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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey





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

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

• (1640)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 40 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 taking place in a hybrid format. There will be members who will be appearing via Zoom.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. For those participating virtually, please use the “raise hand” function before speaking. Click on your microphone icon to activate your own mike. For those in the room, it will be controlled by the proceedings and verification officer. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order, and we appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. If there is a disruption in translation services, in interpretation, then I would ask you to get my attention and we'll suspend while it is being corrected. I would also like to remind participants that screenshots are not permitted. Should any technical issues arise, as I indicated, we will suspend for a few moments.

Also at this time I'm going to remind members and witnesses who are appearing virtually that if you do not have a House of Commons-approved headset, I will not recognize you. This is for the benefit of the translation services, the interpreters. You can participate in the vote by raising your hand, but if you do not have a House of Commons-approved headset and you are a virtual witness or member of the committee, I will not recognize you.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, October 19, 2022, the committee will proceed to a technical briefing session on Bill C-22, an act to reduce poverty and to support the financial security of persons with disabilities by establishing the Canada disability benefit and making a consequential amendment to the Income Tax Act.

I would like to inform all members that the witnesses appearing virtually today have completed the technical tests, and interpretation services have been checked and are fine.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with a technical briefing for up to 20 minutes, followed by questions. I would indicate to the committee that following the 20-minute briefing, if it takes that long—it's maxed at 20 minutes—we will do one six-minute round, as we normally do, after which I will simply open the floor to any question by any member sitting here today—simply get my attention—rather than continuing to go from round to round, if that's agreeable to the committee members.

From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Alexis Conrad, senior assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch and Policy Horizons Canada; and Krista Wilcox, director general, office for disability issues.

We will start with Mr. Conrad.

Mr. Conrad, go ahead.

**Mr. Alexis Conrad (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch and Policy Horizons Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the committee for having us with you today.

[Translation]

As you know, earlier this year, the government once again introduced Its bill on the Canada disability benefit, now known as Bill C-22.

I am delighted that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities is continuing its study of Bill C-22. I am pleased to have the opportunity to help the committee do its work.

[English]

Mr. Chair, I will quickly walk through the legislation, and then spend a couple of minutes talking about some of the engagement that has been done leading up to this point. Hopefully, that will leave plenty of time for questions from members.

As you know, Bill C-22 proposes a framework for the Canada disability benefit. If passed, the bill will provide the legal authority to design, administer and implement a new Canada disability benefit.

First, I note that the legislation is framework legislation, meaning that most of the details of the benefit will follow in regulations. This approach is intentional. The aim is to strike a balance between getting a benefit in place to meet the immediate needs of working-age persons with disabilities living in poverty and, at the same time—in the context of “nothing without us”—having time to engage with people with disabilities and the disabilities community, in order to ensure their concerns are reflected in the design of the benefit. Given the complex system of benefits and supports for persons with disabilities in Canada, engaging provinces, territories and other stakeholders is critical to the benefit's success.

Using regulations for key benefit elements, such as eligibility, also recognizes disability as an evolving social construct. This approach will allow for more flexibility as our understanding of disability evolves. We have been very encouraged by the feedback we've received from the disabilities community, the provinces and the territories in this approach.

The disabilities community considers this strong evidence of “nothing without us” and a best practice. Provinces and territories note that, rather than announcing the specifics of the benefit, working with them to see how a benefit would best mesh with their own programming helps them and persons with disabilities at the same time. Provinces and territories have also noted that, by moving ahead with Bill C-22, the Government of Canada is demonstrating that the benefit will actually happen and isn't simply something that will be planned for later. We are asking them to do a lot of analytical work, and this legislation is proof to them that it's needed.

The purpose of the bill, as stated, is to reduce poverty and support the financial security of working-age persons with disabilities. The preamble situates this bill within the current framework of the legal rights of, and protections for, persons with disabilities in Canada, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Accessible Canada Act. It also acknowledges Canada's international obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In addition, the preamble recognizes that working-age persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than their peers without disabilities, as a result of economic and social exclusion. The preamble also reiterates Canada's aspirations to be a global leader in poverty eradication, as stated in the Poverty Reduction Act and demonstrated through Canada's existing supports to seniors and families with children.

The bill would provide the Governor in Council with the legal authority to detail the design of the benefit through regulations. These include its basic amount; how that amount would be reduced by other income, such as employment earnings; eligibility criteria for the benefit; the frequency of payments; applications and delivery mechanisms; and reviews and appeals.

The approach of tabling framework legislation, with details to follow in regulation, will enable the government to continue to engage on these design elements of the proposed benefit. The rationale behind the approach is that the government will need to work with persons with disabilities, as well as provinces and territories, on the benefit design. Canada's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Accessible

Canada Act provide that the Government of Canada should engage with persons with disabilities on policy, program and service delivery and design where it affects them.

