



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 041**

Monday, October 31, 2022

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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey



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

Monday, October 31, 2022

• (1540)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)):** The clerk has advised me that we have quorum. I will call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 41 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 June 23, 2022. People are attending in person and remotely using the Zoom application.

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” icon. Before speaking, click on the 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. We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. If translation is interrupted, please get my attention. We'll suspend while it is being corrected. I would remind all participants that when the meeting is in progress, no screenshots shall be taken.

Pursuant to the order of Tuesday, October 18, 2022, the committee will commence its study of 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 take a moment to remind those participating in today's meeting, as well as those observing the proceedings in person and on video, that the committee adopted a motion on October 24 that included instructions for the clerk to explore options to allow for the full participation of all witnesses and members of the public in the context of consideration of Bill C-22. In planning inclusive and accessible meetings, the committee has made arrangements for sign language interpretation in both American Sign Language and Quebec Sign Language for those witnesses appearing in person and by Zoom, and for those in our audience. The sign language interpreters are being videorecorded to be incorporated into the archived video recording of the proceedings, which will be made available at a later date on ParlVU via the committee's website. To assist the interpreters in their work, I kindly ask all members and witnesses appearing today to introduce themselves when speaking, and to speak slowly.

Finally, if a member of the audience requires assistance at any time, please notify a member of the staff or the committee clerk.

I would like to inform all members that the witnesses appearing virtually today have completed the technical test to check their connectivity, equipment and verification for interpretation in both official languages.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks.

It is our pleasure to have with us in the room today the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, and from the departmental staff, Alexis Conrad, senior assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch and Policy Horizons Canada. Appearing virtually is Krista Wilcox, director general at the office for disability issues.

We'll start with Minister Qualtrough for five minutes, at which time I will open the floor for questions from the members.

Yes, Madam Gray.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC):** On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I just want to confirm that we have the first slate of witnesses, including the minister, for the entire hour. We're starting late because of the vote we had.

**The Chair:** The minister has just indicated “yes”.

Thank you, Ms. Gray.

Madam Minister, you have the floor.

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

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon, committee members.

I would like to thank the committee for its work to create a more inclusive country for persons with disabilities. I also thank all parties for supporting Bill C-22 at second reading.

[English]

Colleagues, you have before you legislation that is very straightforward in both its objective and its format. Bill C-22 would create the new Canada disability benefit, a monthly supplemental income payment modelled after the GIS and to be paid directly to working-age, low-income persons with disabilities. The objectives of Bill C-22 are poverty reduction and financial security. The harsh reality is that working-age persons with disabilities in Canada are twice as likely to live in poverty as those without. Approximately one in four working-age persons with disabilities lives below the poverty line.

Many persons with disabilities in Canada experience a modest level of financial security for the first time in their adult lives when they turn 65 and have access to OAS and GIS. The poverty level drops by over 60% for persons with disabilities between the ages of 64 and 65—from 23% to 9%. I know you all agree that is unacceptable—not the poverty drop, but the fact that it was 23%.

The Canada disability benefit would be established and implemented through Bill C-22, which is the legal framework to create the benefit, and a subsequent public regulatory process through which the specific details of the benefit would be established. This is by design. This is intentional. This approach recognizes the important role the disability community must play in this process, as well as the complexity of existing provincial and territorial disability service and support systems.

Let me back up for a moment. From the outset, I have had two priorities in developing this benefit: first, that the disability community be involved at every stage of the process, and second, that there be rigour in dealing with provinces and territories, in order to ensure that people are better off and that existing benefits and services are not clawed back.

To my first priority, we worked very closely with the disability community. The principle of “nothing without us” is embedded in Bill C-22. The Accessible Canada Act requirement that persons with disabilities be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs and services is embedded in Bill C-22, and Canada's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are embedded in Bill C-22.

● (1545)

[Translation]

We invested \$12 million over three years in budget 2021 to work with the disability community on the design of the proposed benefit. We did an online survey, held roundtables and other forms of consultations. We also funded national disability organizations to engage the community directly.

We will not impose upon this community, and we will not create a race to the bottom.

[English]

Stakeholders such as Inclusion Canada have made it clear they don't want decisions being made without the disability community's meaningful participation. People First of Canada raised the key principle of having people with intellectual disabilities at the table during the design stage of the benefit. Disability Without Poverty

wants this legislation to pass quickly through Parliament and is eager to participate in the regulatory process, so that a range of lived experiences are heard and listened to. There are more.

We've worked with the community at every step and will continue to engage, seek input from and respond to the community through this and every subsequent phase of benefit development and delivery, including the regulatory process.

[Translation]

With respect to my second priority, it is through the work with the provinces and territories where the rubber hits the road on both the delivery and potential impact of this proposed benefit.

