the benefit of this committee, I will let you know that there are about 4,000 authorizations that we have accepted. However, again, this is a regulatory process that is run by my department.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Has a farmer who's currently using temporary foreign workers or seasonal agricultural workers ever approached you to change the program to allow for open permits for workers, yes or no?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm sorry. You'll have to repeat the question.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm wondering if a farmer who is using temporary foreign workers or seasonal agricultural workers has ever approached you to change the program to allow for open permits for workers. Has any farmer ever asked for that?

Hon. Marc Miller: Not to my knowledge.

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

We'll go to Mr. El-Khoury for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you for being here, Minister.

The UN special rapporteur also recommended that Canada provide all migrant workers with a clear path to permanent residency to prevent situations of abuse.

Can you give us an update on what IRCC is doing to help migrant workers?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's clear from the report that improvements need to be made to the program. I don't think getting rid of closed permits with the stroke of a pen is necessarily the way to go. As the Bloc Québécois member pointed out, that could create a breeding ground for abuse. We can recognize that. I would also say, though, that the vast majority of people who use the program to contribute to Canada's economy do so in good faith and are outstanding participants.

There is no doubt that there are cases of abuse, and that's what we need to be focusing on, as a country, to make sure those situations don't continue. Nevertheless, I don't think just switching the program over to an open work permit regime is a good idea. Farmers and producers have put a lot of money into welcoming and housing these workers. I don't think that is the right way to go, from an economic or human standpoint. I haven't been to any farms, but I have met with people who treat their employees wonderfully. I think the approach has to be surgical, if I can put it that way.

I don't entirely agree with the UN special rapporteur's conclusion, but I do want to get at the root cause. More flexibility for open permits in abusive cases or more regional measures, if that's desirable, are things we could consider. We are always open to those possibilities. Our main goal is to stamp out abuse.

• (1700)

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: The caregiver program is a good example of balancing a worker's ability to change employers with the ob-

jectives of the program. For years, the program, inherited from the Conservatives, was plagued by cases of abuse and harassment because the Conservatives allowed it to happen.

Minister, we dismantled the Conservatives' program and replaced it with two programs, the home child care provider pilot and the home support worker pilot.

Can you describe the changes our government has made to protect caregivers from abuse?

Hon. Marc Miller: First, we tackled cases of abuse. It's clear that the program had been abused in the past. One of the important changes we made was creating a pathway to permanent residency, which has allowed Canada to bring in more than 4,300 caregivers and their family members. Of course, there are many more who are waiting, as we work with families, but the pathway gives people who want to stay in Canada a glimmer of hope.

A lot of people are wanting to take advantage of the program in the country, and we have a duty to be open to that possibility. At the same time, we have to make sure it doesn't lead to abuse. Therefore, that is one of the measures we put in place.

I'm also very amenable to considering other measures given the significant demand for the program. I will say, though, we have to make sure that the abuse that happened in the past doesn't happen again.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: There's something that really disturbs me, not about what has been said, but about consultants who used false documents to secure visas. We've seen that in the past.

Can you talk briefly about what your department decided to do to deal with those people?

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. El-Khoury, but your time is up.

We now go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Minister, I seem to be the least partisan one at the table today, perhaps because my focus is on finding solutions.

You said you were considering the possibility of expanding open work permits for workers in specific sectors or regions, at least in Quebec.

Would that mean that the worker with the open permit would still have to comply with the contract they had signed with their first employer, or would the first employer have access to compensation if the person went to work for another employer?

[*English*]

The Chair: Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: As I see it, we absolutely have to discuss that with Quebec.

I'm open to everything, in the context. I'm not against the idea, but in my discussions with Quebec's Minister of Immigration, Francization and Integration, there was a desire to keep in place some of the work permit requirements that were relaxed because of the pandemic.

I'm still not sure whether I agree with that, but we made accommodations.

One thing is certain. My Quebec counterpart and I need to have a discussion. It's fine to speculate aloud, but out of respect, I'd prefer to have that conversation with her.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Very well.

There is something that concerns you directly, though, labour market impact assessments, or LMIA's, the labour market studies issued by Employment and Social Development Canada, or ESDC. They do cost money, so they do create somewhat of a financial burden.

Since Canada has a workforce development agreement with Quebec, which differs from the agreements with other provinces, and given the Québec Acceptance Certificate system, why is an LMIA necessary? Quebec is in a position to know exactly what its workforce requirements are within its own borders.

Why make employers pay for the federal government to do a study when Quebec already has authority over its workforce?

Wouldn't that be a way to provide access to open permits, while saving employers who initially bring the workers here some money?

• (1705)

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm very open-minded.

Without stepping on the toes of my fellow minister, Mr. Boissonnault—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Madam Kwan.

The floor is yours, Madam Kwan, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Does the minister support the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and their Families?

Hon. Marc Miller: You can guess my answer, but I do, sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

As of today, Canada has not signed or ratified this covenant. Why is that?

Hon. Marc Miller: You would have to ask the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

I am glad to look at and support that covenant. The history behind Canada's non-signature of that covenant is one that we can probably discuss at a later date.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I appreciate that. I appreciate your honesty, Minister, on that question.

The special rapporteur also heard that labour inspectors collude with immigration authorities to target undocumented migrants for arrest and deportation.

I have a copy of a letter that tells people to report people and, as the minister can anticipate, if you're subject to abuse and you leave your employment, you could become undocumented very quickly while you wait for remedies. Already, as indicated, the special provision that's being offered by government.... If you've left your employment, you're not going to be eligible for an open work permit under the vulnerable workers stream.

It would be in the interests of the employer to get rid of these workers and get them deported ASAP, because they are people who will point out how they have been abused.

Does the minister agree with policies that work to get rid of the workers who have been subject to abuse as quickly as possible? If not, what action will the minister take to prevent that?

Hon. Marc Miller: I think you could guess my answer, but I don't agree. The measures we do to make sure that people can exercise their rights, whether it is to sue employers or make sure that their rights are enforced, are in the context where lots of people are fleeing or are afraid to speak up. Again, you've made lots of suppositions in the fact pattern that you stated to me, but again I'm concerned about abuse. I'm concerned about people leveraging that potential to get people removed from the country when it hides their abuse. These are extremely limited circumstances, but these are matters where we need to investigate and perhaps exercise our regulatory powers.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Hence, the need to actually change policies to protect and support the—

The Chair: Honourable member, your time is up.

We will go to Mr. Redekopp for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Mr. Chair, I'm going to cede my time to Mr. Lehoux.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Lehoux (Beauce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the committee for having me.

Thank you, Minister, for being here. My first question is pretty straightforward.

I'm on the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, and in the past, I've repeatedly asked that the committee invite the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to answer questions. Both of your predecessors turned down the invitation. Yesterday, for the fourth time, I put forward a motion to do the same thing, and it received unanimous support from the committee.

I think everything being discussed here, today, is interesting, but we have been asking for a meeting for quite some time. We'd actually like to question not just the immigration minister, but also the labour minister about LMIAs. Numerous recommendations have been made, including as part of a recent study on agri-food processing capacity, and we would like to discuss them with you.

Farms employ a lot of workers, as do agri-food processors. Many employers in my region have tried to secure foreign workers, but those processors weren't able to get the workers because of red tape.

Minister, will you commit to meeting with the members of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food?

• (1710)

[*English*]

The Chair: Honourable Minister, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: The committee is independent, as am I—mostly independent-minded—but I will look at the motion. I'm not saying yes right now, but I'm not saying no.

I think it would be better to speak with my fellow minister Randy Boissonnault about LMIAs, since they fall under his authority.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: The red tape around the applications is still a problem. Businesses told me that more than 200 workers were waiting to be admitted to the country because of all the red tape at IRCC. LMIAs aren't the only problem. IRCC is the main player in that domain.

That's why we would like to meet with you, Minister, as soon as possible. We are talking about major problems. There is a lot of focus on food security and export capacity, but the workforce has to be available. I hope you will accept our invitation.

Now I have a very quick question for you.

During the pandemic, workers received open permits instead of closed permits, and a lot of businesses complained, at least in my region. They lost foreign workers, not because they were mistreating the workers, but because another employer had offered them a few extra dollars an hour, on site. That makes things harder for the businesses that initially sought out those workers. They assumed the costs of bringing those people to the country, so there is a cost attached to all that, as you, yourself, mentioned, Minister.

Currently, are closed work permits actually closed?

Hon. Marc Miller: You're right that reforms to the system have to take into account the fact that employers put a lot of money into attracting workers to Canada for a few months. They're hoping their investment will pay off for the duration of their season or crop year.

