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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Committee members, I will call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 14 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is again taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25. Members may attend in Zoom or in person. If you are attending by Zoom, use the Zoom application and the icons available. Choose the language of your choice.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from health authorities, I would anticipate that each of the members would follow proper health protocols. As the chair, I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting. I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow. Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. If the interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

The "raise hand" feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidelines for mask use and health protocols.

While I'm referencing the interpretation services, I want to remind you that at a liaison committee meeting yesterday, we had a meeting with translation services. We could not conduct these meetings without the interpreters who translate for us. For those appearing virtually, it's very important that you have the proper headsets. The issue becomes not hearing you; it's the background noise that makes it difficult for the interpreters to do their job. As well, speak slowly and loudly. Again, I want to thank the translators for the valuable role they play.

I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

Later today, the minister will be appearing. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 31, 2021, the committee will proceed to a briefing on the ministerial mandate letters. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) and the motion adopted on Thursday, March 3, the committee will commence consideration of the main estimates for 2022-23.

Department officials will be appearing. They are Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister, employment and social development and chief operating officer for Service Canada; Karen Robertson, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister; Cliff Groen, senior assistant deputy minister, benefits and integrated services branch, Service Canada; Mary Crescenzi, assistant deputy minister, integrity services branch, Service Canada; Catherine Demers, associate assistant deputy minister, skills and employment branch; Andrew Brown, senior assistant deputy minister, skills and employment branch; Atiq Rahman, assistant deputy minister, learning branch; Nisa Tummon, assistant deputy minister, program operations branch; and Krista Wilcox, director general, officer for disability issues.

It's my understanding that we will go directly to a questioning round. I had a thumbs-up from Ms. MacDonald. No one will be making a statement, which is good, because the members like to maximize the time they have for questioning.

With that, thank you, witnesses, for appearing. We will begin the first six-minute round beginning with Madame Kusie for the opposition.

Madame Kusie, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses who are here today from the department. In the minister's absence, it's very good of you to be here. I'm sure she's very busy, as the new NDP-Liberal coalition will have a significant effect on her department and on the administration of her department.

I'm going to level with you. The questions I'm going to ask you today aren't going to be easy. I'm very sorry you were left in this position, but Canadians need these important answers from this new NDP-Liberal government. We are relying on you to provide them for us today.

My first one, Mr. Chair, is directed to Ms. MacDonald.

How much, Ms. MacDonald, will the new dental care program cost?

• (1540)

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Chair, I have a point of order.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: We've heard a lot on it in the media. I know that Canadians certainly are very excited about the prospect, but this is complex and with a very high price tag.

We need to know, Ms. MacDonald, how much this new dental care program will cost, please.

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): I'd like to make two points. The first is that I understand Minister Qualtrough will be joining us for the second hour. Secondly, I don't have that information here today.

Obviously this is not something that falls under our department, but I'm sure that through future appearances or through tabling of information, we can provide that at a later date.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's completely understandable, Ms. MacDonald. The accord is only three days old and you will certainly need some time to prepare.

Would you happen to know how much the first phase is for the 12-year-olds, who will be insured up to 2022? Do you have an estimate for that portion of the dental care? We are already three months into 2022, so I'm certain you must have been provided with some information before these two parties entered into this agreement.

How much will that first phase cost, please?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: As I indicated previously, this is not an initiative that falls under the department of ESDC. Given that this is a recent announcement, that information is not available to us. However, I believe that a future appearance, or through tabling information at the committee, when that is available, they would be happy to provide it to you.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, Ms. MacDonald. Thank you very much for that information.

My next question is on another initiative of the NDP-Liberal coalition which is very similar.

Mr. Wayne Long: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: I believe that a point of order has been raised.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Mr. Chair, I stopped my time at 2:49. Thank you.

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, the member knows full well that this isn't an NDP-Liberal government. An agreement that was reached

has nothing to do with an NDP-Liberal coalition government that the member has asserted and that we've heard about continually now over the last couple of days.

Mr. Ron Liepert (Calgary Signal Hill, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, that is factually incorrect. That is factually incorrect, and the member knows that.

Chair, I'd ask that—

Mr. Ron Liepert: This is not a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Wayne Long: I would ask that this not continue. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long and Mr. Liepert.

I agree that this is debate.

Please continue, Madame Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll continue then to my next important question for Canadians.

Ms. MacDonald, another initiative that we saw in this NDP-Liberal coalition agreement is the implementation of pharmacare by the end of 2023. Now, the PBO previously priced this out at \$87 billion.

Ms. MacDonald, would you say that this number is still accurate, or should we be considering another number and should the budget be considering another number, given this most recent development?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: As I indicated previously, Mr. Chair, these issues don't fall under the mandate of ESDC. Those questions would have to be put forward to the Department of Health or other departments.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I've stopped the clock at 3:49, Chair.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you.

It seems to me that my colleague's questions do not relate to the subject under consideration today, which is the main estimates.

• (1545)

[*English*]

It's not in the mandate letter of the minister.

My question would be to ask if we could keep our questions to what's on the table, not what's not on the table today.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Ferrada.

Madam Kusie, I would simply ask you to focus your comments on the matter before the committee.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's fair. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This agreement is a shock and is something new for all of us. I think we're all adjusting here.

I would like to remind the department that the end of 2023 is a mere 21 months away. I would really suggest that they begin their planning for this implementation, because there truly is not a lot of time.

Another initiative relative to this committee from the NDP-Liberal coalition agreement has to do with housing. I am hoping, Ms. MacDonald, that the ESDC has costed the housing initiatives as outlined in the NDP-Liberal coalition agreement.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: That question may be better presented to infrastructure as our housing CMHC initiatives have been transferred to that department. I don't have that information with me today.

I'll ask my colleague, Karen Robertson, if there's anything that we can add to that.

Ms. Karen Robertson (Chief Financial Officer and Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): No, I'm sorry, there's nothing I can add. It doesn't form part of ESDC's main estimates.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you both for your efforts in attempting to answer that.

I've run some numbers based on Google. There are 235,000 homeless Canadians. The average price of a home is \$748,450. That's already an initial investment of \$175 billion.

What I think we're seeing here, Mr. Chair, is that this NDP-Liberal coalition agreement—

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, point of order.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: —has many significant implications, and there's a lot of work to be done, so I'm glad you've shed some light on that today.

The Chair: Point of order, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, again, the member is stating something that's simply not factually true, that there's a Liberal-NDP coalition. The member knows that's not true.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ron Liepert: That's not a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

It is a matter of debate, and we are in questions, so I will now call on Madam Ferrada, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is my pleasure to ask my questions of the representatives of the department who are with us today.

I would like to thank the witnesses for all the work you have done, particularly working virtually. I know it's difficult for some of you.

I would like to know your views on the subject of the estimates, particularly regarding two or three items that I think are important.

First, I would like you to talk to us about the modernization of the employment insurance system. I would like to know how you foresee the next few months going in connection with that priority, which seems to me to be extremely important.

Second, I would like you to talk to us about funding, and more specifically the funding programs associated with community organizations and the enabling accessibility fund, which supports people with a disability.

Could you provide us with information about these two items?

[*English*]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll ask Catherine Demers if she could respond to the question with respect to EI modernization.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Catherine Demers (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Good afternoon.

I will be pleased to answer the question.

The government is committed to modernizing the employment insurance scheme. That commitment was clearly stated in our minister's mandate letter. In fact, we are currently working to develop measures that will enable us to move forward with this modernization. A number of steps have already been completed.

We have to build on the lessons learned during the pandemic and the temporary measures that were put in place in the employment insurance scheme. Their purpose was to help workers affected by the pandemic access employment insurance measures more easily and with greater flexibility.

We also have to build on the lessons learned regarding the special measures in connection with the economic recovery. We want to help people who would normally not have been able to access the employment insurance program. These would include self-employed workers, for example.

Given the very significant needs of certain groups in the population, we have launched a program of consultations. The program began in August and focuses on several topics, including access to employment insurance and benefits for parents and families, and also the issue of self-employed workers, freelance workers and seasonal workers.