Bill C-22 recognizes the leading role that the provinces and territories play in providing supports and services to persons with disabilities. Each jurisdiction in Canada has a unique policy environment with respect to disability benefits and supports.

[English]

Quite frankly, I cannot overstate the complexities of the systems we are working with. There are 13 different provincial and territorial systems in play, each with its own combination of supports and services. Some are grounded in legislation or regulations, while others are related to program delivery. There are different definitions of “disability” and a variety of eligibility criteria, not only across jurisdictions but also within them.

In some cases, eligibility for one disability program opens up access to another. In other cases, being enrolled in one disability program can exclude individuals from accessing others, or reduce the benefits provided. Across jurisdictions, there are differences in the treatment of other forms of income, different reduction rates and different treatment of spousal or family income and support.

For example, Alberta has a benefit structure focused on people with severe disabilities. Clients must be substantially limited in their ability to work, and their disabilities must qualify as likely to be permanent. The benefit dollar is significant, and couples can retain more than twice as much employment income as singles before they start to lose benefits.

[*Translation*]

Ontario provides broader, less targeted assistance. Qualifying disabilities need not be severe and can affect work, personal care or participation in community life. The disability must be expected to last at least one year. Benefits are calculated on a family basis. The employment income exemption is calculated separately for each member of a couple.

[*English*]

The Northwest Territories provides benefits that are geared to the high cost of living in the north. Eligibility is based on the ability to perform the activities of daily living. Benefit amounts cover the actual cost of low-cost shelter and utilities, with no fixed cap. Employment income exemptions are household-based.

These are just three of the 13 we're working with in here.

Bill C-22 grants the authority to enter into agreements with provinces and territories to carry out the purposes of this act. That's really important. The CDB is intended to supplement existing provincial and territorial support, not replace it.

Within this complex ecosystem I just described, we really need to harmonize our systems to ensure that there are no clawbacks and that everyone who receives the CDB is better off. This means ensuring that income supports are not negatively impacted and that eligibility for related services and programs is not negatively impacted. We need to lift people up. We need to lift people out of poverty. Across Canada, most disability programs and income benefit amounts leave recipients well below the poverty line. The average total annual income of working-age persons with disabilities who receive social assistance is \$12,600. This comes nowhere close to the national poverty line, which ranges from \$19,000 to \$25,000 per year, depending on where you live.

I'm pleased to report that work with the provinces and territories is going well. There's an FTP work plan that all jurisdictions have agreed to. PTs are very supportive of the framework legislation approach. They appreciate and understand that there's no one-size-fits-all that will optimize the impact of this new federal benefit within the complex array of provincial-territorial systems, and they share our commitment to making people better off and lifting people out of poverty. This is really important. We absolutely need flexibility in working with the provinces and territories. I'll note quickly that we're also working across the Government of Canada on federal benefit interaction.

Colleagues, we have the opportunity for a once-in-a-generation change here. With Bill C-22, we are doing things differently on purpose. Bill C-22 will allow us to work collaboratively with the disability community, as well as with the provinces and territories, to ensure that the benefit achieves its objective of reducing poverty among working-age persons with disabilities.

I'd be happy now to take your questions.

• (1550)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We will now open the floor to questions, beginning with Mrs. Gray.

I would again ask the members to introduce themselves before they begin the questioning, because not everybody can see who's with us.

Mrs. Gray, you have six minutes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm Tracy Gray, member of Parliament for Kelowna-Lake Country.

Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today.

Minister, how much will persons with disabilities expect to receive from this legislation, and what are the goalposts that you're using?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** That's a really important question.

As I explained, we are working, at this stage, to create the legal framework for Bill C-22. In subsequent stages, based on feedback from the disability community and working in collaboration with the community and provinces and territories, the amount will be established through the regulatory process. Our common goal, of course, is to lift people out of poverty. We know what people are getting across the country in social assistance. We're trying to fill the gap, not only between what they get in social assistance and poverty, but also in the time frame between people's getting the Canada child benefit and the OAS and GIS.

Very loosely speaking, we want the benefit to be fair. We want it to be consistent across the country. We want it to be accessible—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Fair enough.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** —and we want it to make a real difference, so the actual amount will depend on the negotiations with the provinces and territories and our ability to secure assurances around benefit interaction.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Sure.