I'm really concerned about this. It's actually the reason why I didn't commit to making all closed permits open permits. Instead, we are going to take a close look at the working conditions and provide open permits only when abuse is happening or the facts warrant it, for instance, in a specific region or sector.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you, Minister.

I assume from your look that you'll agree to meet with the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

I'll give my time to Mr. Maguire.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Maguire you have a minute and 10 seconds.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'll just go back to the previous question that I asked, Mr. Minister. I've farmed all of my life. In farming, timing is important. There's the window to harvest, and for doing other field work it can be quite small. Would it be reasonable for farmers to have valid concerns that open work permits could potentially put them in a situation where they couldn't get their crops off if another farmer with a valid LMIA came by and offered them a better deal?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, the concern is reasonable.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Is the government aware of any other G7 countries that allow open work permits for comparable programs that are seasonal in nature? If they are, could they table them, please?

Hon. Marc Miller: We'd have to check. We don't know.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Can we have those tabled if there are any?

I was pleased to see that you indicated that no farmer who is using a temporary foreign worker or seasonal agriculture worker has ever approached you about changing the permit to an open work permit. Is that correct?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Maguire.

The time is up.

Hon. Marc Miller: I'd have to get back to you on the tenet of that conversation, but it wasn't a full discussion on keeping everything closed. It was about really making sure that employees, including temporary foreign workers, were properly treated and how proud they were of that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ali, you have five minutes and then we will thank the minister.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before the committee. Thank you for your recent announcement on stabilizing Canada's immigration targets.

We have heard from many temporary foreign workers that they come to Canada for better opportunities and that they wish to establish themselves permanently.

Could you please expand on this or inform this committee of pathways to permanent residence available to temporary foreign workers?

• (1715)

Hon. Marc Miller: As I mentioned to one of your colleagues, MP Ali, there are a number of areas in which the transition from temporary residence to permanent residence is a real possibility.

It is not open to everyone, and I think that should remain the case given our concerns around international mobility rights and the reciprocal arrangements we have with other countries.

I think it is legitimate to say that as well in the context of our own orderly migration, with respect to which I spoke last week and made an announcement about the levels. Given those levels I spoke about and announced last week and the strategic review that we performed, clearly there need to be, in addition to the topics covered today about abuse, methods whereby someone can come to Canada as a temporary foreign worker and aspire to be Canadian through the path of permanent residence. That is the case for more than one hundred thousand people. The exact number I could provide to the committee if it so wished, but it is a large flow.

It isn't every international student who becomes a permanent resident, a Canadian. It isn't every farm labourer who becomes a permanent resident, but there are pathways, whether it's express entry on the Canadian experience class where people come here and get points for the experience that they have, the federal skilled worker program, which is a federally administered program based on skill sets, or—something provinces really enjoy—the provincial nominee program, and in the case of Quebec the jurisdiction that it exercises under the Canada-Quebec Accord, which goes back 30 years now.

There are ways—and they are important—but I'm also looking at a number of ways in which we can increase that, particularly in areas where we need workers. We need to offer them a little more hope than simply saying, "Come here; build a building and go home." That is notably in the construction area, and these are policies that I haven't announced yet. We're still working on them and examining them to make sure there is no abuse and that there is a pathway to permanent residency and citizenship eventually.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Minister.

On immigration consultants, this government has put in place the College of Immigration and Citizenship Consultants to regulate immigration consultants and protect Canadian clients from nefarious bad actors and which the Conservatives have voted against.

In 2022, the government also implemented a code of professional conduct for consultants.

Can you explain the role that the college plays in reprimanding bad actors in our immigration system, specifically when it comes to temporary foreign workers?

Hon. Marc Miller: The college is up and working. Its essential goal is to make sure that the code for professional conduct for con-

sultants establishes strong ethical and professional standards that all licensed consultants must abide by. Obviously, the worst actors don't get licensed. Clearly, this is a mechanism that is important for people who are served by them—to have that assurance that they will get the proper advice. In the industry, there is some real opportunism, some real fraud and people taking advantage of folks. I think the college is an important step in making sure that people are behaving the way they should.

I would say there's that part of it, and there's also making sure that they're providing regulatory advice to us on what we can do better. Improving oversight and strengthening enforcement, as well as increasing accountability, was enabled by an investment of about \$48 million over four years, with a \$10-million ongoing commitment. That has allowed us to put this into place.

Essentially, we're talking of consultants who range from 6,000 in 2018 to now 12,000 in 2022. I've met with them. We expect their role to be even more prominent in an area where we're facing an historic volume of people wanting to come to Canada who are subject to abuse.

Obviously, the concern that needs to be addressed is some of the opportunism that happens abroad. That's something that also needs to be stemmed.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The time is up.

On behalf of the committee members and as chair, I would love to thank the minister for being with us today.

Minister, thank you. I'm looking forward to seeing you many more times here.

I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

• (1720)

(Pause)

• (1720)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Two officials, Madam Fox and Mr. Gionet, are with us. We are also joined by Mr. Michael MacPhee, assistant deputy minister of the temporary foreign worker program, from the Department of Employment and Social Development.

We'll go straight to the questions, and we'll start the first round with my dear friend, Mr. Maguire, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here for part of our second hour.

I just have some questions for the officials here with regard to some of the things that I was asking the minister.

Does the department regularly meet with agricultural businesses or farmers to gather feedback on how to improve the temporary foreign worker program or the seasonal agricultural worker program?

• (1725)

Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I think the answer is yes. We do meet with a number of sectors of the economy that use the TFW program or the IMP to get feedback on what's working, what's not and what some of the considerations are. I think there are important considerations to balance as we make decisions.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Has anyone from the agriculture sector ever recommended that the government adopt an open work permit system for temporary foreign workers?

Ms. Christiane Fox: To me directly? No, I don't think I've heard that request before. However, I have heard some comments and considerations around, perhaps, sector-specific, region-specific...and collaboration between different companies. That is something that's come to light. It's not particularly from a farmer, but in the context of processing plants, etc., I think that's come to—

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm just talking about the agriculture sector.

Has the department ever specifically asked farmers that question—about an open work permit system?

Mr. Michael MacPhee (Assistant Deputy Minister, Temporary Foreign Worker Program, Department of Employment and Social Development): The seasonal agricultural worker program actually does have some level of mobility in it already. There is an opportunity for workers to move between farmers that both have LMIA's, as long as there's an agreement for that movement to take place.

I think the community is interested in looking at ways to facilitate the movement of workers so that it's mutually beneficial for both the workers and the employers, and so that the employers have the opportunity to use workers during specific crop—

Mr. Larry Maguire: Since the implementation of the migrant worker support program and the government's creation of a process to allow—as you were saying—a worker to change jobs due to concerns about their work environment or employer, how many workers have changed jobs? Is there a number that you can provide me with there?

Ms. Christiane Fox: For the open work permits for employees who are vulnerable, I would say a few things.

One, since the inception of the program, 4,000 open work permits have been given to vulnerable workers, and this year we have 1,320. Even if an employee has left his or her position, or has been terminated, he or she can still get an open work permit for vulnerable employees.

I would also add that there is a low evidentiary threshold, which is something that the UN special rapporteur has asked us to look into, and our staff who deal with it do get trauma-informed training.

Mr. Larry Maguire: There are a couple of things about the special rapporteur.

Are you aware that during his investigation, he didn't visit a farm in Canada?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I was not aware that he had not visited a farm in Canada.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Are you aware that he couldn't provide an example of another western country that has a good temporary foreign worker program?

Ms. Christiane Fox: He did not share that with us.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Are you aware that he mused about the idea that there needs to be a nation-wide ombudsman for all workers, including Canadian workers?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I did hear that, yes.

Mr. Larry Maguire: According to the UN special rapporteur, the government is doing a terrible job of informing workers of their rights. That's not what the minister just told me, but do you agree with his assessment?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We communicate with employers and employees. When it comes to communication, you can always do more, but we do inform people of their rights. The employer compliance regime that is now in place sets the path for the employer also communicating those rights to their employees.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Is it the department's view that the current process protecting workers is sufficient by giving them an avenue to report concerns and changes in jobs as necessary?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We've tried to set up a system for vulnerable workers to be comfortable in coming to us and making those claims. Every system can always evolve to be more responsive to the needs to new or emerging things that occur. We are attempting to set up a system not only for employees to come forward but also for employers who are bad actors in the system, indicating there are greater penalties, so that we can address the bad actors and allow the good actors to continue to work.

• (1730)

Mr. Larry Maguire: According to the latest numbers, from April 2022 to March 2023, ESDC received 5,465 tips of potential abuse.