These issues were the subject of discussions during the first phase of consultations in August. The consultations involved round tables, surveys, and written submissions. They will be continuing over the coming months.

We have already received a lot of comments, which will help us update the proposals. However, we need more, because there are a number of topics to address. This is a very broad field.

The topics that will be examined include the adequacy of benefits and the financial model for the program. We also have to continue exploring measures to ensure that the scheme better meets the needs of self-employed and freelance workers. We have to understand and define those needs more clearly.

The work is underway and we are planning to continue the consultations this spring, as was announced at the end of the first phase.

All of this will enable us to make proposals in connection with the reform.

One very concrete element of the reform will be implemented: extending sickness benefits, a measure that was announced in budget 2021 and is scheduled for the end of the summer of 2022.

Those are just a few examples.

• (1550)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you.

Could you come back to the second part of my question, which was about the enabling accessibility fund for people with a disability?

I noted that some elements concerned funding and others concerned projects and objectives.

Can you give us more details on this subject?

[English]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes. I'll ask Krista Wilcox to respond to this question.

Ms. Krista Wilcox (Director General, Office for Disability Issues, Department of Employment and Social Development): The enabling accessibility fund is a really important program that we deliver in the department. Its objective is to promote the accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities in our communities and in our workplaces.

Budget 2021 made significant investments into the enabling accessibility fund with \$125 million over two years. That funding is going toward a number of important aspects of the program to help us improve accessibility across the country.

Specifically, there was \$100 million over two years that was announced and will help with the improvement of the social inclusion of persons with disabilities by supporting a greater number of small projects, which are projects that are under \$100,000. Those will go toward not-for-profit organizations, including targeting women's shelters and shelters for victims of violence against women, small municipalities, indigenous organizations, territorial governments and businesses of all sizes for our workplace stream. That would help with about 900 renovations, retrofits and accessible technology projects through that investment.

There is also, as part of the early learning and child care funding that was announced, an additional—

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Wilcox. You may continue with that in a further question, but we've gone over time.

Now we go to Madame Chabot.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

I have two main questions. One will be about the same subject, reform of the employment insurance scheme, and the other about the temporary foreign workers program, or TFWP, and in particular labour market impact assessments, or LMIA's.

Concerning the reform of the employment insurance program, the government had announced several hundred thousand dollars for consultations in the last budget. The problem is that they were not particularly transparent. It was hard to find the phases of the consultations on the department's website—we know, because we searched. As well, you held an online consultation. A request had been made for a report to be written. I am going to ask you the question again: is it possible to receive a report on this subject?

For transparency, can you give a clearer explanation of the steps in the consultation, the topics addressed, and the people who were consulted?

As well, you say there will be another phase. We also know that there have been problems associated with a lack of equity among the groups with whom meetings were held. I personally made a request to the Minister for the opposition party employment critics to be able to participate in the reform process.

Can the department clearly explain the stage of the consultation that is underway and the stages yet to come?

Ms. Catherine Demers: I am happy to answer the question.

The first stage of the consultation, as I explained, began in August with an opening round table with the Minister, Ms. Qualtrough, and the two employment insurance commissioners...

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'm going to interrupt you. I am aware of what has been done.

Ms. Catherine Demers: Okay.

Ms. Louise Chabot: What I want to know is whether it is possible to publish reports concerning the consultations, and information about the next stages, on your website.

Is it possible to get reports about what has been done to date?

Can you give a clearer explanation on your website of what you intend to do for the next stages?

That is my question. I would like there to be clear information when the documents are consulted. At present, the information is being given piecemeal.

Ms. Catherine Demers: The first phase of the consultations ended on February 17 with a closing round table, after some 20 round tables had been held.

As you said, in the course of the inquiry, there were about 2,000 respondents and about 60 written submissions, from one end of the country...

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'm sorry, but is it possible to get a report on this consultation online?

Ms. Catherine Demers: Yes, that's possible.

I confirm that there will be a report on the first phase of the consultations regarding the topics I spoke about earlier: eligibility for employment insurance, simplifying the process, seasonal workers, the premium reduction program...

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

So I understand that we will be getting some information.

Ms. Catherine Demers: A report will be published when we launch the second phase, in the spring, starting in April or May.

Ms. Louise Chabot: So we are counting on you to be able to get all the necessary information when we consult the department's website.

Regarding the temporary foreign workers program, of course you know there is a labour shortage in a number of industries, our SMEs, the food processing industry, and so on.

The alarm is being sounded everywhere, even in my riding, where processing times for labour market impact assessments is hellacious. Companies call us because they are getting no response to their requests. We must not forget the costs associated with LMIA's. Processing times are exploding, and, on top of that, if you don't get answers within the time allowed, the work permits, which come under Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, expire.

What is the explanation for these extremely long processing times?

How can this be remedied, how can companies' needs for foreign labour be met in a timely manner?

• (1600)

[*English*]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'm going to give you a short response, and then I'll turn it to my colleague Nisa Tummon to speak to the LMIA issue you've identified, Madame Chabot.

First and foremost we are very aware of the pressures that the industry is under right now. Minister Qualtrough has asked us to work at measures to support the employers—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, I can't hear the interpretation.

[*English*]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: —in addressing these pressures across the many sectors and occupations that are feeling them right now.

The Chair: Excuse me, Madame MacDonald.

Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I can't hear the interpretation, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm not getting it either.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'm going to let Ms. Tummon answer the question, while we're waiting for the interpretation problem to be solved.

Ms. Nisa Tummon (Assistant Deputy Minister, Program Operations Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): We understand that the present situation is very difficult. There has been an exceptional number of applications relating to foreign workers to support various sectors, including the agri-food sector in Canada.

We have worked closely with our Minister on developing an action plan to improve our service levels and especially to accelerate processing of LMIA's.

In Quebec, we are working closely with our counterparts at the ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration. As some of you know, we are examining files jointly, we are examining the labour market, and we are making recommendations relating to the approval of LMIA applications. Employers are not just meeting labour market needs; they are ensuring that foreign workers are protected and ensuring their safety.

In particular...

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Tummon and Madame Chabot, your time has concluded.

Now we go to Madame Zarrillo for six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to note that I am going to speak about residential schools, so I just want to give everyone a heads-up about that.

Today is World Tuberculosis Day, and I see many of my colleagues wearing a ribbon. It's a day of reflection. I speak of how tuberculosis was used as a weapon in Canada to support genocidal policies to infect first nations children in residential schools. That's where I come to this committee from today, from that space.

We have a lot of work to do in Canada to end ongoing discrimination against first nations, Inuit and Métis people. I would ask the witnesses today what programs and budget items can be shared with this committee in the main estimates that address the needs of first nations, Inuit and Métis.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll ask Karen Robertson, our CFO, to respond initially to this question, and then any other witnesses who may want to come in.

Ms. Karen Robertson: We have a few programs that are targeted at our indigenous communities. The first one I'll speak to that's in the estimates is the indigenous early learning and child care transformation. There's \$299 million included in these main estimates.

If you'll just bear with me, we have about 50 programs. There's also support to indigenous learners, which includes \$3.8 million in these main estimates.

I apologize, because there are quite a few. We also have indigenous labour market programming, and there is a total of \$297.6 million in these main estimates, which includes funding for both the indigenous skills and employment training, as well as skills and partnership fund.

It will take me a few minutes to hunt down more than that. Thank you for your patience.

• (1605)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Mr. Chair, maybe they could be supplied to the committee after.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I just wonder if there's anything on housing. That would be one I would be interested in. I'm not sure if it would be in this. If there's something there that's easy to find, I'd like to hear about that one, but the rest can come later.

The Chair: Yes, Madame Zarrillo, anytime there's a detail, you can ask the witness to provide more factual information in writing back to the committee.

Please continue with your question. I believe it was on housing.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you very much.

I'm going to stay on the topic of discrimination. I wanted to speak specifically about the women who recently won a case through the Social Security Tribunal, as they were discriminated against because they were pregnant.

I note in the mandate letter for the minister, who is coming later, there is not much of a gender lens. We know that women are discriminated against at work, diverse genders. I also see that we want to get more supports to get more people living with a disability into the workforce, so I'm concerned, again, that discrimination will be part of their experience.