Minister, is there a ballpark amount that you're working towards? Are there goalposts or a ballpark amount?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I've said, the benefit is modelled after the guaranteed income supplement. As I've alluded to, we know what people are making, generally, across the country in social assistance, and we know what people get for CPPD or for OAS and GIS combined. We also know what the national poverty level is, so we have a very broad ballpark amount that we want to get people to. However, it really matters how this benefit will interact with provincial and territorial benefits in terms of how much we need to invest in order to get them there.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** When will the cost analysis for the Canada disability benefit be completed?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Obviously there's a separate budgetary process that will happen independent of the legislative process. We have to first determine all the details of the benefit, so the amount, the eligibility criteria, the number of recipients—again, you'll hear me say this a lot—how it's going to interact with other benefits in terms of reduction rates, and that kind of thing. Once we've done that, we'll be able to provide a very detailed cost analysis, but it will not be until then. It would be premature.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Right. The costing really can't be done, you're saying, until the regulations have been discussed and completed.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** The costing will be done during that phase, absolutely.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Assuming Bill C-22 becomes law, how long will it be before persons with disabilities receive the benefit?

• (1555)

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Well, day one after this bill becomes law, the regulatory process begins. Our best estimate is around 12 months, but it again depends on the level of engagement with the disability community, and how well and how quickly negotiations with the provinces and territories go. I anticipate that they will go well, based on all the work that's been done to date through officials and through ministerial conversations.

I don't know when this is going to pass, but I would estimate 12 months for the regulatory process. Again, we have to make sure people are involved.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** The timeline you're working towards sounds like around 12 months, approximately, for the regulations. You would have missed budget 2023, so then you're looking at budget 2024, which is in the spring of 2024.

Realistically, just to be clear for people's expectations, you're really looking at the spring of 2024 at the earliest. Would that be an accurate assessment?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Potentially it would be a little earlier than that, but I absolutely agree with your math.

In budget 2021, we invested three years' worth of funding to get us to the benefit. I would say that you're in the ballpark. It could be in the last months of this fiscal year.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** However, if the regulations haven't been determined, as you said, and the costing hasn't been figured out, you're really not working off anything until you have that completely done.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Right. However, a 12-month timeline that starts in January of next year might end by the end of next year, with a benefit delivery early in the months thereafter. That's what I'm suggesting. I don't know enough to be accurate, but I'm hoping—

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** You'd be into that 2024—

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Somewhere in that ballpark, yes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Where in the legislation does it address preventing clawbacks from those receiving this benefit, whatever it may be?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Well, very broadly, through the authority to grant the government the power to enter into agreements with provinces, that's a red line, and provinces know it.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** I know you said the intention is to not have any clawbacks. Where would it be in the legislation right now that would give confidence to people that there wouldn't be any clawbacks?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Are you asking for more specificity regarding clawbacks in the legislation?

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Right. You can say whatever the best of intentions are. You can say, "This is what we intend to do. This is what we hope will happen. This is what we're negotiating."

In the legal framework, the legislation, what is in there to give people the confidence that in fact there will not be clawbacks?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I said, there's only the broad reference to the ability to enter into agreements. Quite frankly, the term "clawback" is shorthand and will be different within every province and territory.

There could be no one description that would capture the potential services or program supports that could be impacted. "Clawback" usually refers to income support that is being taken away because your income goes up too high. We're also dealing with a world in which my bus pass, my pharmacare, my access to employment and training opportunities, my assisted devices...are all at play.

Clawback is a kind of shorthand, but not just for income support. It's for access to all these services.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** It sounds like there's no real guarantee, though. It's the intention, but there's really no guarantee.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** It's more than intention, it's a red line. I've put that in writing to provinces, absolutely.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Right, but it's not in the legislation.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Yes.

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

We will go to Mr. Kusmierczyk for six minutes.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Minister, for joining us here at HUMA committee. Thank you so much for bringing forward, as you describe it, once-in-a-generation legislation. It really does feel, for this committee, that we have the opportunity to make history here. I want to thank you for that.

When I look at this government's poverty reduction strategy, I look at the fact that 300,000 children have been lifted out of poverty because of the Canada child benefit. I look at the fact that 80,000 seniors have been lifted out of poverty because of our work on the GIS and OAS.

What impact do you see the Canada disability benefit having on reducing poverty in our country?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** At its very core, that's what this bill is all about. It's about poverty reduction. It's about addressing the incredibly shameful levels of poverty within our working-age Canadians with disabilities—as I said, 23%.

If done right—and that's going to be my caveat in a lot of your questions—meaning if we successfully and rigorously negotiate with provinces and territories, and if the meaningful participation of the disability community is ongoing, which it will be, this will benefit hundreds of thousands of people. It really will lift a significant number of people out of poverty, big time.

• (1600)

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Thank you, Minister.

I guess I should begin by introducing myself as well. I apologize. I'm Irek Kusmierczyk, the member of Parliament for Windsor—Tecumseh.

Minister, I wanted to ask you, what advantage does framework legislation provide? What is the advantage to bringing it forward as framework legislation?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** You know, we did a lot of thinking around how we would structure this legislation that would ultimately become law.