Through the approach being taken, the government will continue to engage with persons with disabilities through the regulatory process on the benefit design. In addition, engagement through the regulatory management process will allow for the ongoing involvement of persons with disabilities on the implementation of the regulations.

Because provinces and territories play such a central role in providing support to many persons with disabilities, it is imperative that the Government of Canada collaborate with them to ensure that persons with disabilities are better off because of the introduction of this benefit, and that potential negative interactions with existing federal, provincial and territorial measures are identified and addressed.

A key component of the bill is clause 12, which would require parliamentary review of the act, its administration and its operations—in other words, the implementation of the benefit. This review would take place three years after the coming into force of the act and every five years thereafter.

Finally, the long title of this bill mentions “making a consequential amendment to the Income Tax Act”. This amendment is to allow the sharing of tax priority information from the Canada Revenue Agency, such as income information, with Employment and Social Development Canada for the purposes of administering the benefit, in order to determine the amount to which individuals would be entitled. This is standard across most income benefits.

As with most legislation, the bill would come into force on the date set by the Governor in Council.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

In the spirit of “Nothing without us : an accessibility strategy for the public service of Canada”, persons with disabilities rightly demand to be included in the development of policies and programs that have an impact on their lives. The structure of the Canada disability benefit was based on information gathered from ongoing consultation with stakeholders.

Numerous consultation activities have been held thus far. From June 4 to September 30, 2021, we held online consultations on the disability inclusion action plan, which addressed issues pertaining to the Canada disability benefit. More than 8,500 participants responded to the survey.

• (1650)

[English]

Four disability inclusion action plan or Canada disabilities round tables have been held. There was a round table with Minister Qualtrough, MP Ryan Turnbull and disabilities organizations to launch an online survey in June 2021. There was a round table with the Prime Minister, Minister Qualtrough and persons with disabilities later in June 2021. There was one with Minister Qualtrough and Disability Without Poverty, in July 2021, and one with Minister Qualtrough and disabilities organizations later in July 2021.

Four other round tables have been held. There was a round table with disability researchers and academics in January 2022; one with organizations that work with members of racialized communities, which was also in January 2022; one with national disabilities organizations in February 2022; and one with disability service providers later in February 2022.

In addition, we have engaged with other organizations, such as those representing the private insurance sector, given their role in the broader income benefits landscape in Canada.

Currently, community-led engagement efforts are under way to inform the disability inclusion action plan and the Canada disability benefit. Funding agreements are in place with national disability organizations to lead community-level engagement. It is anticipated that the community-level engagement that is currently under way will take place until spring 2023. Funding through ESDC engagement protocol agreements for national indigenous organizations to provide community consultations is anticipated to continue until spring 2023.

We are also engaging with the provinces and territories, given that they provide key benefits and programs to persons with disabilities. In summer 2021, federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for social services and disability met for an initial discussion on the proposed benefit. Bilateral and multilateral engagement with provinces and territories has been ongoing. It is expected that ministers will meet again soon, where the proposed benefit is expected to be a priority item.

If and when Parliament passes Bill C-22, the department has extensive plans to engage all stakeholders through the regulatory process to ensure their views are heard and factored into the draft and, eventually, the final regulations. In fact, the ongoing engagement that is already under way is a key input into the regulatory process.

Mr. Chair, I will stop there.

We'd be pleased to answer any questions you have.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Conrad.

That concludes the technical briefing. As you can see, it was under the 20-minute allotted time.

Before we begin the questioning round, I was remiss and forgot to acknowledge that we have a substitute member sitting in. Mr. McDonald is joining us today. Actually, he told me he's going to rate me. He chairs the other committee I sit on, so I'm under some pressure, committee members, with him present.

As I indicated, unless somebody objects, we'll do one six-minute round and then we'll just go to open questions from any member who wishes to direct a question. Simply get my attention.

We'll begin, for six minutes, with Mrs. Gray.

You have the floor.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the information here today.

First of all, right now, individuals have the ability to apply, federally, for the disability tax credit. While this tax credit doesn't encapsulate all individuals with disabilities, has there been any conversation around having the tax credit and the Canada disability benefit approval go hand in hand to speed up the approval of the benefit when it's rolled out?

• (1655)

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** I'll start. I'll ask Ms. Wilcox if she wants to jump in as well.

We have been looking at every form of eligibility and assessing them. We've been talking to the disabilities community, the provinces and territories—everyone—about the best approaches. The question around the disability tax credit is an option. No decision has been made. It's something that is still under consideration.

Depending on the approach taken, we obviously will look to see the easiest way for persons with disabilities to access the program. The service delivery aspect of this, making it easy for people to receive the benefit, is critical, regardless of which eligibility tool it is. If it's the disability tax credit, then we will work with the Canada Revenue Agency, but that's still to be determined.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** So that's something you're looking at right now as a potential option; that's what you're saying.