How many of those tips resulted in a business being banned from using the program?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: We don't necessarily tie the tip directly to the outcome, because oftentimes the tips that do come in are related to an existing investigation that has been undertaken. About 43% of all of the tips that come in are followed up directly by ourselves, and another 23% or so are referred to other organizations, including the RCMP or local law enforcement.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Do you have a number of how many businesses have been banned from using the program?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I have some for our program at the IMP. Some 3,381 employers were inspected, and 13 employers were found to be non-compliant. Since 2016, about \$1.3 million has been paid in compensation to workers, and in terms of administrative monetary penalties, about \$670,000.

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time is up Mr. Maguire.

We'll now go to Mr. Chiang, for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Chiang (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today and giving us their valuable insight on what they do.

We know that the purpose of the TFW program is to assist employers in filling specific labour market gaps without compromising the capacity of Canadians to access the job market.

Can you speak to this committee about how these objectives are accomplished, and the sector-by-sector approach taken by this program?

Ms. Christiane Fox: The IMP program is intended to support the economic, cultural and social goals of the country. That could be an open work permit for youth mobility agreements with other countries and having young people come to Canada, discover Canada and work in Canada. That would be one important outcome of the IMP.

The other types of outcomes are post-graduation work permits for students who come here to study and have the ability to work post-graduation. Also, trade agreements are linked to the IMP, when we have mobility agreements with other countries.

Then, on top of that, we do have sector-specific strategies for specific types of labour gaps. I will give an example in the high-tech sector. A few months ago, we announced that H-1B visa holders in the U.S. who were IT workers, etc., could come to Canada through the IMP on an open work permit to allow them to bring their experience and talent to this country. Within 48 hours, we had 10,000 applications. That would be an example of how we can use temporary foreign workers to fill a particular gap in our labour market.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you.

Among the subcategories of the TFW program, such as high-wage stream, low-wage stream, agriculture stream and caregiver stream, are there specific sectors that stand out to you as being of particularly high risk for workers' exploitation? Please explain the specific risks within these sectors.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think, traditionally, we would note that low-skilled workers are more vulnerable than high-skilled, high-mobility employees who come to the country on a temporary basis. We tend to pay very close attention, I think, from a TFW standpoint, to meat-packing plants, fisheries plants and farmers. These are areas where we do take a very close look.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you.

There have been concerns raised about workers' exploitation through employer-specific or closed work permits. A report published by this committee back in 2021 noted that avoiding mistreatment and overwork is difficult for those with closed work permits, because they don't have the power to move around to another employer that would provide better working conditions. These work-

ers are also unable to control their workload by finding additional work at other places later in the season.

What is currently being done to support TFWs with closed work permits, and where are the current gaps in enforcement for employers related to working conditions?

• (1735)

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think I would start by saying that the fact that we have employer-specific work permits does allow us to know where employees are and to do check-ins and inspections. If everyone had an open work permit, that would be a lot harder to track.

I understand that there are sensitivities around employer-specific work permits. I am very sensitive to that. However, I think we also have to be mindful that because there is an employer tied to the permit, we have an ability to inspect and to offer supports to employees who find themselves in a bad situation.

That said, I think what the department has done to address the context of vulnerable employees is setting up the open worker permit for vulnerable employees so that they have a pathway to report abuse and to be able to stay in this country and not be deported. We try to really limit the threshold for them to be able to access that open work permit.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you.

A newspaper article published by the National Post in February this year noted that, while the government does allow abused workers with closed work permits to apply for an open work permit, "it places the burden of proof" on the employer and does not "guarantee future re-employment" via the TFW program, "nor does it provide workers with the housing or support they require to find new employment".

What additional steps can your department take to ensure that abused TFWs receive the support that they need?

The Chair: Deputy Minister, you have 40 seconds.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think I would say that we definitely take that to heart. I think when people make the hard decision to leave their employer because they are abused and vulnerable, first, it takes that courage from the individual to report. What we've tried to do is to have—as I said—a low threshold, a quick response to the individuals who come to us, a team who has training to deal with people who have been in an abusive situation, and an ability to get an open work permit.

I would agree that if this committee were to dig into better ways that we can communicate this program and better ways to look at the transition between their current work permit and their new work permit, or their open work permit, we are all ears to that. We want to make this successful and to make sure that people know it exists and access it throughout. I think the low evidentiary threshold we've tried to set hopefully gives people confidence that this is a re-course mechanism that is available to them.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Parliamentary Secretary. The time is up.

Now we'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Please go ahead, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

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

I wasn't planning to bring this up, but since we are talking about vulnerable workers and open permits, I will.

There are groups that advocate for farm workers, like the Réseau d'aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec, or RATTMAQ. In early 2023, back in the winter, I spoke with representatives of the organization, and they couldn't understand why the department was suddenly denying applications the organization was submitting on behalf of vulnerable workers looking to obtain open permits because of abusive situations. For years prior to that, the same process for the same types of cases did not result in the same number of applications being denied.

Were you aware of that, Ms. Fox?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I actually met with RATTMAQ representatives in March, further to consultations on our immigration program. They talked about periodic processing delays, but I didn't hear anything about a change in the number of applications being denied.

I can certainly follow up with them to get a better sense of the issue and find out more about the change you're referring to.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm a bit surprised to hear that, since I had actually set up a meeting between the people at RATTMAQ and staff in then minister Sean Fraser's office to discuss that very issue. I'm surprised you weren't brought into the loop on that, given your high-ranking role at the department.

If I understand correctly, no one in the office of then minister Sean Fraser passed on any information regarding the meeting I arranged to discuss that very thing.

Do I have that right?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's quite possible that staff in Minister Fraser's office spoke with the team in charge of that. That is possible, even though I may not have known. Actually, I think the issue was discussed with the department.

• (1740)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In that case, could you answer my question?

Mr. Jean-Marc Gionet (Director General, Immigration Program Guidance, Department of Citizenship and Immigration):

Yes, we did have discussions with people in Minister Fraser's office about that. I believe we were trying to figure out whether there was a problem on the applicants' end or the processing end, and whether we needed to follow up with the people doing the processing. Was the balance between the open permits issued and the time it took to make the decision adequate?

When complete applications were denied, was a decision made too quickly? Do we need to communicate more with clients, and so forth?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My question is pretty straightforward.

I arranged a meeting between RATTMAQ and the minister's office. They passed on the information regarding what was discussed at the meeting. You must have done some sort of assessment to identify why, all of a sudden, it became virtually impossible for people whose applications were in order to obtain open permits in the same circumstances. Why was it easier to obtain those permits before?

What did your assessment reveal? What's the reason that the permits were suddenly denied?

Did you make changes to the process? Was the situation corrected?

Mr. Jean-Marc Gionet: Thank you for your question.

We are always looking for ways to improve the instructions we give our officers so that applications are processed properly.

I'm going to have to get back to you on this. I'll have to go back and see what exactly was recommended.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As far as you know, did one particular officer deny more applications than the rest of the team, say?

Mr. Jean-Marc Gionet: Again, I'm going to have to get back to you on that, because I can't give you an answer now.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, can you make sure the witnesses get back to the committee with the answers to my questions? I wasn't planning on bringing this up, but a few things came to mind.

Can we be certain that the witnesses are going to get back to the committee with the answers to all my questions? I'm especially interested in the answer to the last one, which is rather important. We'd like to find out what happened, so we need to have the details.

Ms. Fox, some 142,150 new permits were issued under the temporary foreign worker program between January and August 2023.

Can you tell the committee how many closed work permits have been issued per province since the beginning of 2023?

Ms. Christiane Fox: ESDC issued 147,863 permits under the temporary foreign worker program between January and September. We had about a million on our end. Of that number, 77% were open permits, and 23% were employer-specific permits. The breakdown for employer-specific work permits was 40% and 60% for the two departments respectively.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: You have 25 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Fox, you said that you were exploring the possibility of issuing sector-specific and region-specific open work permits. I assume you are looking into that because it's a good idea.

Am I right?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's certainly an idea worth considering.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Why is it an idea worth considering?

Ms. Christiane Fox: A private business that recruits workers and invests in its people fully recognizes their value. It doesn't want to lose workers because they have an open permit. I think it's important to recognize the investments of good employers.

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

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Would you agree that there's a power imbalance between the migrant worker and their employer?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have certainly talked to many migrant workers for whom a power imbalance is very real. Therefore, they are subject to exploitation and abuse in the workplace. Many of them are very afraid to speak up, because when they do, they risk losing their job and livelihood, and there are cascading implications from that.