I'm just wondering how much in the main estimates is held in the budget to take Canadians fighting for their human rights to court.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: We actually would not have it broken down like that in the main estimates. I know our CFO was checking her book at this time. We can speak to you, though, about the recent challenge specific to that on the tribunal. I could turn to Catherine Demers for more information.

Ms. Catherine Demers: What I can say is that the Canada Employment Insurance Commission has submitted an application to seek leave to appeal to the SST appeal division on this case, which was granted. The matter is before the SST, so I would not be in a position to offer more comment on this particular case.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I would like to revisit the gender lens and a feminist recovery.

I note that in skills development and labour there's a lot of talk about very important industries to Canada, like natural resources, real estate, construction, but I didn't see a lot of talk about the care economy. Is there any additional investment in the care economy in the main estimates? I'm specifically talking about care work, the majority of which is done by women.

The Chair: We'll suspend for a couple of minutes. We're having a technical problem.

• (1605)

(Pause)

• (1610)

The Chair: Committee, we will resume.

Madame Zarrillo, we'll give you a minute and a half.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

I just wanted to go back to the gender lens, and even gender-based analysis.

As I was saying, under skills development and labour in the minister's mandate letter there is talk of investments for important sectors in our economy, like natural resources, real estate and construction, but I wanted to ask specifically about the care economy and investments in areas of the economy that are led by women—health care, child care, long-term care, domestic support. I'm just wondering if there's any news you can share in the main estimates on investments with a gender lens, and maybe any gender-based analysis that was done in putting this mandate letter together in regard to skills development and labour.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll ask Andrew Brown if he's able to comment on this question.

Mr. Andrew Brown (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thanks, Lori.

The care economy is really dominated by women. There is work under way. We've noted during the pandemic the importance of workers in the care economy—health care workers, people working in long-term care facilities and so forth.

Another thing that has been noted is a lack of sufficient workers in that sector across the country. One of the things that's necessary there is to invest to create training opportunities to be able to find more workers to provide support in long-term care and personal care. There is work under way right now, programs that have been launched and that are already now training workers to provide additional support in the sector. That work is continuing.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

Thank you, Mr. Brown.

Now we'll go to Mr. Liepert for five minutes.

Mr. Ron Liepert: Thank you, Chair.

First of all, I am a little disappointed that we didn't get an overview of some of the accomplishments that this particular department is embarking on. I'm looking at the mandate letters, and there are all kinds of strategies that have been asked for.

This is a government that's pretty well known in that it can't get anything done. Now, with this new coalition with the NDP, it will be even more difficult for departments to get anything accomplished.

What progress has been made to date on the employment strategy for Canadians with disabilities that was called for in the mandate letter? Has anything commenced? Where are we on that?

• (1615)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Go ahead, Krista.

Ms. Krista Wilcox: Andrew, I don't know if you want to take that one. I'm happy to take it, if you want.

Maybe I can speak generally about the disability inclusion action plan, which is one of the minister's principal mandate commitments in her letter. The minister has put out in the last year a framework around the disability inclusion action plan. As you mentioned, one of the key pillars of that is an employment strategy for persons with disabilities. As part of the plan and the employment strategy, the department has undertaken significant consultation over the last several months, including an online survey that had 8,600 respondents and provided an overview of some of the more important issues that are facing persons with disabilities in Canada today.

We've also held round tables specifically focused on the employment strategy. Andrew could potentially speak to that as well as on the Canada disability benefit, which is one of the cornerstones of the plan.

Work is also under way with disability organizations. We've provided significant funding to them to also engage with persons with disabilities as well as through our national indigenous organizations to have a distinctions-based approach to engagement on the plan, including the employment strategy.

Mr. Ron Liepert: Do you see with this new coalition formed with the NDP...? Obviously the NDP is going to be demanding a number of conditions. Do you see starting from scratch again because we're now under a different regime? I would presume that you will be asking some different sorts of questions as you try to develop that strategy to get the support of the left wing of the party, commonly called the New Democratic Party.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: We don't have a comment on that particular question. We continue to work on the minister's mandate letter as we've been requested to throughout this term.

Mr. Ron Liepert: Many of the things that are included in this mandate letter are going to be impacted by the fact that you have this new agreement. Has the minister not had any discussions with department officials to say that we have to look at this in a different way than we might have before this coalition was formed?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: We continue to have conversations with the minister on her mandate letter that was indicated to us at the beginning of the term, and that's the work that we are doing.

Mr. Ron Liepert: All right.

Well, how about we try Canada student loans and Canada apprentice loans: Where are we with any progress on that?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Atiq Rahman would be happy to take that question.

Mr. Atiq Rahman (Assistant Deputy Minister, Learning Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Mr. Chair, as you may already be aware, the interest charged on Canada student loans and apprentice loans has been waived until March 2023. As you may also know, we work with our provincial student aid programs to implement any initiatives taken by the federal government.

With respect to the minister's mandate of eliminating interest on student loans and apprentice loans, that is already in place until March 2023. We have been consulting with our provincial partners as well as service providers to determine the next steps on that one.

Thank you.

Mr. Ron Liepert: I also see in the mandate letter—

The Chair: Ask a short question, please.

Mr. Ron Liepert: Well, it seems like there is a desire to work with the Minister of Natural Resources around what this government calls a “just transition”, whatever that means. Is the department doing anything differently in light of the Ukraine crisis and the obvious lack of fossil fuel, natural gas or oil around the world because of this, in lieu of the mandate letter?

• (1620)

The Chair: Give a short answer, please.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll ask one of my colleagues if they want to come in on the just transition. I will say to you that the department is looking at a number of initiatives right now with respect to Ukraine. They range from supporting women and children coming into the country to ensuring that people can get access to services, including things like social insurance numbers, access to support programs and access to employment-readiness types of initiatives as well.

These things are ongoing and on a day-to-day basis as we look at the unfolding situation in Ukraine.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald and Mr. Liepert.

We'll now go to Mr. Coteau for five minutes.

You have the floor.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the department for being here and talking to us about many of these great initiatives that are captured in the mandate letter.

I want to talk a little bit about apprenticeship programs. I know that the mandate letter does mention just a strengthening in the apprenticeship program. Maybe you could take a minute to talk about the vision for the apprenticeship program captured in the mandate letter.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll ask Andrew Brown if he could take this question.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Sure. I'm happy to take that question and speak to apprenticeships.

I think one thing that's really important is that there's recognition that skilled trades are vital to Canada's economy. Apprenticeships really help skilled workers, and especially young people starting their career, to connect with businesses and find well-paying jobs.

That's one of the reasons that the government is investing over \$470 million over three years to establish a new apprenticeship service. It will help create an estimated 55,000 jobs by providing small and medium-sized employers with \$5,000 for the hiring of a first-year apprentice and an additional \$5,000 for the hiring of an apprentice from an under-represented group.

This program will also help small and medium-sized enterprises by providing them with supports that they need to increase their participation in apprenticeship.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I have just a bit of time, so I'm going to jump in. I do appreciate that, but I want to drill down a bit more into the apprenticeship program and the target audience—who it's going to serve.

I was looking on the website at Stats Canada, and it said that there were just under 400,000 people in general in the apprenticeship programs across the country. When I looked at the numbers, just about 12% were female. Do you have numbers or percentages that speak specifically to indigenous people and people of colour? Do we track that type of information?

Mr. Andrew Brown: Certainly, we are working hard to increase diversity among apprentices, and get a more broad range and representation among Canadians into the skilled trades. That's one of the reasons, as you may have heard in my description, that part of the program is focusing on under-represented groups.

With respect to data, specifically, I haven't got those numbers available. I know that's one of the areas that we are continuing to work on and develop, so we have a better sense of the proportion of

under-represented groups in apprenticeships, but really in our skilled trades across the country.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Mr. Brown, going into communities that are under-represented is a great strategy. The labour shortage that exists within many different sectors can really use an influx of new people into those sectors, and the apprenticeship programs will do that.