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** Everything is on the table.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Okay.

Clause 8 is about entering agreements with provinces on this benefit. How many provinces' equivalent departments has your department reached out to so far regarding coordinating on this benefit?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** We have spoken with all of them many times. We have ongoing officials tables that meet on a very frequent basis with all provinces and territories, all of which attend the meetings. The minister, the deputy minister and I have worked closely with them in both a multilateral forum and a bilateral forum. In fact, they've been very encouraged by our efforts to work with them.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Great. Thank you.

Can you table for this committee, broken down by date and province, the meetings your department has had with each province's equivalent department or agency on the Canada disability benefit and its implementation? Is that something you'd be able to provide?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** I think we can document the efforts we've made. I'll have them sent to the committee after. That works.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Great. Thank you.

Do you have an expected rollout, or a target rollout, for this benefit to be applicable?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** The legislation doesn't include a date. That's to be determined. There are a lot of processes still ongoing to refine the elements, to decide on the specific elements of the benefit and to implement it. I can say that the minister is keen to move forward as quickly as possible. She's also keen to make sure that we fully meet the needs of "nothing without us". We engage the community. We work with them through this process. We work with them through the regulatory process. That does take time. We're trying to strike the right balance.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Do you have an estimate of any kind? Are you looking at two months, six months, nine months, a year? You must be working backwards towards a particular timeline so that people with disabilities have at least a general idea of when they should be expecting this.

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** The challenge is that, not having any sense of when Parliament will finish its consideration of the bill, we need to finish that process before we can actually do the regulatory process. We have to figure out all of the engagement parts of the regulatory process.

So I don't have a date to work back from, because I don't know the date that we'll be starting the next phase of the process.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** After the next phase of the process you're referring to, then, assuming it's passed through Parliament, what is the estimated timeline of the next phase to go through the regulatory process? How long are you expecting that to take? What's your best estimate that you're expecting?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** A regulatory process like this, which is extremely complex, with literally hundreds of elements to it, will take some time. For notional purposes, we start to think about a "12-month-ish" time period. It can be shorter. It can be longer. It depends on the complexity of the program but also the level of engagement.

It is certainly a multi-month process to do regulations and then consult on the draft regulations and bring back the final regulations.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** As you've been working through this...because this was actually legislation that was worked on in the last Parliament and has now been brought forth. As you mentioned, since May there's been a lot of engagement out there, and getting feedback. Do you have some drafts already, based on all the work you've done over this amount of time, or is that really all just starting after this potentially passes through Parliament?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** I just want to make sure I'm answering the right question. Are you asking about drafts of the regulations?

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Yes, exactly. Do you have some drafts already that you've been working with? This was already something that was worked on even in the last Parliament, and then there's been lots of engagement, you said. Do you have some drafts already, or have those not even been started?

• (1700)

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** We don't draft the regulations until Parliament has finished its consideration of the legislation. We are going through a very deliberative process on the engagement side, as you mentioned, and working also as a department in terms of making sense of it and trying to bring advice forward about what should be in the regulations.

The drafting process is a formal thing that will kick off after the bill has been finished by Parliament.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Just to be clear, based on what you are saying, you are anticipating that this could take, in your best estimate, a year after it passes through Parliament. Is that what you are saying?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** What I'm saying is that when we formally start the regulatory process, notionally we start to think around that time frame. There are a lot of considerations that have to go into that, including the level of engagement, the amount of time and the input we get from the disability community through that process, because one thing we don't want to do is shortchange them in terms of their critical input to this. We also have to have significant conversations with the provinces and territories, and those do take time.

There are, to be honest, so many moving parts to this that all have to be stage-managed very carefully, so while we're ambitious in terms of wanting to get the benefit brought forward, we have to make sure we do that right, and that will take some time.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

We now go to Mr. Van Bynen for six minutes.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the time you are taking to help us gain a better understanding of what's being proposed here today.



I have a number of questions. The first one is how you anticipate the Canada disability benefit will interact with the existing provincial and territorial disability benefits.

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** The intent of the federal benefit is to be almost a supplement to a provincial benefit. It's to sit with it, not replace it—in the same way, for example, the guaranteed income supplement works with the old age security system. We see this as a supplement. It will complement it and be harmonized with the provincial benefit.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** How would you ensure that the benefit amount is consistent from coast to coast to coast?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** That's a question the minister has to consider based on feedback. Provincial programs differ. Most federal programs are the same across the country, but that is part of the conversation we need to have, including how the benefit will best meet the needs of the various people.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Have the provinces and territories given any indication of their willingness to be partners in this scenario, and, if so, to what extent?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** They have expressed enthusiastic willingness to be engaged in this. In fact, they have been enthusiastic both on the intent of the benefit and on the approach we've taken, including the framework legislation. This is exactly what they think needs to be done and exactly the process they feel needs to be conducted to get it right.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** As we're getting into the framework, a couple of items have been raised with me as recently as in a meeting today. There are some disabilities that are episodic—for example, mental illness, multiple sclerosis and psoriatic arthritis. Is there any consideration given to providing disability support for these episodic disabilities?