I'm interested in knowing how many migrant workers applied for the open work permit for vulnerable workers process and were rejected.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would agree that it can exist. Yes. I don't think it would be in all cases, all the time, but I think there can be a power imbalance.

• (1745)

Ms. Christiane Fox: I will have to get you the precise number on that. I don't have it with me. I can say I have the number of how many were issued, but I would have to determine the number that applied.

I should also note that through the open work permit for vulnerable workers program, we also offer open work permits to the spouses and family members of those individuals.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I understand the program. I think that's an important number to look at, because there are many people who cannot get through the process.

The rapporteur made these comments with respect to the program:

...the fact that the worker must remain with the abusive employer or survive in Canada without the ability to work legally or access most social services until the open work permit application is granted

—the rapporteur raised that concern, as well as the following—

the high evidentiary standard required in practice to receive a positive decision in spite of a legal threshold of “reasonable grounds”, and language barriers and lack of ability to navigate the legal process to obtain a permit without external assistance.

He raised those concerns as major barriers for people to access the program.

The government's own website, which I have open in front of me, on the open work permit for vulnerable workers indicates that you actually have to be employed as you experience that abuse in order to qualify for the program.

Did I hear the deputy correctly when she said they don't have to be employed?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you.

Workers who left an abusive employment situation before applying for this work permit are still eligible, as long as their permit is valid or they are on “maintained” status.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The website is right in front of me and it says something different. Perhaps there is some miscommunication on, or misalignment with, the government's website with respect to that.

I have met with migrant workers who didn't qualify.

When did this policy change?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's been in place for some time.

Mr. Jean-Marc Gionet: I can't point back to a specific date for when or if that changed. I'm only looking at the website as it currently reads.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I can tell you for sure that I've met with workers. I've tried to assist them. I've appealed to former ministers about people having been terminated or who left their employment and are subject to abuse.

I tried to assist them in getting access to this program and I failed. I appealed to the ministers directly for support on that, and they said they do not qualify.

That is the reality for the people I dealt with.

There was a change in policy at some point in time. I don't know exactly when. The website I'm staring at right now on my computer tells me something different.

One of the issues that has come up over and over again with respect to this—and it was cited—is that ESDC potentially goes to check on these violations. Are you aware of ESDC flagging for the employer that it's coming?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: We have a blend of announced and unannounced inspections that take place depending upon the nature of the inspection we are undertaking.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you provide a breakdown of that? How many are announced and how many are unannounced? Can you provide that information to the committee if you don't have those numbers?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Yes, we can do that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How often do Service Canada inspections take place over the phone?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: The nature of the inspections changed with COVID. During the time of COVID, a significant proportion of all the inspections were done virtually. At this point in time, of all of our active inspections, about 46% of them are on site versus 54% being virtual.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How can you possibly check and see about these violations if you're on the phone?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: We have 28 different conditions that we inspect, and not all of those conditions require us to be on site. If we're doing a check against the documentation provided by the employer as it relates to wages paid, we can do that virtually.

• (1750)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is it possible that the employer would just provide false information? How do you verify that?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: We have an opportunity to engage with the temporary foreign workers who are involved. As an example, since 2021, our inspections have resulted in our engaging either directly or indirectly with about 25,000 temporary foreign workers.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan. Your time is up.

We will go to Mr. Redekopp for five minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Regarding the United Nations report that we've been talking about all evening, Deputy Minister, has a formal response been drafted for the minister or our UN ambassador to respond to this report?

Ms. Christiane Fox: At this stage, the report is still a preliminary report. The final report is expected, I believe, in July 2024, at which point a formal response would be drafted.

Right now we're taking a look at the recommendations. We are looking at some of the recommendations and some of the points that have been made. For instance, one of the recommendations that the UN special rapporteur has made points to the fact that we need to make our open work permit for vulnerable workers easier to navigate and easy to apply for, so we're looking at simplification of some of the elements. That would be one thing that we're not waiting for until the final report; we're looking at it now.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Are you going to have a chance to give feedback to the rapporteur before he does the report, or is his report going to be without your input?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We will have an opportunity. He published the interim report in August. There will be an opportunity. We've

been working very closely with Global Affairs and our partners at ESDC to come back to him with some of our responses to his recommendations and his findings. We'll continue that dialogue.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Are you going to be able to tame down the language on slavery, or is that going to be baked in?

Ms. Christiane Fox: At the end of the day, he will own the report and have the ability to shape it as he wishes. We will give factual information about IRCC and ESDC programs.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Did he provide you with any direct evidence or specific incidents of racism, xenophobia or anything like that, or is this just all his commentary?

Mr. Jean-Marc Gionet: Yes. During his visit in Ottawa, there were opportunities for officials from various departments to brief him on the various programs that were the subject of his report.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Did he give you specific examples then?

Mr. Jean-Marc Gionet: I wasn't personally at those briefings. I'm not aware whether or not evidence was provided.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: My colleague Ms. Kwan asked the minister about granting permanent residence to TFWs. His response was no. In other words, it's an automatic granting of PR.

Has the minister given you any direction on this? Do you know the reasoning behind that decision?

Ms. Christiane Fox: My understanding is that the minister indicated that there are pathways for temporary residents to become permanent residents. In fact, in 2022, 177,000 people moved from temporary residency to permanent residency. I think that 95,000 of those were international students. We try to look at some of the pathways we could explore as a country to facilitate that transition. I think that as a country we benefit from people who are here contributing and have Canadian experience and who have attended a university or college. I think, regarding those pathways, we are always looking for—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If I could summarize, then, there are pathways—

Ms. Christiane Fox: There are.

Mr. Brad Redekopp:—and making it automatic is not necessary. Is that a fair statement?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I don't think we could make every temporary resident automatic, because not every temporary resident wants to have an automatic permanent residency.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's fair enough.

Regarding the inspections Ms. Kwan was asking about, there was a PowerPoint presentation I saw from Service Canada that was given to some farm groups. It was talking about inspections. It's titled "The Temporary Foreign Worker Program and compliance regime", and it's dated November 9, 2022. It's from Service Canada. It mentioned on slide 23 that for the agriculture sector 61% of TFW employers are fully compliant, 38% are compliant with justification and 1% are non-compliant.

Mr. MacPhee, does that sound correct to you?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Thank you.

At that point in time when that was produced, yes, that does sound accurate.

• (1755)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Is it possible to table that PowerPoint presentation with the committee for use as evidence, sir?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Yes. We can follow up with that information.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That would be great.

Now, in terms of the inspections, you said that 54% are done remotely.

You also said there are a number of things you can test remotely and others that you can't. Of the ones you can't really test remotely, are those still done remotely or do you have to go to the business to inspect those things?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Yes, we are doing on-site inspections, both announced and unannounced.

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member.

We'll go to Madam Zahid for five minutes, please.

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

Thanks to the officials for appearing before the committee.

My first question is in regard to the process of investigation. How do you investigate the employers' compliance? Is it solely complaint-based or are there any random audits that you do?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I will start on the IMP, on that program. I think what I would say is that there are kind of three methods.

There are tips that we receive in the department.

It could be, because of a history of non-compliance, that we would do a check-in.

Then there would be a random selection that we would choose to inspect.

Mr. Michael MacPhee: That's the same model that we employ as well.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] compliance, would it involve site visits or phone calls? How do you decide which ones will have visits and which ones will be phone calls?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think there are some considerations as to how those decisions are made. In the context of whether the non-compliance was a fairly minor infraction, then maybe it would be a check-in with the employer or a check-in with the worker virtually.

If it was a tip that was significant and large scale, that, we feel, warrants an in-person site visit. Then, of course, if those lead to further challenges, we would also involve law enforcement if that is required.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Do you have any numbers with regard to the breakdown between the site visits and the phone calls?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I have a breakdown within sort of total inspections, so that's 3,381 for us, but we can get you the breakdown of how many were in person. We can definitely table that with the committee.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

In 2021, the same committee recommended the creation of a trusted employer program. Has that been explored? Are there any developments on that?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Thank you.

Yes. We've now titled it the "recognized employer pilot". Phase one of that was launched or announced in August of this year and focused on the agriculture sector. Phase two will launch in January 2024 for other sectors.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: In budget 2022, \$14.6 million was allocated to improve the employer inspections and "hold employers accountable for the treatment of workers". What will be the result of this spending?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think we were able to increase our inspection activity, which meant that we were able to administer monetary penalties to the companies. We've been able to administer about \$670,000. There have been more compensation payments as a result. I think the funding has gone to create more capacity for inspection and enforcement.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

In a CBC article on April 23, it was reported that the average time from complaint to resolution in 2021-22 was "538 days". Is it the same now? Or has it been reduced or has it increased? What is the current number?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Just to make sure that I understand the question, is it about the time from complaint to resolution or is it about the time to get an open work permit? I'm not quite sure I understand.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: It's in regard to the complaint process.