Can you talk about any of the specific strategies you may be using to attract more females, more indigenous people, and Black people, into those programs?

Traditionally, and I've spent some time around labour, it's usually based on the connections on the ground rather than government programs pulling people up into those opportunities.

Can you talk about some of the strategy there? I would really appreciate it.

• (1625)

Mr. Andrew Brown: There are some investments through what's known as the union training and innovation program, and it's also related to apprenticeships.

Starting in the 2022-23 fiscal year, it's to support more apprenticeship opportunities and partnerships in the Red Seal trades. I speak to this, because the new investments in the union training and innovation program will continue to target greater representation and participation from women, indigenous people, newcomers, persons with disabilities, and Black and racialized communities.

This is work that is being done in conjunction with unions to encourage and increase participation in the skilled trades.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Madame Chabot, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to come back to the temporary foreign worker program.

Ms. Tummon, in your answer regarding processing times for LMIA applications and the reasons behind those times, you said that you had to have discussions with Quebec, more specifically. That is so true that we believe it would be much simpler if Quebec managed the program, which is currently managed by Ottawa, because the processing times are inexplicable.

In the food and beverage sector, for example, there is something like a 25 per cent labour shortage. Eleven associations have joined together to propose concrete short-term solutions. They are asking that you sit down with them and look at long-term solutions.

What is the explanation for the inability to meet the needs of industries hit by the labour shortage in a timely manner?

There may be all sorts of explanations, and it may be that the shortage will fade over time, but at present, this is hurting industries and businesses.

What can you tell us about processing times?

How can we speed the process up?

Ms. Nisa Tummon: Thank you for the question.

On the subject of how to improve processing of LMIA applications throughout Canada, we are in the process of making a number of changes to our own ways of doing things and our processes for accelerating decision-making and providing recommendations to employers.

We have made a few internal changes to simplify how we process applications. First, we are putting a process in place that will be standardized across the country so that cases are processed the same way and at the same pace from coast to coast. We are also recruiting more staff to expand our capacity to process cases speedily.

We know there has been a sharp increase in the number of applications in Quebec in particular, as compared to other provinces and territories. As the Minister has already announced, there is an agreement between Canada and Quebec to simplify processing of LMIA applications from Quebec in order to meet employers' needs and combat the labour shortage in a number of sectors.

Ms. Louise Chabot: To all appearances, that agreement to simplify the process, which which I am quite familiar, is not working. I'm talking about companies and employers in Quebec, of course.

I am aware of one case in which a worker has been waiting since September to get an answer to their application.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

We'll have to get that question answered with another.

Now we go to Madam Zarrillo, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to carry on with my questioning around the gender lens, but I wanted to start by just sharing that last night late in the night, I received a message from one of my constituents who has family escaping Ukraine. They are in Romania right now, a mother with two children. She has all the infrastructure she needs when she gets to Canada but can't make her way here because she needs biometrics to pass through the visa applications, and that is impossible. She's there in Romania with only \$200 and yet she can't get a biometrics appointment until April 29, which is nine days after the expiration of their visa. That's how I'm coming to the table today, with those thoughts on my mind.

Getting back to the gender lens, I want to ask about the modernization of EI. I think some of these legacy policies were made before we really thought about women in work and diverse genders coming to work and persons with disabilities coming to work. I just wondered if staff could share with us how the gender lens is being applied to the modernization of EI and that work.

Ms. Catherine Demers: One of the key objectives of the EI modernization work that we're doing is looking at ways to ensure that all workers have access to EI and that the EI program is more inclusive, stronger and simplified. We're looking at all aspects of the program in terms of administrative and program simplifications, but also access issues with respect to workers losing their jobs and families experiencing life events such as the birth of a child or illness. A key area of discussion through the consultations has been focused on ensuring that we understand well the issues with respect to the changing needs of families, including working mothers.

Minister Qualtrough has met with employer groups, worker groups and various groups representing families including adoptive parents, for example, to understand these changing needs.

The Chair: It must be a very short question, Madam Zarrillo.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm just going to carry on with that questioning. I was just wondering if any of that consultation, maybe just one or two things that were learned, could be shared with the committee.

The Chair: Give a short answer.

Ms. Catherine Demers: We are compiling the information and doing the analysis now. Certainly a lot of interest has been raised from worker, labour and family groups around access, such as eligibility rules for accessing programs and flexibilities for using parental and maternity benefits. For example, there is interest in looking at the number of weeks of benefits available for adoptive parents compared to birth mothers and other birth parents in general.

There was a lot of interest in that aspect. There was a lot of interest in simplification issues, as well as flexibilities in general.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Zarrillo.

We'll continue with Madame Gladu. As soon as the minister arrives, we'll move to that part.

Madam Gladu, you have five minutes.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to members from the department. I'm happy when the minister shows up to interrupt my time. I'm happy to have her make her comments and to perhaps have a chance to ask her a question.

I have some questions on the mandate and some questions that are more general.

First of all, I want to talk about people coming from Ukraine and how they are going to need English as a second language or English upgrades. I think this department has typically been responsible for budgeting that. I didn't see anything in the estimates.

Have there been discussions about offering that kind of training to the Ukrainians who are coming?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll start off and some of my colleagues may want to jump in here.

We're in the process of looking at what programs we can leverage that exist already in the department and what additional programs we can add through a grant and contribution agreement, for example, or through some of the programs we have, like our job bank.

At the same time, we're looking at leveraging what's already in place in some of our community resources to see if we can build on those to meet the vast array of needs we expect people arriving in Canada from Ukraine will have. These may be education, English as a second language, support for day care, housing, child care or clothing.

We're in the process of looking at a number of those measures and what the department can contribute in that regard.

• (1635)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you.

The Chair: Madame Gladu, I'm advised that the minister is ready.

I'll take direction from the committee. Do you want to pause for a moment or do you want to continue with your questions?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Let's hear from the minister.

Can I have the rest of my time to ask her questions after that?

The Chair: Yes.

If it's the direction of the committee, we'll conclude the first round of this meeting and then we will move to the second.

Thank you, witnesses. I believe you may be staying while the minister is here.

We'll suspend for a couple of minutes while the minister is brought into the meeting virtually.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: Committee, we are back.

Minister Qualtrough, welcome to the committee.

The members are looking forward to your appearance here and that of the departmental officials. We have Jean-François Tremblay, deputy minister; Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy, who has stayed with us; and Karen Robertson, chief financial officer.

Madam Minister, I understand you have opening remarks. You now have the floor.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Thank you very much.

Hi, everyone. Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

I'll be speaking to you first about main estimates.

The funding for Employment and Social Development Canada represents a total of \$87.4 billion in planned budgetary expenditures. This is a net increase of \$5 billion over last year's main estimates. This is primarily due to significant increases for the early learning and child care agreements with the provinces and territories and for the Canada student financial assistance program.

We're also forecasting important increases to the old age security pension and the guaranteed income supplement. These increases are actually being offset by a decrease for the three statutory temporary recovery benefits.

I'll now speak quickly to my mandate items so we can get to questions, where I'll account for some of the specifics of the estimates: supporting workers impacted by the pandemic; modernizing EI; improving the temporary foreign worker program; building a strong, skilled workforce; ensuring post-secondary education is more affordable; and making Canada a more barrier-free, disability-inclusive country.

As Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, I'm responsible for ensuring workers in Canada are supported. Most recently, this has meant the creation of the Canada worker lockdown benefit. During the rise of omicron in December, we expanded the definition of a lockdown so that more workers would be eligible. This expanded eligibility was extended and ended on March 12. We also increased the number of weeks available under the Canada recovery caregiving benefit and the Canada recovery sickness benefit, which, as you can see in the main estimates, show a combined decrease of almost \$6.5 billion.

We're also focused on modernizing EI. Of course, one key lesson that we learned during the pandemic was just how important employment insurance is and how much stronger Canada's system could be. I'd like to thank the members of this committee for your excellent study on this issue, which included your 20 recommendations and which I regularly turn to to see if we're on track and to see how close the feedback I'm getting is to what all of you spent time recommending.