**Ms. Krista Wilcox (Director General, Office for Disability Issues, Department of Employment and Social Development):** Perhaps I can answer that one.

Unlike other groups of people for whom we have benefits based on age or other status, with disability it's quite unique in the sense that we have a very diverse population. Disabilities are different, so we have to think in terms of the eligibility criteria and how there are different approaches in terms of duration of disability. We see across the country how different benefits range from three months to permanent, so we have to take that into consideration.

We have to look at eligibility criteria related to how we define a disability, so we do look at fluctuating disabilities. We have different programs for those, and we will have to consider all of those when we look at how we would define this and how we'd bring those together in the eligibility criteria.

It's certainly something we've heard about from our consultations with the disability community on this benefit. We want to try to reach the people who are living in poverty who have disabilities, and those range across all types of disability and all lengths of duration of disability. Those are the things we're trying to look at.

● (1705)

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** Will there be income testing for individuals and families who support persons with disabilities and, if so,

how would we make sure that the Canada disability benefit avoids disincentivizing paid work?

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** It's a really important question. It will be an income-tested benefit as a poverty reduction measure—at least that's how we anticipate the eligibility criteria developing for this.

You have raised a really important point. We're developing this benefit on top of an incredibly complex system of benefits across the country, and that includes provincial and territorial social assistance. It includes private disability insurance programs and federal programs like programs for veterans and Canada pension plan disability. We have housing benefits that are outside of social assistance in provinces and territories, so we are layering this on and, when we look at this in the income testing, we really want to make sure that people are going to be better off at the end of the day.

We heard very clearly from the disability community that people with disabilities want to work. They're not always able to work and gainfully earn an income, and the design of this benefit needs to really take into consideration the interactions with other programs and benefits, look at making sure that we don't disincentivize work and look at the effective marginal tax rates and how they will affect people in terms of dollar per dollar and losing money at certain income thresholds.

That's a really complex piece of work that is going on. Trying to understand the various programs that exist in the provinces and territories has really been fundamental to that, and that has been a lot of the work we have done so far with provinces, really trying to understand how their income-tested programs are currently designed and how this benefit will sit on top of them and potentially interact with them.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen. Your six minutes have gone.

We have Madame Chabot for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd also like to thank the witnesses.

I'd like to reiterate what I said in the House. During the study of the bill, I was able to support the principle of introducing a Canada disability benefit.

The problem was that we were starting from scratch. We adopted the principle of the bill, meaning the introduction of the benefit, and we talked a lot about consultations, the principle of complementarity with the provinces, and the principle that this benefit should be established by and for persons with disabilities.

As legislators, however, we were being asked to come up with a bill whose implementation would involve a lot of regulation. The bill's objective is to reduce poverty. However, we don't know the amount of the benefit and we have no clue about what it might be.

On the basis of what criteria would you be able to say that the benefit would lift persons with disabilities out of poverty? Would the amount be calculated in terms of the poverty line? Do you have any idea of what economic indicators might be used? Is it just the poverty line or would people's income be included?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** We have a lot of information. There are databases containing information on the income of every Canadian. We understand the problems being experienced by persons with disabilities and know what their annual income is. From this standpoint, the problem is in evidence across Canada.

What we want to do is work with the community to learn what we should be providing, and to whom. So we want to work with the community rather than simply come up with numbers in the act. It's a somewhat different approach, and I understand that, but we feel that it's the best approach to adopt in order to provide the best possible benefit.

• (1710)

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I'll give you a very concrete example of how the community of persons with disabilities would benefit: In Quebec, as of January 1, 2023, people with severely limited capacity for employment would be eligible for a guaranteed basic income that would be indexed and supplemented by other measures.

Do you have any fairly straightforward studies on the status of the situation in every province and territory, and on programs that have been introduced, to help in determining which would be the best approach to adopt? I would imagine that you have data that the minister or the cabinet will be working with. Are these studies available? Can we have them?

[English]

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** Perhaps I'll answer that.

If the question is that you would like to understand if we have data on provincial programs or you would like data around poverty across the country, the latter I can easily provide to you. We have not done an assessment of provincial programs. We do have work that we're doing with provinces and territories to understand their programs but not in an assessment way.

I can certainly provide the committee with some data on poverty across Canada and the situation. We can provide data on how provincial programs that exist for persons with disabilities...how the income support programs stack up against the market basket measure across the country. If that's the type of data you are looking for, we could provide that to the committee to support your work.

[Translation]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Thank you.

Even though most of the groups agree, and the buy-in rate is fairly high, some have expressed reservations about how long it will take for this new benefit to be made available.