• (1800)

Ms. Christiane Fox: What we would probably see is that, if there's a large-scale investigation as a result of a tip or a complaint, it would take a significant amount of time, given the process involved in a full investigation. I can't cite those numbers in particular of the article that you're citing, but we can definitely come back to you with more specificity.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Based on your experience, what would be the average number of days it takes from when a complaint is filed to a resolution?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I don't think we want to make that kind of generalization, because they're so different. Some things could be resolved very quickly. Let's say that an employee has not gotten their overtime payment from their employer. That could be resolved within a matter of weeks, whereas, if there are abuse claims, that could take a few months to unravel. That's why there's a real discrepancy. The average wait time would obviously be pulled by the more in-depth investigations that could take a lot longer versus the kind of smaller infractions that can take days or weeks to resolve. That's why that scale is probably larger than the individual case would be.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

I think my time is up.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

Then, Madam Kwan, you will be up for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to reassure my Conservative friends: I don't think the study we're currently conducting is targeting anyone in particular. Nevertheless, we need to understand and consider the fact that abuses have occurred and that this may have happened because ill-intentioned people have taken advantage of this tool called the closed work permit.

The vast majority of employers registered with the temporary foreign worker program act in good faith, obviously, and they take care of their employees. If ill-intentioned people have taken advantage of this tool to commit abuses, as parliamentarians or lawmakers, we have no choice. We must try to change things. It's one of the things I discussed with the minister. He told us to talk to Minister Boissonnault. I can't believe the departments don't talk to each other.

Have you had discussions with various departments regarding the closed work permit?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we have.

[*English*]

Definitely.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right now, it costs employers a fortune to conduct LMIA's. I can't speak for other provinces, but Quebec already has a workforce development agreement with the federal government.

In your opinion, why is it necessary for Quebec to produce an LMIA if it already has a workforce agreement?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Thank you for the question.

In Quebec, the program is delivered jointly by Service Canada and the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, or MIFI. We look at six criteria, and MIFI looks at three. Together, we—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How much does that extend the timeline and add to the cost, dealing with your department and the MIFI to obtain the Quebec acceptance certificate, for example? To me, that's duplication.

Mr. Michael MacPhee: There's no duplication, because we look at different criteria than the MIFI.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So why not just let the MIFI make the determination?

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll go to Madam Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could the officials provide how many on-site inspections are announced and how many are unannounced?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we committed during the previous question to provide that to the committee.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can we also get information on, for those that are announced, how many of them were found to have violations, and, for those that are not announced, how many of them have been found to have violations? Could we get those stats as well?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we can provide that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can we get that from both IRCC and from ESDC?

One issue for migrant workers is language. Many of them may not speak English as well as they might need to in order to file a complaint or even to be able to communicate with officials. Do both departments, the IRCC and the ESDC, offer interpretation when you talk with migrant workers?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we do.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is that the same for ESDC?

The Chair: Mr. MacPhee.

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Yes. In fact, the tip line is accessible in over 200 languages.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When you speak with the individual in person, do you always make sure they know that interpretation is offered?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: We have options available to them, yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do they know that, though?

● (1805)

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Have they been offered that option, and do they always know that is available?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: I will say that it's part of what should be offered—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I appreciate what should be offered versus what is offered, so perhaps you can table for the committee how often that is utilized—for interpretation to be provided—for both departments.

I raise this, Mr. Chair, even here. As we know, we are studying this issue, and I have invited a witness who is a migrant worker and whose English is not as perfect as it would otherwise be. It hasn't been confirmed that in fact interpretation will be provided for them.

I'm deeply concerned—

The Chair: Honourable member, that is confirmed, and we will try that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm deeply concerned about that because language is absolutely key, and people need to feel comfortable that they can make this request, and it should be offered to them. If it isn't, sometimes they may actually not even ask for it. For someone who used to be an ESL...I can tell you, it's a real thing.

The Chair: Your time is up.

I will leave it to the deputy minister.

Ms. Christiane Fox: As a last comment, in some of the work that we're doing in some of the rural parts of the country that really require workers, we're actually working with employers so that they can provide on-the-job-site language training for employees who come into their organization, in addition to what is required through the worker pathway. I just wanted to flag that.

We appreciate and understand the importance of people being able to communicate, to learn, but also to have the available—

[*Translation*]

interpretation

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister.

I will go to Mr. Maguire for two minutes and then to Mr. Ali for two minutes.

Go ahead, you have two minutes, please, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I have a couple of quick questions in regard to the tips. Does ES-DC track who makes those calls? My concern there is whether they are actual workers or are concerned citizens, advocacy groups or unions? Do you track who actually makes the calls?

The Chair: Mr. MacPhee.

Mr. Michael MacPhee: Part of operating a tip line is making sure that it's confidential, so we don't require any information from the individual when we follow up on all of those tips.

In addition to that, we also have the opportunity and the concierge services for consulates to be able to contact us. We also engage with the migrant worker support organizations to receive information from them.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Are you concerned about abuse in that, or is it that you just don't track them?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: I think the confidentiality trumps the abuse perspective in this space, to ensure that these individuals feel that they are able to report information without reprisal.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Are they currently meeting their internal targets of how much time it takes to investigate a claim of abuse? Is there a specific time? Can you just answer that?

Mr. Michael MacPhee: As Christiane mentioned previously, different types of inspections will require different periods of time in order to be completed.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Does the department ever consider the option of providing greater flexibility for work permits in circumstances where a farmer doesn't have enough work for that week? This occasionally occurs in the agricultural sector, with mother nature and crop development. Where the harvest is done for the year, could they temporarily work in another operation?

The Chair: Give a quick answer, Mr. MacPhee.

Mr. Michael MacPhee: It's certainly something that we are investigating. As I said previously, the seasonal agricultural worker program already allows for worker mobility from farm to farm.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ali for two minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the officials for your hard work. Over the time, you have not only addressed backlogs during COVID and high-level plans, but you've also been addressing immigration issues very efficiently. As I see in my constituency office, as compared with last year, the number of people approaching the constituency office to get help from IRCC has come down. I'd like to thank you for the hard work you're doing for Canadians.

I have a question. At the constituency office in Brampton Centre, many people come in who have applied for TR to PR. The response we get from the department is that there's no processing time limit on those. I was wondering if you could elaborate on what the maximum limit is, how long they should wait and how we can address this issue.

• (1810)

The Chair: You have 35 seconds, Deputy Minister.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Canada's system is a managed migration system. As we saw last week, the levels plan dictates how many PRs we can accept on a given year. If there is high interest for people to come to Canada, which is a great thing, we are still bound by the limits of our levels plan.

The time frame can depend on the demand in a particular year. Potentially, it could depend on now using express entry to draw Francophone immigration, trades workers, and health workers. That has an impact.

That is why, sadly, sometimes people wait. I can appreciate that it's difficult, but it is part of the managed immigration system that we operate within the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much on behalf of the committee members and this chair.

Deputy Minister Fox, Assistant Deputy Minister MacPhee, and director general, Mr. Gionet, thank you for being here and for your contribution. The very best to you.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1810) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1815)

The Chair: Thank you again, Deputy Minister, for staying with us. It's a long day today.

I would also like to welcome Mr. Hollmann, director general, asylum policy; and Ms. McQueen, director general, resettlement and asylum strategic operations.

I am going to give the floor to the deputy minister for up to 20 minutes.

Please go ahead.

• (1820)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Fox: Good evening.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to update you.

I'd like to start by pointing out that we are on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe Nation.

[*English*]

Thanks for having me here today.

I do want to provide a bit of an update on the work that we're doing at our department to address asylum claim increases, on how we are fulfilling our legal requirements and on how we are working globally to reduce the number of people seeking asylum claims.

[*Translation*]

I would like to express my appreciation for your committee's work and thank you for your recommendations.

[*English*]

I also want to thank you for your ongoing focus on supporting newcomers.

Since the committee's report and the government's response, we have expanded the application of the safe third country agreement. This has changed the context and the circumstances of our response, and we feel that it is important to update the committee.

Immigration is obviously an important part of Canada's economic future. Through the recent increases in immigration, we are seeking to reduce the impact of our aging population, which was highlighted in census 2021, and we are seeking to find the skilled workers we need in Canada to support employers. We also believe that immigration is a solution and an opportunity to address the labour

challenges in the construction of new homes and in staffing our hospitals and long-term care facilities.