On February 17, we wrapped up phase one of our consultations. We held 10 national sessions and 11 regional sessions. We did a parallel online survey for Canadians and got more than 1,900 responses and 60 written submissions.

What we heard was that employment insurance could be more fair and more inclusive. It could be—and actually should be—simpler to navigate and should get benefits to Canadians quicker. We also heard that we need a program that supports workers and employers both when there's high unemployment and when there are labour shortages. I'm pleased to advise that we're going to publish a summary report soon on what we heard, and the second phase of consultation will begin in April.

Ensuring workers are safe and supported is also a critical part of my mandate, and that includes all workers. Another key priority for my department is addressing the systemic challenges that are in the temporary foreign worker program. I have publicly committed to a series of actions to improve upon the quality and timeliness of our inspections and, as we prepare for the 2022 agricultural season, my department has already taken steps to implement these actions. We are now truly better able to support our inspection staff through supplementary training, enhanced tools and improved workload management.

I'm also working with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food to help address labour shortages in farming and food processing. Earlier this year, we streamlined the processing for many of these employers, and we're working with the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship to establish a new trusted employer system. You'll also see about an additional \$19 million in the main estimates for a migrant worker support network, and that's to enhance the temporary foreign worker program.

We also know that Canada is experiencing a shortage of available workers across many sectors and regions. To grow our economy, I'm taking action to maximize workforce participation by breaking down barriers to employment and by helping workers up-skill to adapt to a changing labour market. To this end, I'm committed to expanding the foreign credential recognition program to help more newcomers enter the Canadian job market quicker. Yesterday morning, I announced funding for nine organizations that will help thousands of qualified newcomers enter our health care workforce more quickly.

I'm also moving forward with a disability employment strategy to help employers make their workplaces more inclusive and reach this untapped talent pool.

• (1640)

Another priority is to promote the skilled trades as first career choices for young people and diverse populations. We've launched the national skilled trades advertising campaign, which provides information on training, federal funding and in-demand trades by region.

We also have committed to doubling the union training and innovation program, or UTIP, which is a very popular program. We are moving forward with our apprenticeship service, which will provide more training opportunities for Canadians pursuing a career in the trades. Just last week, we announced new investments in Halifax and in Sudbury through UTIP. That will ensure more people get trained in skills such as carpentry and other essential in-demand skilled trades.

My mandate is a big one, but it also includes ensuring that Canada's workforce is ready to meet a low-carbon future. We're doing this by investing in our new sectoral workforce solutions program. To build talent for the clean economy, we're also committed to launching our new clean jobs training centre.

As you can see, there is a lot going on.

To make life more affordable, a critical part of my mandate is to make post-secondary education more accessible in Canada. To do this, we've committed to permanently eliminating federal interest on Canada student loans. We're also making repayment systems more flexible and less burdensome on Canadians, through multiple measures, including increasing the repayment assistance program threshold to \$50,000 for borrowers who are single and allowing new parents to pause repayments until their youngest child reaches the age of five.

We're also looking to increase debt forgiveness for doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners who work in rural and remote areas, and we're committed to increasing this debt forgiveness by 50%.

Before I conclude, I want to turn to a part of my mandate that is close to my heart, as you know, and that's our work to improve the lives of Canadians with disabilities. No Canadian with a disability should live in poverty—no one should. One of my key priorities is to create a new Canada disability benefit and consult on its design with members of the disability community, provinces and territories and other stakeholders. Once implemented, such a benefit could help lift hundreds of thousands of working-age Canadians with disabilities out of poverty.

I'd like to take a moment to thank those members who have contacted me personally with their support to retable this legislation. I'm committed to doing so in the House as soon as possible.

This benefit is a cornerstone piece of our new disability inclusion action plan. This plan has four pillars: financial security, employment, inclusive communities and a modern approach to disability. In the spirit of “nothing without us”, we are committed to working closely with the disability community on the disability inclusion action plan and the design of the new benefit, because persons with disabilities know best what we need, the challenges we face and what barriers most prevent us from having financial security.

I'm happy to point out that over \$78 million for the enabling accessibility fund and over \$67 million for the opportunities fund are reflected in the main estimates for persons with disabilities.

I'll leave it there, Chair.

I hope that's demonstrated the breadth and strength of my commitment to my mandate priorities. I look forward to questions.

• (1645)

The Chair: Madam Minister, thank you for coming in a couple of minutes under your time.

Now we will go to Madam Gladu for six minutes.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing today.

I want to start with some of the items in your mandate letter.

I agree that the modernizing of the employment insurance program could be more fair. My understanding of this program is that employees pay premiums. If they've worked enough hours, then when they lose their job, they receive that benefit.

However, my understanding is also that, in this pandemic, people who lost their jobs because they didn't want to take a vaccine were prevented from getting employment insurance, even though they had contributed to it and they had met the hour criteria.

Can you explain this?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks for the question. It is a question that I've had often.

I'll start by saying that the science is really clear that vaccines are safe and effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19. We think it's prudent for our workplaces, and good for the economy, that they be as safe as possible.

Each EI application is assessed on a case-by-case basis. However, if an employer has a mandatory vaccination policy and an employee is found to have not complied or has voluntarily quit because of that, they typically wouldn't be eligible to receive benefits, just like they wouldn't be eligible in the case of other policies that an employer has. It's the compliance issue with an employer policy, not necessarily a function of the EI system.

As I said, certainly I don't make those determinations, and each EI application is assessed on a case-by-case basis. It's a matter of non-compliance with an employer policy.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: It certainly does seem unfair.

I noticed in your mandate letter that you have a goal of increasing the number of personal support workers by 50,000, which is good to hear because we all know that we're short and long-term care facilities are suffering.

Is this target before or after the 22,000 personal support workers who were fired for not having vaccines?

• (1650)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: These are two separate issues. It's a completely different conversation that we would have to have with provincial and territorial governments, who are responsible for dictating employment requirements and standards for personal support workers.

Our goal on the training side of it, having recognized this gap, is to train these individuals as quickly as possible so that they can be part of the health care sector.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Okay, thank you.

I'm very interested in the disability benefit. There were private members' bills that the Conservatives brought forward to try to address the issue that when disabled people want to work, they actually lose their benefits so it's a punishment to them for going to work and that keeps them in the cycle of poverty.

These new benefits that you're designing, will they address this concern so that the disabled who want to work will not lose their benefits when they do?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's a really important question, and in fact, the number one preoccupation of mine on this benefit is to make sure that this benefit doesn't disincentivize or punish work and it fairly incentivizes work, I would say, so that people are better off working. It's also so that we're not replacing benefits, particularly at the provincial and territorial level where disability supports are primarily housed, and we are actually making people's lives better and people are getting lifted out of poverty.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Speaking of poverty, I have a lot of seniors in my riding and obviously the cost of everything is going up—gas, groceries and heating—and people can't always afford all of those.

I wanted to ask about the policy that awarded increases to seniors over the age of 75 but excluded those between 65 and 75.

Is there a possibility that the government would reverse that policy in recognition that inflation is hitting all of the people who are on a fixed income equally?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Again, that's a really important question. We have committed to increasing writ large the OAS and increasing it for people over the age of 75, which is a recognition of the increased costs of medication, of accessibility issues that people face at 75. There's much less likelihood of working by that age whereas we find people between 65 and 75 do sometimes have another source of employment income. It's not my file. I apologize, colleagues, but I just don't have any further detail. You'll have to ask the Minister of Seniors.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: No problem.

I have one final question. We have heard of this NDP-Liberal coalition and that there have been agreements made in the back room about what programs might be added.

Can you clarify what, if anything, will be added to the estimates that we're seeing here in order to appease the NDP?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: What I can say is that the agreement allows Parliament to function exceedingly better. It will allow us to move forward on areas of mutual interest including pharmacare and climate change. Certainly from the perspective of the disability community, dental care is a welcome addition to that list.

I can tell you I'm not sure. Again, they're not my files so I think it would be best to talk to another minister about the details of those particular programs.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: We have Mr. Long for six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair. I'm sharing my time with MP Van Bynen.