How long will it take between the adoption of the principle and the actual implementation? People really need it now. Is it true that the consultations might last three years or more?

[English]

**The Chair:** Give a short answer, please.

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** One thing I don't want to do is put a time limit or specify an exact time of how long it's going to take to fully engage the disabilities community. We're doing that already. As we talked about, this is an incredibly complex environment to deliver a new benefit in.

I'm fully cognizant that the disabilities community would like this benefit to start now because the need is there. In fact, that's why the government is actually moving forward with the benefit in the first place. Our biggest fear is doing it wrong, to be honest. The interactions, which my colleague talked about, with other federal, provincial, private programs, the linkages.... The last thing we want to do is move to a model where people end up accidentally being hurt and having other benefits cut off or declined. That's why it's so critical that we do this right, that we do it right both from a process point of view but also from all of the variables.

I will absolutely tell the committee that I would love this benefit to start tomorrow, but it is so complex that it takes time to get it right. We are moving, absolutely, as quickly as we can, and the minister is fully committed to moving this as quickly as we can. However, I can't stress enough how complex it is and how important it is that we do it right.

• (1715)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you to the technical staff for coming to share with us today.

I know that there's actually quite a large piece of the disability community watching this today. They're interested in these answers around when it's going to come, how much it is going to be, and who's going to get it. There was some talk today about how much consultation has already gone on.

My question is just around what studies have already been done, what findings are available for us as the committee to look at. First of all, about the estimate of how many people would be covered and be eligible for this benefit, have there been studies on this? Are there findings? Could you share them with the committee?

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** In terms of studies, what I can say is there are about 6.2 million Canadians with disabilities across the country. There are about four million working-age persons with disabilities in Canada—that's between 18 and 64. There were about 917,000 working-age persons with disabilities living in poverty in Canada in 2017. We can provide the statistics that we have on those.

In terms of whether or not they would all be eligible for this benefit, that would be determined by the eligibility criteria that would be set out in the regulations. This is a really challenging population to get at, as we talked about already. Defining disability and how you look at it is a critical piece of this.

In terms of what we know about people living in poverty, we know that with the severity of disability the risk of living in poverty and the risk of living in deep poverty goes up tremendously. We will want to take that into consideration in designing a benefit to best target this population. We know that people with disabilities who are living in poverty have various sources of income, not just social assistance. They have federal income supports. They have support from private insurance. We know there's about 10% of the population of people with disabilities with no source of income. I think it's really critical for us to be able to understand that population, and how best to target this benefit to make sure it's getting at that population of persons with disabilities.

As I mentioned before, I'm happy to share with the committee the diagnostic information we have on persons with disabilities.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you, and definitely I'd like to see that diagnostic. You said a number of things that are very important. Has there been analysis? Has there been a deep-dive analysis around eligibility? Maybe there's a phased approach. There has to have been, in the last seven years, some conversation around what this should look like. I'm really trying to get an understanding of what the will is behind this bill.

Even in the preamble, it talks about reducing poverty, but I'm trying to get an understanding of what is the will of the bill. I think there are many people for whom this is very important. They need to understand, are they going to be eligible? Is this going to come to them?

I'm looking a little bit deeper around how much studying, how many findings, what kinds of reports are available on what this could look like. I have to believe there is some additional information other than the top-line data that can come out of StatsCan.

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** Yes, there are other sources of information. I mentioned in the beginning that one thing we've been doing is working with the disabilities community for them to help us understand this issue. Rather than telling them what's right for them, we want them to tell us what they think is going to work best for the community.

There are groups, like Disability without Poverty, who are doing a lot of analysis. They share it with us. We do a lot of analyses, as

my colleague talked about, looking at how people interact with the market basket measure. We're working closely with provinces to understand how their programming works. It's an unbelievable amount of analysis.

The goal really is to change the lives of the disabilities community in Canada, who live in poverty in such larger numbers than the rest of the population and need the support. I can't tell you who's going to be eligible. I can't tell you how much, but I can tell you that we're going through a very deliberative, detailed process to understand how this should work best so it can benefit people.

• (1720)

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Just on that, what does that timeline look like? I'll ask again. Is it going to be more than a year before people are going to see this in their bank accounts?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** As I said, I can't speculate. To be honest, I can't speculate on how long Parliament will consider the bill for. Once the bill moves through Parliament—which is why we're obviously hoping it moves quickly—then we can move ahead with the next phases of it. Once we have the benefit designed, then we have to design the implementation and do the regulations. We're doing as much of this stuff in parallel as possible, but it is very hard, detailed, complex work.

I honestly wish I could just tell you, “This is the date the benefit's going to launch”, but I'm a hostage to other processes. Our ambition is to get through those as quickly as possible because we know what the need is, but I can't honestly give you a timeline.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you for that.