Just as we are competing with other nations to attract the skilled workers we want, we are also collaborating with other countries, the UN, the IOM and other partners on the record levels of displaced persons and refugees.

The world is facing unprecedented flows of migrants and refugees, and Canada is not immune to these trends. According to the UNHCR, approximately 110 million people “were forcibly displaced” in 2022 “as a result of persecution, conflict, [and] violence”. Solving this challenge will require a global response.

[*Translation*]

Canada is committed, through federal legislation and international conventions, to providing support to people who seek asylum. We have a duty to protect the integrity of our borders and manage resources on behalf of all Canadians.

[*English*]

As I mentioned in March of this year, Canada and the U.S. signed the expansion of the safe third country agreement to include the entire land border and internal waterways, which significantly reduced the number of people attempting to cross irregularly into Canada to make asylum claims. Where Canada was previously seeing over 4,000 irregular border crossings per month, it has now dropped to between 50 to 100 per month. That's about 11 claims per day.

As the claims have dropped significantly in irregular crossings, we have seen increases in the number of claims being made at airports. However, many of the policies put in place in recent years are helping us to respond faster to the challenge of the larger number of asylum seekers. For instance, in budget 2022, the government invested \$1.3 billion over 5 years to expand our capacity to be able to process 50,000 claims.

We must now look at how the increased arrivals have impacted the system and work closely with our partners at the CBSA and the IRB on reforms.

Earlier this year the federal government also expanded the interim housing assistance program. This program was initially set up to support quarantine requirements for asylum seekers, as well as to provide temporary housing. The program provides reimbursements to municipalities and provinces for the housing of asylum claimants. It has provided almost \$700 million between 2017 and 2022, and an additional \$212 million was announced in July of this year to respond to increased pressures.

In response to urgent housing needs, the federal government has procured hotel accommodations. This is in addition to the money that flows from IHAP, the interim housing assistance program. We have procured locations based on local needs and growing demands, and this represents about \$627 million since 2017.

The federal government also established the interim federal health program to provide basic health care access for doctor visits, hospital care or testing, as well as supplementary care for urgent dental issues, prescription drugs and vision care.

[*Translation*]

On this issue, we are working closely with the provinces as well as the municipalities to address the challenges. We are listening to our partners' requests, and in my opinion, the department has shown flexibility and offered practical solutions to the challenges at hand.

• (1825)

[*English*]

When provinces and municipalities have asked for assistance, we have responded. We do expect that all jurisdictions have a role to play in these responses.

As claims have increased in Ontario and, in particular, the greater Toronto area, we have increased our engagement and our resources. We have established an operational table, which I chair, with provincial and municipal counterparts—city managers and provincial deputy ministers—to maintain regular and ongoing dialogue.

When the IHAP program was extended, we earmarked funding of nearly \$100 million specifically to the City of Toronto for specific relief of demands relating to housing asylum claimants.

We have also increased our resources to provide more federal hotels, as I mentioned earlier. The federal government currently has 3,600 hotel spaces in Canada, which house over 6,500 asylum claimants. The vast majority—about 4,200 or 65%—are spaces in Ontario.

We are seeking to further expand our space by an additional 300 before the cold of winter sets in.

[*Translation*]

We are also looking to increase the housing capacity in Quebec.

[*English*]

Because of our expanded presence in Ontario, we have been able to transfer about 1,000 claimants out of shelters and churches and into federally supported hotel spaces in municipalities across Ontario.

We know that moving asylum claimants from one temporary solution to another is not a longer-term plan. We are working on potential reforms.

Since 2022, IRCC has had a temporary public policy to provide open work permits to asylum claimants. This process includes an initial screening for a positive eligibility decision, which is a first screening to ensure the individual has a basis for claim. Then there

is an interim medical exam. Once this process is completed, the temporary public policy allows IRCC to provide a work permit that can allow them to work while their asylum claim is under review and in the system.

To date, we have provided over 93,000 work permits to asylum claimants to help them support themselves and their families and potentially find alternate means of housing. For example, in Ontario, as of October 14, 80% of the work permit requests were processed within nine days of criteria being filed with IRCC.

We have also intensified our efforts in co-operation with shelters and churches that have asylum claimants. IRCC is not waiting for people to come to our offices. We are conducting processing blitzes where we are going into shelters and churches to provide asylum claimants with refugee protection claimant documents and work permits. We've had 3,000 individuals during September of this year alone. That represents a 300% increase in processing from the month before.

[*Translation*]

We therefore work closely not only with provinces and municipalities, but also with volunteers and community leaders, to address needs in real time.

[*English*]

Finally, the department is focused on how it can connect asylum seekers to employers in a skills recognition and matching initiative. We are at the early phases of thinking about how we can actually do better matching and provide people with opportunities to contribute. We need to be creative to work with the private sector and settlement organizations to respond across sectors in support of those seeking refuge in Canada.

Even with these efforts, the ability to address this challenge is ultimately a global issue. With the record levels of displaced people, increased conflict and political or economic upheaval, Canada's efforts have also been to focus internationally.

As the members and the committee also recommended, we are acting to address our challenges in partnership with international bodies, security partners and allies. We are working with countries like the U.S. to focus potential asylum seekers towards existing programs and immigration streams, creating pathways.

In October of this year, the Government of Canada announced its plan to assist 15,000 refugees and displaced people from the Americas in coming to Canada. The humanitarian-based pathway for about 11,000 of those displaced individuals will provide the ability for individuals from Colombia, Haiti and Venezuela to come to Canada, provided they have an anchor relative.

We are working with international partners to build up capacity to manage refugees and asylum seekers in places like Central and South America. Due to the political and economic upheaval in Venezuela, millions have been forced from this country. Canada has provided support and expertise to neighbouring countries, including on border measures, developing screening capacity and support for resettlement programs.

In conclusion, our approach to addressing asylum seekers is a multi-faceted one, involving domestic supports and programs that uphold our legal and international obligations, as well as work to prevent asylum seekers from needing to make a claim here in the first place.

• (1830)

Immigration remains an important economic policy for the government, and we are working to maintain our position as a leading destination for migrants. We will continue to respond to the challenges, working with our partners to support newcomers, and provide programs that support asylum claimants and newcomers alike through programs to focus on potential asylum claimants to existing programs, and we're supporting policies that reduce irregular migration, like the STCA.

I'm very happy to take the questions you may have. This is not an easy challenge. We have a number of people arriving at our doorstep every day. We have a context of higher numbers than the country has ever seen. I think we not only need to respond to what we're seeing now, ensuring that housing and employment needs are met, but, most importantly as a country, we need to think about where we're going.

What are some of the best practices that we're seeing internationally? How do we deal with the context that, in our view, will not go away?

Asylum seekers will be coming to the country. How do we deal with this in a way that is comprehensive and supports people?

I will stop here, Mr. Chair, and open it up for any questions you may have.

The Chair: You finished in 11 minutes. That was very well done.

I have two speakers on the list right now. I have Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Mr. Redekopp.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Fox, thank you for still being here at this time. I know that you have to leave soon to teach basketball.

Correct me if I'm wrong. You said in your presentation that there were no longer many irregular border crossings, but that there were a significantly higher number of asylum seekers at airports. We're mainly talking about Pearson in Toronto, and Trudeau in Montreal, the two main airports for asylum seekers that have seen a massive increase in the number of asylum claims compared to recent years.

At the beginning of the summer, we learned on Radio-Canada—so I'm not making this up—that your department had issued a direc-

tive last spring about tourist visas for nationals of many countries, particularly African countries. This directive asks officers to no longer invoke the section of the law whereby an officer can decide not to grant a tourist visa to a person if they fear that the person will not return to their country. Now, all of a sudden, we're seeing a huge increase in asylum claims at Canadian airports.

Is this true? Did you issue the directive?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for your question.

The department constantly reviews its decision-making practices based on their categories and risks. In the case of someone who has come to Canada multiple times and has always obeyed the terms of their visa, for example, is it possible to make effective decisions while also taking into account the level of risk?

The department did find itself in a particular situation, as we were facing a major backlog, and we were looking for ways to process more claims. It is customary for the department to make changes to its policies. We saw an increase in the number of asylum claims after the government's decision, but it may still be a little too early to establish a link between the two, given that the number of asylum claims has risen around the world. Therefore, the situation is perhaps not unique to Canada, and in this case, the increase in asylum claims may not be solely attributable to the decision the government made.

Either way, we're studying the data because we're aware that the number of claims has gone up.