Minister Qualtrough, Carla, welcome and thank you for coming back to speak with us today. It's always a pleasure to have you back, and I thank you so much for the work you do on behalf of so many Canadians.

As we know, the Canada disability benefit was tabled in the last Parliament. It died on the Order Paper. I'm very happy to see it remains part of your mandate, and I'm really looking forward to fulfilling this important platform promise.

In New Brunswick, approximately 23% of the working-age population lives with a disability. This benefit will be crucial to those who live in my riding Saint John-Rothesay and across Canada.

I actually tabled a motion to study how a benefit such as this would reduce poverty among working-age Canadians with disabilities and how the federal government can improve access to federal programs and services for persons with disabilities. I look forward to getting to work on it in the near future.

Minister, could you explain the importance of the Canada disability benefit and exactly what you believe it will achieve and can you provide any insight on when my constituents can expect this legislation to come into place?

Thank you and welcome.

• (1655)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question, and thanks for having me.

As I said in my remarks, no one should live in poverty. Right now, we have working-age Canadians living with disabilities who are twice as likely to live in poverty than those without disabilities. Twenty-two per cent of Canadians with disabilities who are of working age live under the poverty line. That's one in five. It's shocking.

Poverty rates go down by half when persons with disabilities reach age 65, and you know why; it's because they now have access to the GIS. It's a big gap between the CCB disability, which ends when an individual becomes an adult, and 65, when someone is able to access the GIS. This has the potential to lift hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty.

We are committed to looking at introducing this as soon as we possibly can. I'm grateful for the support from members of all parties who have indicated that they want this benefit to move forward.

Forty-five senators wrote us a letter saying that they want to fast-track it. It's very exciting and I look forward to tabling it as soon as we can, given the legislative schedule.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you for that, Minister.

I'll turn it over to MP Van Bynen.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Minister. I appreciate you taking the time to bring us up to date on your mandate letter and the funding that's required going forward.

An item in your mandate letter is to continue to support the work of the national campaign to promote the skilled trades as a first-choice career for young people in diverse populations.

Blue Door Shelters is an example of an organization that's providing emergency housing in York region and supports women, children and families at risk of experiencing homelessness. They've started Construct, which is a program that provides entry-level experience in construction in the home improvements industry to develop an interest in pursuing the trades and to become self-reliant. At the same time, they can generate some income for a social enterprise. The program is building on support, and some of the supports that you're contemplating may apply.

I fully support promoting these skilled trades as a first-choice career. I'd be interested in knowing if you could provide us with an overview of this work and update us on how that's progressing. Specifically, is there a benefit for the social enterprise programs?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I think a lot about how we can get young people, in particular, to seriously consider a skilled trade as a career of first choice. Our workforce desperately needs skilled trades workers. We have about 700,000 skilled trade workers who will retire between 2019 and 2028, I think. These are good-paying, professional, exciting, in-demand jobs.

Historically, these jobs have been second-choice careers. We have put in place a strategy and launched a campaign to educate and to reframe the conversation to get young people, in particular, excited about a career in the skilled trades.

We have been working with industry partners. We've formed an advisory group. We've launched this campaign, which is wrapping up at the end of this year. Again, we're trying to get the conversation shifted to promote our apprenticeship strategy and promote the supports we have with UTIP, for example—the union training and innovation program—to change the conversation. This is a first-career choice. When I came into this portfolio, the average age upon entry into the skilled trades was around 27 or 28.

We want people to be excited about these good-paying jobs. We desperately need our workforce to have the richness of skilled trades workers in it in order to get what we need to get done: to build our economy.

• (1700)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[Translation]

You have the floor for six minutes, Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister, and thank you for being with us to discuss your mandate letters, which are several pages long. You have been given a number of responsibilities. I would like to talk to you about the reform of Canada's employment insurance scheme.

I know that you are holding consultations and I imagine the work you are doing is much appreciated both among groups of unemployed people and among groups of unions and employers.

The Prime Minister has instructed you to build "a better, more inclusive employment insurance system" by the summer of 2022. According to an article published in *La Presse* on January 1, you said that you were sure you would be able to meet the June 2022 deadline the Prime Minister had given you.

Do you intend to honour the resolution you made on January 1 and give us a guarantee that we can count on reform and modernization of the employment insurance scheme in June 2022?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question.

I don't recall saying that, but frankly,

[English]

what I have always committed to is getting this right.

I've been very clear that we need to do this in stages and phases. We want to get the more agreed-upon consensus elements built into the system more quickly, and take the time we need to dig in on the elements for where there might not be consistency.

Specifically, around the self-employed benefit, when I think of that...We have to consider the costs of doing this, and we have to phase it in through costs. We have to consider the need to make system changes.

We are putting forth a bold vision for EI, where benefits are accessible and adequate, and address the needs of workers today. That will be done as quickly as possible, ensuring we take into account all the factors I've just put forth.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Minister, you know that the flexible employment insurance measures will be ending in September 2022. You also know that numerous solutions are known and that modernization by stages, without considering it comprehensively, is just going to provide piecemeal responses to certain needs. I can send you the article in which you said you could meet the deadline for the reform. Ultimately, what we expect is that there will be a reform of employment insurance as of now.

My colleague asked some questions relating to women. The employment insurance scheme discriminates against women in two regards: the eligibility criteria, because they often hold atypical jobs, and entitlement to maternity leave. Women have successfully fought this. They proved there were discriminatory rules that meant that if they lost their jobs they were not entitled to parental leave.

In another article on the subject published in *La Presse*, you showed that you were sensitive to the cause of these new mothers who had no access to benefits. In spite of all that, you decided to appeal the decision of the Social Security Tribunal of Canada.

Are you committed to correcting this discrimination against women in your reform?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Just to quickly add to my last answer, I want to assure you that while we may be implementing EI reforms in stages, we will not be doing this piecemeal. We're thinking about the entire system, and how every decision and issue we address, or don't address, impacts others. It's a systemic reform that will be implemented over time.

In terms of the issues you speak about, absolutely, I remain committed to addressing the inequities that women face in the EI system, whether it's the stacking rules, or rules that sometimes result in women getting to the end of regular benefits, and having no weeks left in the 50-week limit to access maternity or parental benefits. These are the issues that are driving our reforms.

I can't, of course, speak to one particular case before the Social Security Tribunal of Canada, because of privacy issues, but I can assure you that reforms will address inequities faced by women.

• (1705)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Minister, my Conservative colleague asked a question about workers who did not comply with mandatory vaccination being denied employment insurance benefits and emergency benefits such as the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit and the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit.

You said that it depended on the companies and the decision was not up to the department. But it actually is a decision by your department, and a majority of the companies where vaccination is mandatory come under federal jurisdiction. Those workers have already been laid off or dismissed or put on leave without pay, and a punitive burden has now been piled on: that they are no longer eligible for employment insurance benefits. You have said this measure would last as long as public health required.

At this time, do you think that depriving people of employment insurance benefits in this situation is an extreme measure?

Are you considering lifting this measure?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: As my colleague, the Minister of Health and others, including me, contemplate next steps with respect to vaccine mandates, I can assure you that we will follow the science. The vast majority of businesses in this country are under provincial jurisdiction. Their decisions as to whether to impose a mandatory vaccine requirement are matters of their internal business policy, and, of course, if someone loses a job or chooses to leave a job because they are not following an internal policy, that, again, in most cases would result in their not being eligible for EI.

I'm not talking about a situation in which someone has a duty to accommodate due to a legitimate medical reason. That is an important caveat.

With regard to the federal public service, in terms of workplaces that are currently under federal mandates, I think we will continue to follow the science and we will continue to make decisions based on our commitment to make sure our workplaces are healthy. Doing that benefits not only our citizens but our economy as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Qualtrough.

Madam Zarrillo, go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you very much.

Thank you very much, Minister.

I am going to spend all of my time with you today on getting information for persons living with disabilities.

I'll start by just saying that with the rising cost of housing, the rising cost of living and the greater level of risk that will come to the disability community as changes in the mask mandates and other COVID protections are lifted, this becomes even more urgent. The ASAP that you spoke of a couple of times today really matters.