I guess one of the concerns I have as a legislator is that I want it to be the best it can be, and it seems like we don't have answers to what that best is going to be. There isn't even a commitment in the bill to eliminate poverty. I don't think there's anything in the bill that talks specifically about the Poverty Reduction Act or any tie to it. I'm really—

**The Chair:** Ms. Zarrillo, I have to interrupt for a moment. The bells are ringing for a vote in the House of Commons. I need unanimous consent to proceed.

We need unanimous consent to proceed, and we will suspend with five minutes to go, if that's okay, and if members are agreeable to using their voting app from here.

I need direction from the committee. Do we have unanimous consent to continue? It's a 30-minute vote call.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Yes, as long as we suspend to vote.

**The Chair:** Yes, we'll suspend in time to allow everybody to participate by voting app. Is that agreeable?

Okay. I see unanimous consent. Thank you.

Ms. Zarrillo, your time is up. Would you wrap up your question? We'll give time for a short answer.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you so much.

What data is available to this committee that can help us understand eligibility, timelines and amounts? What is available?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** I'm sorry. I don't have time to give you a list of all the pieces we're looking at. We've had some requests already from the committee, for which we'll provide that kind of data if there are specific requests. We'll do everything we can to provide that to the committee, because we do think it's important that you have the most information possible to advance the bill.

I'm sorry. I know that's a difficult answer. If there are things that you specifically need, we'll look inside to see if we have it. If so, we'll happily provide it to the committee.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Conrad and Ms. Zarrillo.

I'm going to follow the process we had, which will take me to Mrs. Falk for five minutes. Then I'll go to Mr. Long, because I'm going through the questioning process. We have 15 minutes left.

Mr. Morrice, you're not a member of the committee, so I cannot recognize you.

Mrs. Falk, you have five minutes.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Just so I can recap here, what I heard was that there was no assessment done on the provincial programs. Is that correct?

• (1725)

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** No. In fact, we're working very closely with the provinces. I'm sorry if I said anything else.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** Oh, I thought....

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** Maybe I could just clarify. We would never assess a provincial program. That's a provincial responsibility in the sense of assessing the impact of those programs.

We've looked at them. It's information sharing at this point, in terms of gathering the information about the programs.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** Okay. Thank you.

In my opinion—and maybe it's just me—I definitely like to do my homework beforehand so that I know what needs to be done and what boxes need to be checked, to make sure that when we get to the next phase we can check those boxes off.

I was a part of this committee in the 42nd Parliament when this particular committee studied Bill C-81, the accessibility act. We repeatedly heard from stakeholders at the time that they wanted things placed in the legislation versus in the regulations, because they wanted stability and they wanted predictability.

What I've heard and what has been said is that the benefit amount and eligibility for this program are not included in the legislation as drafted. My question is, why was it decided to exclude the basic and integral information to this program from the scrutiny of Parliament?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** I'll give you a sense of the logic behind it, building on what I said at the beginning in terms of the framework legislation. Not only is it an opportunity to make sure that the voices of the disabilities community are part of the conversation to feed into the program design, but we also know that the nature of disabilities programming across the country—my colleague talked about this—is dynamic. It changes. Frequently there are changes made by provinces, or in jurisprudence there are changes, and the regulatory process is much more flexible in terms of making sure that the benefit design keeps up with making sure it's still meeting its policy objective.

Some people may have mentioned, through the Accessible Canada Act consultations, that they would like the details in the legislation. The feedback we have gotten from the disabilities community through the engagement we've done is that they prefer this. They like this approach because they feel more a part of it, but also because it is a more flexible, dynamic process to keep pace—

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** Thanks. Is that in the same vein as the provinces and territories? Have they said the same thing, that they'd like to see that in the regulations versus the legislation?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** Provinces have consistently told us that they like the framework legislation approach rather than our presenting them with what it's going to look like and their having to figure out what to do about it. They're involved in the conversation at the beginning.

Every conversation we've had with the provinces has told us that they like the approach and they feel engaged. Given the importance of making sure that the provincial benefits and the federal benefit harmonize and always help persons with disabilities, that level of support from provinces is key to making this a success.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** In my province of Saskatchewan, people with significant and enduring disabilities have access to the Saskatchewan assured income for disability, which is called SAID. We know that benefits do vary from province to province.

How is this new benefit going to interact with existing benefits? Will provincial benefits be clawed back as a result of this benefit? If you don't have the answer to that, has there been inquiry with the provinces and the territories if this is going to happen?

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** I think it's a really important question. It's fundamental to what we've been doing with provinces and territories. Minister Qualtrough has been clear in her messaging publicly and with provinces and territories that this is not a transfer to provinces and territories. We need to make sure that people are better off as a result of this new benefit, which is meant to supplement existing sources of income for persons with disabilities, as is said in the bill.