• (1835)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Wait, I just want us to be clear and respect everyone's intelligence.

You say there's been an increase in the number of asylum claims all around the world, and not just since the spring.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Absolutely.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: However, the department issued a directive this spring, which incidentally did not show up on its website until July. What's more, to the best of my knowledge, it took the government weeks to respond to Radio-Canada journalists.

Are you now telling me that there's absolutely no correlation between the department's directive, the rise in asylum claims at airports and the closure of Roxham Road?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'm not saying there's no correlation. What I'm saying is that the department makes decisions based on public policy, the level of risk and directives issued to officers.

The number of claims has risen and the new public policy is more flexible. We'll have to study the data over time to get very accurate figures on the number of people who came to Canada under that public policy and how many of them sought asylum. I'd say that not everyone who entered Canada has done so under this public policy. Has that number started going up? Yes, there has definitely been an increase. However, I don't yet have the exact numbers, so I can't say at this stage if we're talking about an increase of 5%, 20% or 30%.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Just to be clear—

[English]

The Chair: Honourable member Brunelle-Duceppe, ask the question.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Don't we have as much speaking time as we want?

[English]

The Chair: I think we'll give five minutes to each party first, then if we have time—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It wasn't clear at first and I thought we had as much time as we wanted. We're in the middle of an extremely interesting discussion.

[English]

The Chair: Anyways, just ask the question—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What I understand is that a public policy was put in place because the department wanted to reduce the number of claims in the backlog, which you have confirmed to us. It wanted to reduce the backlog because things were crazy in the office. So the department introduced a new policy to deal with that, but instead it led to a huge increase in the number of asylum claims at airports.

That's what the people here and I understand right now, but could the department finally own up to it? You have yet to admit it, but it's as clear as day to me.

Ms. Christiane Fox: The department is closely studying the data resulting from the introduction of this public policy. The policy decision was based on data, not only the presence of a backlog. It was made to ensure that people who wanted to enter the country would face acceptable processing times. The department is always looking for ways to speed up decision-making. Therefore, we will carefully study the data resulting from the introduction of this public policy when it comes time to decide on the best way to manage such decision-making processes in the future.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Redekopp, go ahead, please, for up to six minutes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You talked about hotels, which I want to focus on. Money has been spent on that.

There was an Order Paper question about the Ramada hotel in Cornwall, Ontario. I'm sure it's a very nice place. The contract that was given was for \$10,479,000, which works out to \$63,000 a day, or about \$560 per hotel room to provide food, accommodation and other services.

Does that seem like an exorbitant cost to you?

The Chair: We have the honourable deputy minister.

Ms. Christiane Fox: When we have contracts, we obviously do competitive bids for them. We work very closely with PSPC. I think it's not just the room itself, but there are services at the hotel as well. You mentioned food services. I visited some of the hotels in Atlantic Canada. There would be at times a nurse and a health professional. There could be security. It's not just the cost of the hotel.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I understand that, but this is a Ramada in Cornwall. Do you believe that \$560...? To me, that seems very high. Would you agree? What are your thoughts on that amount?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We have a competitive process to get value for money for the contracts that we award. Those contracts are not just for the hotel room; they have built in supports in them. That is what I would state as the answer.

● (1840)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If there is no proper competition in a particular place, you just have to pay whatever they ask. There's no upper limit. There's no logic put to that. How does that work?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think that in the Cornwall context there are other locations that we're using. We're using the DEV centre and other hotels in Cornwall. We're always looking at maximizing... We're also conscious of the fact that municipalities and settlement organizations in those municipalities can sometimes feel overwhelmed if they have a large number of asylum seekers who arrive in their community. I think sometimes we try not only to take into account the availability of hotels, but also how we can work with municipalities across Ontario to look at distribution.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's how we ended up with \$500 hotel rooms.

Our leader, Pierre Poilievre, had called—I believe it was in February of this year—for a closure of Roxham Road. At that time, there were a lot of responses that it couldn't be done, that it was going to cause chaos, that we just couldn't do this. That was in the House of Commons. There were many comments back and forth from the Liberal government saying they couldn't do this.

In fact, that agreement was already signed and it was already put to bed that it was going to happen.

Can you comment on the chaos that did ensue at the border after Roxham Road was closed on March 25?

Ms. Christiane Fox: When the decision and the announcement were made and the agreement was concluded, we saw very quickly the numbers decrease.

I think on the day of the announcement, we still had about 200. The next day there were about 80, and the day after that there were about 25. I think the numbers of arrivals changed quite dramatically at the signing of the agreement.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That was as predicted by the opposition, in Pierre Poilievre's response.

Was there additional chaos and all kinds of people crossing at various spots all across the country after that time?

Ms. Christiane Fox: No, there has been no increase in irregular arrivals. We're not necessarily seeing anything like the Emerson crossing in Manitoba. We're not seeing those numbers.

I think where we are seeing an increase now, rather than claims being made through Roxham Road and through irregular crossings, is at airports and at inland offices, so at IRCC offices across the country. That's where claims are being made versus being made irregularly.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: So the claim that there would be chaos at the borders hasn't proven to be true then.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think what we're seeing is—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Just a yes or no is fine.

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's a little bit hard to give a yes-or-no answer.

The border's very large so I think—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Is there chaos at the border?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would not say that today there is chaos at the border.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Fair enough.

There was another concern raised. We had the RCMP here. The commissioner of the RCMP was here and talked about having to deploy resources to Roxham Road that were essentially being diverted from other things they could be doing in Quebec.

On the 23rd, the RCMP tore down their headquarters at Lacolle and issued a statement saying their presence was no longer required.

Again, would that be viewed as a positive thing for RCMP enforcement in Quebec or a negative thing? How would you view that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think that would be best for the RCMP to answer. It's a policing question.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Is it fair to assume though that the RCMP could be doing other things now with the resources they have?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Again, I think it's up to the RCMP commissioner to speak about where his resources are being directed.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You talked about 93,000 people being issued open work permits and you talked about methods to find jobs for those people.

Are there any metrics? Does the department have tracking metrics? Are we having success? Do we know what percentage of those people are finding jobs or being able to support themselves and move out of the hotel system that has been created?

The Chair: The time is up, so could we have a very brief answer, Deputy Minister?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think what we're finding is that the ability to have an open work permit sooner in the process allows the asy-

lum seeker to have a better opportunity earlier on to find employment.

We are trying to be creative. At one point, the Quebec government told us that they could not take in any more asylum seekers in hotels or in their spaces, so we worked very closely with Atlantic Canada. What we tried to do was identify the skills of asylum seekers who had arrived—in the context of Quebec—and then match them with potential employers in Atlantic Canada.

We had conversations with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and I think in that context we had some successes, in which people were meeting employers and people were actually conducting employment fairs for these individuals.

I think we can go back and look at the percentage. I think that right now it is difficult for people to find affordable housing and so we are seeing people stay—

• (1845)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister.

It's been seven minutes, so—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Very briefly, she mentioned she could provide the statistics. Could we get the statistics?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Definitely.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. El-Khoury and then Madame Kwan, both for up to six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Deputy Minister.

Madam Fox, Canada is known as a very welcoming country and we are proud to welcome those people who are subjected to oppression in their countries, as asylum seekers, political refugees and all kinds.... It costs Canada a lot of money and we treat them nicely. I have some complaints and cases in my riding that I find difficult to explain. For example, we have cases like permanent residents who have spent a lot of time here working and contributing to our economy and for some reason like sickness or someone from their family having passed away, they have had to leave Canada and did not respect the time limit of six months by a couple of weeks or a couple of months, and have lost their permanent residency and had a removal order against them.

How can we logically justify to those people who are integrated in our workforce contributing to our economy...? As a matter of fact, they do jobs that Canada needs versus those seekers for whom we really don't know what kind of job they'll be able to do if they're accepted, and it costs us money. Logically speaking, can you justify that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think, if I understand your question correctly, you are talking about people who are permanent residents who leave for a certain amount of time and lose their permanent residency card. I think there is, as part of being a permanent resident in Canada, an obligation to fulfill a residency requirement in this country. If you don't meet those obligations, then there is a risk you would lose that permanent residency, and I think that's important because we want PRs to be here contributing to our economic well-being and our cultural well-being.

But I would say there is a recourse mechanism so that if someone wanted to either dispute the fact that they did not maintain residence or they have a good reason.... For instance, during COVID, there were decisions made where people had to go back to their home countries for a period of time and then because of border closures.... I think there are some flexibilities in the system and an opportunity for recourse if someone gets a decision that is maybe unfavourable to their PR.