You mentioned that the legislative agenda was potentially a barrier to getting the Canada disability benefit onto the floor, and I'm wondering if you can tell the committee whether this bill has been pushed back since November 2021 and whether there are any remaining barriers to getting it to the floor.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

I certainly don't mean to say that it will be a barrier. It's more that other events, such as the emergency benefits from the fall, the Emergencies Act and other things going on in no way reflect the work that has been done already to prepare the groundwork for the Canada disability benefit and the conversations that are ongoing

with provincial and territorial governments around how we are going to engage in negotiations once this benefit becomes law. I just don't have a date, which is why I'm hesitant, but I don't want to leave anybody with the impression that this isn't going to happen. It's just a matter of when. I just can't tell you the date.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm sure you know, Minister, that many in the disability community are anxiously and eagerly awaiting it. Is there anything this committee can do or that members of this committee can do to try to advance that work or to assist in advancing that work?

• (1710)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you. As with the Accessible Canada Act, we're going to have an opportunity with this piece of legislation to go above partisanship and to deliver for Canadians with disabilities.

I have talked with members of all parties about their support for the Canada disability benefit. It would be lovely if we could all agree to move it through the parliamentary process as quickly as possible. Once tabled, the bill will look the same as it did in June, so for any questions you have or any issues you have, it would be great to work together so that once this is tabled, we can fast-track it and deliver for Canadians with disabilities.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Minister. I think one thing that I'm hearing a lot is around who will be eligible, and the eligibility criteria. You said the criteria will be the same. Will there be eligibility criteria spelled out?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes. I guess from a point of view of parliamentary decorum I would say the elements would be the same. I can't opine on letter for letter, word for word, because I wouldn't want in any way to be out of line on this.

This is really framework legislation in the spirit of "nothing without us", working, co-developing the benefit with the disability community. This creates a framework wherein we get the regulatory authority to work with provinces to ensure there are no clawbacks of this benefit, to ensure that the amount ultimately lifts people out of poverty. That's why we are funding Independent Living Canada to work with the disability community to recommend eligibility criteria.

Of course, as we all know, it's not a business the federal government has been in historically, so we are hard-pressed to find easy lists of people who could be eligible. We have the disability tax credit. We have people who get disability benefits through Veterans Affairs and CPP disability. But unlike, say, seniors, where we can identify everybody in this country who is over 65, we can't do that yet with disability, because of the lack of data. We really need to understand the enormous challenge of defining the eligibility criteria, and that work is already ongoing, but the legislation will give us the legal framework to basically bring the ball over the finish line, I would say.

That's not an analogy. I think I just missed it. Anyway, you know what I mean.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you very much, Minister, and that's good information. I think you know that the NDP would like everyone who qualifies provincially or is on a disability to automatically be eligible. I'll leave that with you, because I don't—

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, and that is an option for sure, and it's all in the mix.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Great. I have one more question for you.

I'm really concerned about discrimination in employment, so I'm very pleased to hear that we are going to do more to get employment opportunities for people living with a disability. This too needs to be modernized. I know that you agree with that. Many people living with a disability lost their employment disproportionately and have had a difficult time gaining it back.

I'm worried about discrimination in the workplace, as we move forward, for persons with disabilities. What does the government have planned to protect workers so that their human rights are protected? I ask that because human rights claims are very expensive, they're emotionally taxing, and right now—and in general, but even more so right now—human rights tribunals are overburdened and they're taking a very long time to adjudicate cases.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: You've hit on the two things that matter so much to me. Historically, more than 50% of the complaints to the Canadian Human Rights Commission have been on the grounds of disability, and the vast majority of those in employment. We know this is happening. That's why employment is a key pillar of our disability inclusion action plan, making sure that we put a standard for employment in place through Accessibility Standards Canada so that becomes part of the proactive regime of barrier identification, unburdening the individual from having to fight case by case at the Human Rights Tribunal. They can lean on and expect their government to make that fight for them against their employer.

There's a lot going on in this space, including education and awareness training for employers. Of course, this will be a key component of our employment strategy, because the number one barrier to full participation by persons with disabilities in society writ large is discrimination on the grounds of employment.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Zarrillo. Your time is up.

Now we go to Mr. Ruff for five minutes.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thanks, Chair.

Minister, part of your mandate letter includes a commitment to “Launch [the] Clean Jobs Training Centre to help [industrial skill and trade] workers across sectors to upgrade or gain new skills...to be on the leading edge of the zero carbon industry”.

As you may know, in my region nuclear power is of major importance, and nuclear is arguably a vital part of any sensible response to climate change. Unlike the green bond framework, will the clean jobs training centre include training and skills to help workers transition to the nuclear industry, or will it exclude this important and innovative industry? Is that yes or no, Minister?

• (1715)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Actually, we're right now engaging stakeholders and other government departments on what that should include. That is definitely a topic of conversation, but, sorry, I can't weigh in either way on that yet.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Minister. Please weigh in that it should be included.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Understood. Message received.

Mr. Alex Ruff: My next question is one that I've brought up before in the House. It's with respect to support for the visually impaired and those with print disabilities.

In last year's budget, the funding was cut, or there was no provision for long-term sustainable funding, for NNELS and CELA. The current funding envelope is very small, but the impact of this funding is significant. The loss of NNELS and CELA services to people with print disabilities in Canada will be devastating.

Can you provide a very quick update on what is happening with this file and your commitment in your mandate letter to permanently fund support services that ensure equitable access to reading and other published works for Canadians with print disabilities?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you. I've assured both CELA and NNELS that their funding levels will not go down for the next fiscal year as we work to permanently address this issue with them. I had a meeting with them recently where I told them this.

So they can breathe easy while we and while I continue to find the best path forward to permanently stabilize their funding, we're on it. They're good for the next year at least.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Minister. Please stay on top of that to ensure that there is no shortage while you're working on a long-term strategic plan.

My next area of questioning is around our agriculture sector, in particular our fruit and vegetable growers. Currently under the LMIA process, whether they're temporary foreign workers or seasonal, there are audits being done with respect to housing standards. At the provincial and municipal levels there are integrity audits, labour audits, municipal zoning regulations, fire codes and so on. Some of these farmers who are fundamental to our food security are undergoing eight audits in a given year.

What is your role and ESDC's role to streamline this and take away this bureaucratic burden to our fruit and vegetable growers?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's a really important question. Thank you. I recognize that this is one of the most complex and convoluted programs we have, partially as a function of the different levels of government and the different areas of responsibility. It's not an excuse but just the reality.

One of the most important things that I think we can do in addition to creating the sector-specific agricultural labour strategy that the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and I are working on with our producers and food processors is to establish a trusted employer system. This would significantly streamline application processes for Canadian companies hiring TFWs. You can imagine a NEXUS equivalent where, if you have a good compliance record, we wouldn't maybe require you to have an annual LMIA. We might extend the length of your LMIA. We might provide fewer inspections and take a more risk-based approach to inspection that lets us target the bad actors, if you will.

We know how burdensome this is. I think you'll be very pleased with how we move forward to modernizing and streamlining these processes. I know it should have been done already. We need to do this for our farmers.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Yes. I would ask you to take that lead role at the federal level to help coordinate all these inspections or audits so that the farmers will be impacted only once and not multiple times.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Mr. Alex Ruff: My final question is tied to this. You initiated the consultation period in response to COVID for the bunkhouses for many of these temporary or seasonal ag workers. That was concluded last December. What are the new standards, if any, that our employers are to abide by, and when are they coming?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's a good question. We released a "what we heard" report on this in mid-December, I believe; I don't have the date in front of me, and I apologize. The next step is to hold a conversation, a round table, with all the implicated stakeholders to dig into what we heard and figure out what those standards should be.

We're working closely with PTs trying to, again, untangle jurisdiction, because of course this is primarily a PT area. The way during COVID that we were able to be a little more rigorous was to use immigration regulations, because of the extraordinary times of COVID, but we need a system that does this, not a one-off. We're working on it.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ruff.

I need direction from the committee now. The bells are ringing, but they're 30-minute bells. They've been ringing for a little less than five minutes.