The work we've been doing with provinces and territories to date is to really understand the complex web of programs. You mentioned one, which is an income support program, but within Saskatchewan there are also many other programs that rely on income tests for disability supports—

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** For sure, yes.

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** —that people could inadvertently be cut off from.

That's really what we're trying to do as part of the process in terms of using framework legislation so that we can ensure that, before everything is finalized in regulations, we understand properly—

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** I really want to throw my voice behind consultation. That consultation needs to be done with the provinces. We've seen over and over this Liberal government railroad through provinces and force what it wants onto the provinces. Not all provinces are the same. We have regional differences. It's just different from province to province. I sure hope that the consultation has been done with the provinces and the territories, because this is for the benefit of the people who have disabilities.

Thank you.

• (1730)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Now we go to Mr. Long for five minutes.

**Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, colleagues.

Thank you to our witnesses. Thanks for your work on this.

My questions are along the same line as MP Falk's. I will say, just for the record, that I'm glad we forced provinces along on things like day care—Premier Kenney and Premier Ford. I'm glad that we brought them along to accept the day care programs that are benefiting all of our constituents around the table.

Along the lines of MP Falk, one concern a lot of my constituents have that they come into the office and talk to me about is this: "How will it look? How will it intertwine with the provinces? Premier Higgs is going to cut some of our benefit."

Do you envision this, as my colleague MP Falk was saying, as a province-by-province negotiation? Will it look different? Do you expect it to look different province by province? For example, our housing benefit is different in one province from another. I know we had the negotiations with child care. How do you envision that's going to look rolling out?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** I'll start. To go back to the question of engagement with the provinces, yes, this is absolutely fundamental to this process. That's the journey we're on at all levels, collectively with the provinces so they all hear the same thing and bilaterally with them so they can understand the specifics of how it fits with them.

As we know, provincial programs differ so much. There are different elements of them. There's different eligibility. There's differ-

ent interaction with other programs. By sitting down with them and walking through it, one process they're going through is understanding all of the links with their own system.

On the provincial side, they will try to make sure they understand, when a federal benefit comes in, that they don't accidentally disqualify someone or reduce the income they're getting from another program. That's the spirit with which we've been working with them on an analytical basis to understand all those links. To be honest, part of that is why it is so complex. It is a very difficult and very differentiated landscape across the country.

**Mr. Wayne Long:** Thank you for that.

I'll yield what's left of my time to MP Morrice.

Thank you.

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

Chair, how much time is remaining?

**The Chair:** You have two minutes and 20 seconds.

**Mr. Mike Morrice:** Will there also be an open round, as was mentioned at the beginning?

**The Chair:** It depends on how our time goes. The committee will have to agree.

**Mr. Mike Morrice:** Okay, I'll get started. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions are about the urgency of this benefit and ensuring that the disability community is actively heard from throughout, in particular because there is limited or no support in Parliament for an emergency disability benefit.

Mr. Conrad, I appreciate that you mentioned urgency in some of your remarks earlier. You also mentioned a number of round tables that have been held since June 2021, which is good to hear, but what's also true is that the language of the bill is exactly the same as what we had in June 2021.

I'd like to understand better what you heard at those round tables. Did you not hear anything that merited inclusion? Why is it that, despite all that consultation, the bill is exactly the same?

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** Thanks for that question.

There are two pieces to the answer. I can give you a sense of what we've heard so far, but I'll just remind the committee of what Mr. Conrad mentioned in terms of what's going on right now.

We did hold round tables, but there is also a really important engagement process with persons with disabilities that's happening and that we've provided funding for through the department. We're receiving right now and over the next months the results of that engagement process. I can give you a sense of what we've heard so far.

This is just a summary in terms of round tables and what we've heard from the funded projects.

We've heard about the despair that people with disabilities have in living in poverty and that really, the CDB has the potential to transform their lives and enable them to live with dignity, choice and freedom. We've heard that people are having to make tough choices between their basic needs and necessities such as buying groceries or paying their rent. They're living in unsafe conditions. They're taking expired medications.

We've heard that intersectionality impacts disability experience in accessing government programs and that marginalized populations face systemic racism. They have a discomfort or a mistrust of government authorities and there's medical racism and misdiagnosis in the system.

We've heard that they struggle with the costs associated with having a disability, including out-of-pocket expenses. They want the CDB to be equivalent to the amount of CERB. They don't want it to reduce other benefits.

They're concerned about the marriage penalty and would prefer to have income tested individually.

They want to move away from the medical model of disability.

They want to avoid creating new systems or adding complexity to existing systems. They want us to try to find a way to make this an automatic payment for persons with disabilities. They don't want to have an employment test. They want to have little, if any, asset testing.

They want us to fund community organizations that could support persons with disabilities in navigating the complex system of benefits for persons with disabilities. These could address some of the psychological barriers that people with disabilities face in applying for any benefits that could be created by this new benefit.