But there is a requirement as a permanent resident in Canada to live in Canada for a particular amount of time to keep your status as a permanent resident.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I could tell you, Deputy Minister, I have cases such as a woman who was delayed for three days—three days—because of difficulties with an airplane ticket, yet she received a removal order. That puzzled me.

I have another question. If an asylum seeker comes to Canada and from his arrival he proves that he has all of the qualifications as a professional or any skilled worker and he could take a job where Canada needed him to be, is it possible to speed up his path to permanent residency? Is there any special consideration for such cases?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think what I would say is that it's possible to speed up a work permit to allow the individual, the asylum seeker, to work during their time in Canada, but I think we also have to respect that there is a process with the Immigration and Refugee Board where someone will claim asylum and the IRB will determine if they become a protected person in Canada. If they do become a protected person in Canada, then they would have a right to permanent residency, and eventually have the right to become a Canadian citizen.

My answer would absolutely be that we would want to fast-track someone who may be a doctor or in the context of some of our labour gaps, but I think it is important that we let the Immigration and Refugee Board make that final determination of whether or not someone's asylum claim is in fact warranted.

• (1850)

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: A couple of cases happened in my riding that I don't understand, Madam Fox, where a family came to ask for political refugee status or asylum, and their kids were three or four years old. The process takes three to four years to get the final decision, and as you well know, some of the lawyers here profit from cases and start to go for appeals, and delay and delay while the kids learn the language, go to school, adapt to our Canadian life. Then they have a removal order and have to leave with the kids. How can you explain that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I would say is that I think we do need to think about our process in Canada and look at our asylum system from all the pieces that are involved—and that's not just IRCC, just the IRB, or CBSA, but everybody—and how we can have a fair and efficient decision-making system. I do think asylum seekers who come to Canada seeking asylum should get a fair and fast decision, and if that is delayed over a long period of time and there's not efficiency in the system, then, absolutely, it can lead to people who have been here for three years or four years, and who may have had a child here, and it increases the complexity....

Our team at IRCC is looking at asylum reform, and what I was talking about is that we have a situation now where we have an influx of people coming to the country and I think we need to take a very human approach to providing them with supports. At the same time, we have to think about what reforms to the system are required to have a more efficient system for decision-making.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Madam Kwan for up to six minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

Could the deputy minister provide to the committee, since the Syrian refugee initiative—under which Canada housed asylum seekers when they arrived here, or government-assisted refugees, in hotels—a breakdown the cost of the hotels by the respective stream, GAR and inland asylum seekers; by the year; by the province; and by how many rooms were being provided with that cost, and the services provided?

If we could get that information for the committee, that would be very helpful.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Just to clarify, do you want it for asylum seekers and government-assisted refugees.

Okay. Thank you. Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With regard to the situation in Toronto, I was just there recently and went to visit an NGO that is providing shelter to asylum seekers. The vast majority of the spaces there are taken, in fact, by women who are escaping persecution of one form or another. The government, over the course of the summer, made an announcement that it would actually provide \$97 million to Toronto. Has that money flowed?

Ms. Christiane Fox: There are two things.

First, the way the interim housing assistance program works is that the money is earmarked for the City of Toronto. It's based on a repayment process that would be done at the end of a fiscal year. However, given the pressures, what we've done now is... We have an ability to do interim payments for some of the municipalities that may need a bit of a financial boost and not wait until the end of the year. In my conversations with the city manager, he—just being aware, I think, that there was a commitment of \$97 million at the time of our conversation around this, which was probably around September—indicated to me that they probably would not necessarily require an interim payment. However, we are going to meet with all the municipalities that have pressures around interim housing to see if we can give a bit of an increase payment—let's say in December—prior to the full payment that would be done at the end of March 2024.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Would you say that the increase payment is not to go above and beyond the \$97 million? It's within the \$97-million envelope, right?

Ms. Christiane Fox: The \$97 million is dedicated to Toronto, but we have \$212 million as an envelope. For instance, I've been having conversations with Ottawa, which will also be requiring a payment under the IHAP program.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Right, so that would be applying to other municipalities.

Ms. Christiane Fox: The \$212 million would apply to other municipalities, minus the \$97 million for Toronto.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In talking with NGOs on the ground, we know that they are desperate for additional resources. How could they get access to resources to house people?

They are NGOs that could actually allow for more beds to be made available if they had the financial resources to do so. However, they can't access that money.

My question is this: How can they access the money?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would say two things.

I have been working with some of the Black leaders who have stepped up in the GTA. I met with some of them in person to talk a little bit about how we can support... One of the things that we have done is this: With regard to people who are either in a municipal shelter or in a church, for instance, every single weekend—every day, frankly—we have a plan of moving people who are asylum claimants into our hotels so that we can be a direct support. The city is aware that we are doing that. I think it is the city that has to designate what is a shelter and what is not to make sure that the right conditions are in place to protect people. We are working directly with community leaders in the course of our decision-making and our actions.

• (1855)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: One of the issues, of course, is that we're doing shelters. As you indicated, doing shelters and moving people from one temporary space to another temporary space is not the long-term solution.

I just want to put in a plug for the following for the officials to consider: Previously, under the Syrian refugee initiative, we actually studied the issue afterwards. Experts said to the government that

what it should really be doing is building permanent spaces so that it's not constantly paying money to hotels where it cannot keep the asset for future uses. We know that there's a global crisis going on. We know that this is going to be utilized. Even if it isn't, we can use it for domestic individuals. Is that under consideration by the government?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, it is.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I hope it materializes quickly because it's a smart way to spend the money.

I want to actually turn to, for a minute, the Rainbow Railroad program, which the government actually made a special announcement about, for particularly the LGBTQ2S+ community. I have somebody in my constituency who came to Canada under that program, which is great. However, because they identified as being from the LGBTQ2S+ community, their family members are being persecuted and are being harassed and threatened. They are desperate to find a way to bring to safety their mother, sister and brother who are faced with severe threats.

What options are available to a family like that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: As you noted, we've been working very closely with Dr. Kimahli Powell on Rainbow Railroad, and they are now a partner in our resettlement efforts. I think that's a first for the country and something that we're very proud of.

In the context of persecution, whether individual or family, I think we work with them in terms of being a referral partner to help us navigate that. That also includes, in addition, human rights defenders.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: But for family members?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We would work with Rainbow Railroad to determine their list of at-risk individuals. Right now I would say the focus is on the individuals themselves who are identified as LGBTQ2+.

But this is a settlement question not an asylum one. I'll have to go back to the team and say, "What are the parameters of the agreement with Rainbow Railroad? How do we deal with the context of family?"

I would say that the priority is really for those who are under direct persecution.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan and Madam Fox.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I ask whether I can pass this information on to the officials to look into? The family members are under threat because their son, in this instance, is a member of the LGBTQ2+ community. They are being actively persecuted and are under threat.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan.

For the last short question and short answer, please, I will give the floor to Mr. McLean.

Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC): Could we get a quick answer to Ms. Kwan's question by the deputy minister, please?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I can absolutely take that on and take a look at the case. I cannot make guarantees that we will bring the families over, but I will definitely look into the case.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McLean

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you.

I'm sorry that I have to be so short here.

We've gone through a lot of numbers: \$700 million over the last five years, an extra \$212 million this year, which includes \$97 million in Toronto, and \$627 million more for hotel rooms. We're talking about billions of dollars here.

You're overseeing a department where, as I recall from last week, your budget is to go down next year, and yet it seems that your demands are going up with this program.

How do you reconcile that, as far as being able to serve this growing expense without putting that in the budget? Or is the budget exercise a bit of a sham at this point, if I may say that?

The Chair: Thank you.

Deputy Minister.

Ms. Christiane Fox: The department, through our levels plan, got funding for the work we are doing, and that funding will be to operate all of our lines of business.

What I would say is that as we think about asylum reform, we need to look at the system as a whole—and that's not just IRCC—and where funding is required. There are mechanisms by which funding can be requested, including in the budget cycle. I think these are decisions that the government will need to make around the very important priorities it has.

• (1900)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fox, Mr. Hollmann and Madam McQueen.

Mr. Greg McLean: Chair, just as a follow-up, it doesn't reconcile that the needs are going up and budget is going down. That's what I'm trying to get to the bottom of here.

Can you please tell me how that actually works? You're going to need more money and yet your budget shows that you're going to get less money.

The Chair: We don't have resources after 7 p.m. If you can answer that question in writing, I would really appreciate it.

On behalf of committee members, I would love to thank the interpreters, and, of course, the clerk, analysts and the support staff, for helping us.

Again, thank you and the very best to you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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