Do you wish to continue on? What's the direction?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: We'll stay as long as everyone gets in their round or the minister's available, either-or. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Good. The minister's available.

We'll now move to Mr. Collins for five minutes.

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister. Thanks for your attendance here today.

Mr. Chairman, please note that I'm going to be sharing my time with my friend and colleague Mr. Coteau.

The first question I have, Minister, is around the foreign credential recognition program that you highlighted in your opening.

Over the years, I've met dozens of residents in my riding of Hamilton East—Stoney Creek who are health care workers, engineers, accountants and other professionals and who are anxious to share their expertise with us as part of our Canadian economy and to contribute with the training they've received from wherever they've come from in the world.

I know that you made an announcement yesterday. I was hoping that you could elaborate on the announcement and share with us the progress that we've made—and you've made—with the foreign credential recognition program, and what we might expect to see in 2022.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

I think we cannot underestimate the importance of newcomers to Canada's workforce and of making sure that we are actually using their skills and talents and helping them get into the workforce as quickly as possible in their area of expertise. We're experiencing a shortage of available workers, and this is a labour tool that is ripe for us to use.

What the foreign credentials recognition program does is fund provincial and territorial regulatory bodies to enhance foreign credential recognition, so part of the funding goes to work to untangle some of the credential recognition challenges that individuals face. We also fund organizations that help newcomers navigate these complicated processes, and we fund organizations and employers to provide first Canadian work experiences in somebody's area of expertise or education.

Those are the three prongs of attack of this program: try to streamline the processes, support organizations that are helping individuals access or get through these processes, and actually give that first work experience. The announcements we made yesterday for these nine organizations did a combination of this in working with a national group of nurses to help navigate and streamline nursing regulations in Ontario; in supporting employers who want to hire newcomers and provide them that first Canadian experience; and in supporting local organizations that work with newcomers in broader wraparound service provisions, as one of the things they do, to help them navigate and get their credentials recognized.

I think we're going to see exciting things. We've increased the budget significantly for this program, and I think it is a key prong of our approach to addressing labour shortages.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman, I'll cede my time to Mr. Coteau at this point.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Coteau.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Mr. Chair, I'm going to pass this on to the member for Kitchener Centre.

The Chair: Mr. Morrice, you have two minutes.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Thank you, Mr. Coteau.

Thank you, Chair.

I want to start by acknowledging that I'm now the third member, from a third political party, who is raising the subject of the Canada disability benefit this afternoon. Really, I'm following Mr. Long and Ms. Zarrillo in amplifying the calls of Disability Without Poverty and so many others across the country who've been putting in the work on this for years and years, including on the principles referred to earlier. As the minister knows well, those principles are on the Disability Without Poverty website with respect to implementing the Canada disability benefit.

I'd like to go further yet in recognizing how important this is, as was referred to earlier in this conversation. It was referred to in question period yesterday and in my conversation with the parliamentary secretary the day before.

I understand that the minister is not able to share a timeline for "when", so in light of that, I wonder, knowing, Minister Qualtrough, of your support for the Canada disability benefit, if you could speak about the specific steps that have been taken over the last few months to move closer to making progress in the legislative agenda, and if you could speak to the specific progress being made in order to fast-track the reintroduction of the Canada disability benefit.

• (1725)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you, Mr. Morrice. Thank you for your relentless pursuit of this. I'm appreciative.

We tabled the legislation last June. It died on the Order Paper. It was a clear, foundational part of the Liberal Party platform in the last election. It is in my mandate letter, and the Prime Minister, all of our colleagues in cabinet and I are committed to introducing this legislation. I can tell you that, as we've worked to move forward on

many aspects of the disability file, this has been the unwavering cornerstone of the work we're trying to do.

As you may have heard me say, it would be the flip side of the investments we make in employment. Ideally, the more people we get working, the better. Until we remove the barriers that we've put up as a society and until we recognize that we created this situation, we need to make sure people aren't living in poverty.

That's as much detail as I can think of, but I can assure you that it's a top priority for our government. It is simply a matter of when, not if. It will happen.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrice.

Now we'll go to Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, between now and June 2022, what measures are you planning to take that will, from what I understand, mark the beginning of a systemic reform of the employment insurance scheme?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to clarify my position.

[*English*]

We are going to put forth a vision and a pathway for employment insurance. We're going to release what we heard in the findings of our initial round of discussions on access to EI. Of course, we are committed to increasing the weeks of sickness benefit to 26. That will happen this fall. We will be making decisions. They will be heavily informed by what we heard on the ground during our consultations around the temporary measures that are set to expire at the end of September.

I can assure you—again, perhaps an implementation will be phased, and these conversations are not happening all at once—that the vision that we put forth for an EI system remains the guiding principle. This will not be piecemeal.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Have you finished your answer, Minister?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, I'm finished.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Minister, my next question deals with the temporary foreign workers program.

I am well aware of the new agreements, particularly the ones signed with Quebec, but nonetheless, the situation for food producers, in the food and beverage processing sectors, as in many others, is that they are still facing delays this year. Numerous companies and employers are enduring delays associated with the processing of LMIA applications, which is the start of the process.

What are you going to do to solve the problem of delays?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I can assure you that we have been addressing the backlog of LMIAs and delays. I know Lori is on the line. She can speak to where we are, but we meet weekly to see how things are going on a regional basis and ensure that those delays are being addressed.

I think we have good news, Lori, don't we? I don't have the numbers in front of me, but I think we're well on the way if not caught up.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: We are in a good place, Minister. We've fixed our technology challenges. We've taken a significant decrease in the cases in Quebec. On agricultural LMIAs, we're averaging 25 days to get those LMIAs through. We're seeing a significant change, and our inventory has been reduced dramatically. I'm working very closely with our Quebec counterparts to address the issues that remain.

• (1730)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Now, we have Madame Zarrillo for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm getting my two and a half minutes. That's amazing.

My last question is going to be again on disability, but intersectionally on first nations, Inuit and Métis who live with disabilities. I'm wondering if there's anything in the main estimates that you could share with us or even any additions in the main estimates that deal with support for first nations, Inuit and Métis living with disabilities.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm sorry, I can't point to the exact line, but one of the things we're working on, on a distinctions basis, is the Accessible Canada Act, and its application within indigenous communities and on reserve. There was a conscious decision made on the advice of indigenous leaders to work in a parallel track on the application of the Accessible Canada Act, and that work is being done.

We've also built into a number of our programs a more distinctions-based specific stream, I would say, for indigenous persons with disabilities. I apologize, I want to make sure I get my language correct. I'm thinking of ISED. I'm thinking of our Canada summer job program. I'm thinking of a couple of others whose names escape me. In fact, the disability community is on the cutting edge of intersectionality. As we look at a range of issues that we might call disability issues, we recognize very quickly that it's not necessarily just the case.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm going to ask about the disability tax credit for type 1 diabetes. I know there are other things, other places, for the disability tax credit that have this time allocation as a barrier to access. So for diabetes, the 14 hours a week application and appointments don't apply.

I'm just wondering if there's any movement on removing that time barrier, just again, to modernize the disability tax credit

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Absolutely. We appreciate...What's happened, and I've said this to this committee before, is that the disability policy has been really driven or has been a function of tax policy in this country.

My mandate letter commitment to take a modern approach to disability, and to have a common definition of disability, is an exact response to the issues like this, where functional impairments aren't captured by the current approach to disability in a program. I'm committed to fundamentally changing our approach to disability, so that we understand how, as opposed to a diagnosis, your day-to-day functioning is impaired by your disability, or whatever medical or physical impairment you have.

So absolutely, there's no outcome on that particular type 1 diabetes, and the 14 hours a week, I believe it is. It's actually one of the driving factors to reconceive, and have a modern approach to disability with a common definition across the Government of Canada. Lucky for us, we already have one in the Accessible Canada Act, so type 1 diabetes would fall under that. We're really excited about completely flipping this on its head.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo. That concludes our time.

Thank you, Minister, and departmental officials for appearing before the committee on this important topic.

Thank you, committee members. We will now adjourn the meeting for the vote.

The meeting is adjourned.

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