They don't want to have clawbacks of their existing benefits. They want to have a generous earnings exemption so that people with disabilities can continue to earn income in the labour market.

Those are some of the top messages—

• (1735)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Morrice.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, it's over to you now for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I have a question concerning section 3, which says that the purpose of this bill is "...to reduce poverty and to support the financial security of working-age persons with disabilities."

Some of the groups of persons with disabilities that we met have been asking themselves a lot of questions. What do you mean by the expression "working-age"? Some pointed out that the way things are now, people who are 65, 66 or 67 years old could consider themselves employable. So it's not clear. Can you clarify this for us?

Not only that, but section 4 says: "A person is eligible for a Canada disability benefit if they meet the eligibility criteria set out in the regulations." But the regulations have not yet specified these eligibility criteria.

Would it be possible to have more specific details? Are you really conducting consultations with a blank slate or do you already have some amounts in mind? Have you determined what the minimum income threshold would be? Do you have any suggestions about what the expression "working-age" means? Do you have eligibility criteria to suggest so that we could discuss these rather than start from scratch?

[English]

**Ms. Krista Wilcox:** It's a great question. Thank you.

Working backwards, in terms of the approach to the engagement we've done so far, we've done it thematically. We've asked questions to provide the community with the opportunity to give us their perspective. As we get into the regulatory process, we will provide more detailed information that will enable us to engage more specifically on proposals for the regulations.

In terms of working age, you're right; it does not define it in the legislation. The intent, in terms of trying to target this population, is that there are benefits for children up to age 18 in Canada, through the Canada child benefit and the child disability benefit. There are benefits for seniors over the age of 65. The gap we are trying to fill is in that age group in between, where there are currently no federal benefits that are specifically targeted to that population, unless they've been in the workforce and have access to programs such as Canada pension disability or EI sickness, for example.

• (1740)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Wilcox.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

We go to Ms. Zarrillo for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** I just have so many more questions. I was really hoping to get some confidence in today's messaging.

I'm going to follow up on what Madame Chabot just said. There was some testimony that this is going to fill the gap. I was looking at census data today, just around immigration and poverty levels for immigrant children, which are high.

I'm getting input every day from folks who are making a decision between eating more than one meal a day and taking their medication. It's frustrating to have a meeting like this and not get any more information.

My question is just about this lack of urgency. How are we going to deliver support to people before the three-year window, the two-year window, the one-year window? We don't even have an answer on how soon this is going to get rolled out. I'm looking for some sort of confidence that we're going to be supporting people in their worst times right now because I don't want to lose another person to MAID. I don't want another child to go hungry, or another mother.

Could you just give us some idea of how you're going to solve that in an urgent manner?

**Mr. Alexis Conrad:** I can't comment on other government programs that are ongoing. I obviously follow what's going on in terms of affordability programs that have been put forward.

Nothing about what we've said should suggest a lack of urgency. Persons with disabilities have been in the most precarious situations for far too long in Canada. The whole purpose of this benefit is to fix that. There is a heightened sense of urgency, which is why the government is doing this.

What I've tried to do is just lay out the steps we need to take and why we're doing them so that we get it right. As I said, the last thing anyone wants to do is accidentally harm people. In this kind of environment, if we do it wrong, we can have unintended consequences: either it gets them no further ahead or it puts them behind where they were. That is something I don't think any of us want.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Do I still have time, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** That concludes your two and a half minutes.

It also concludes the first round and the first hour that this session was scheduled for. As per the agreement, I now have to suspend.

Go ahead, Mr. Morrice.

**Mr. Mike Morrice:** This is a brief question to you, Chair. As I'm not a member of the committee, do I need consent from the com-

mittee to receive the documents that were promised to various members? If so, can that be asked for? We heard a commitment about the engagement with provinces and territories, for example.

**The Chair:** Is the committee agreeable that whatever documents are provided to the committee can be provided to Mr. Morrice?

I don't see anybody objecting. Mr. Morrice, whatever documents are provided to the committee from the officials will—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Mr. Chair, I have a point of clarification. I'm sorry.

Were you referring to the public documents? Are they documents that would be in the public, or are they documents that would be coming to committee members?

Are these public documents? Is that what you're referring to?

**The Chair:** They'd be any documents that were asked for and that would be provided to the committee.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** They would be the tabled documents that would be provided only to the committee. Therefore, from a process standpoint, they should be for committee members only. It has nothing to do with the question.... I thought the member was referring to what was coming in from stakeholders, not the tabled documents that were....

**The Chair:** We have to get unanimous consent. I do not see unanimous consent.

I have to suspend at this time, as per the agreement. I'm going to suspend the meeting for voting purposes, as we agreed to.

I did not see unanimous consent, Mr. Morrice.

Thank you.

The meeting is suspended. Let's vote, as we agreed.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*







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