Very early on, in working towards what is now in front of us as Bill C-22, we recognized fundamentally that we needed to reflect in our process, as well as our outcomes, our commitment to “nothing without us” and ongoing engagement with the disability community. We needed to put ourselves in a strong position, almost strategically, in dealing with the provinces and territories, the complexity of their systems and how this benefit would interact.

We wanted to find the quickest way forward, the fastest way to put money in people's hands, and that's why we determined that framework legislation was the best vehicle to achieve those three outcomes.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Thank you, Minister.

You mentioned the bedrock principle of “nothing without us”, which really underlines all of your ministry's work and all of your work. This bill, as I think everyone knows by now, provides the framework to establish the new benefit in law, leaving the details to the regulatory process.

Again, appreciating and recognizing that bedrock principle of “nothing without us”, how will persons with disabilities and groups that represent persons with disabilities participate in the regulatory process to ensure their voices are heard?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Taking a step back, remember that we're not starting from scratch here. The disability community has been involved. There have been consultations and online surveys; there has been funding to national organizations to enable them to consult with their own communities, and there has been indigenous-led community consultation. All of that will feed in, of course, to benefit design elements.

Additionally, through the regulatory process itself, there's an opportunity to do prepublication consultation. There's an opportunity for public comment after the first draft of the regulations. There's

an opportunity to course correct if the feedback is that it's not quite there yet. We are committed.

We've demonstrated over the past six years and I think there's a confidence within the disability community that we consult. We meaningfully engage and listen. People see themselves and their comments reflected in our work on the disability file.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** That really seems to be the strength of this framework legislation. It's the fact that it provides an avenue and a platform for the disability community and their voices to really be there from start to finish, including in the important design phase. Is that the thinking with the framework legislation?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Absolutely: It is the bedrock thinking, as you said. It's the idea of sitting across a table and hashing this all out, because it is so complex. There will be literally tens, hundreds, of decisions that will have to be made around benefit interaction. My mind just explodes when I think of it, but the best way to make sure the voices of the disability community are heard is to sit at the table with them, get their advice, get their input and make sure it's reflected in the regulations.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Mr. Chair, how much time do I have? One minute? That's perfect.

Minister, you mentioned the complexity of this space and the diversity of the range of disability-related programs and services that are being administered by the provinces and territories. What have you heard on the ground, if anything, from conversations with your colleagues at the provincial and territorial levels?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Well, as I said in my speech, the highest-level message I have received is that they appreciate the early engagement and the flexibility that framework legislation provides: the idea that we are saying to provinces and territories, “You know your systems best.”

Within those systems, we're going to have some shared kind of principles around this benefit. We all agree that people need to be better off. We all agree that this can't negatively impact entitlement to other services and programs. PTs appreciate having been at the table since the very beginning, almost, of the conception of this benefit. They really share a common goal of improving outcomes for people and making people better off.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Madame Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

• (1605)

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

My name is Louise Chabot, member of Parliament for Thérèse-De Blainville, in Quebec.

Minister, thank you for being here with us today to answer the many questions that we have about the bill. You were correct in thanking all parties for supporting this bill in the House so that it could be studied here at the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

You said in your opening statement that your objectives are clear. I tend to agree. The goal is to reduce poverty without creating a race to the bottom. That being said, for the parliamentarians who will have to vote on the bill, there is something awkward from a democratic standpoint. Most of the bill, except for the objectives, will be implemented through regulations.

For example, subsection 11(1) mentions eligibility criteria for a Canada disability benefit. However, we do not know what the criteria are. We also do not know the amount of the benefit or how it is calculated. Both of these elements will be implemented through regulations. Without any more details, passing this bill would be akin to giving the government a blank cheque.

You tabled Bill C-35, and then Bill C-22 a year later. We know why Bill C-35 did not go any further.

It would be important for us to know two things. First, regarding the poverty line, do you have a minimum amount in mind? Second, you said in your speech that a lot of people have an annual income of \$12,600 and that the poverty line ranges from \$19,000 to \$25,000. What is your department planning to do to actually lift people out of poverty? Surely you must have some idea.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As you said, our goal is to lift people out of poverty. We know that the poverty lines set out in legislation range from \$19,000 to \$25,000, depending on the region. It is one of our principles that everyone must receive the same amount across the country.

We therefore cannot use regional poverty lines as objectives to lift people out of poverty. However, we know that Canada pension plan disability benefits range roughly from \$18,000 to \$20,000. Also, if we add old age security and guaranteed income supplement payments together, the sum falls between \$19,000 and \$20,000. That is a rough estimate of the payment that we have to make to lift people out of poverty. To get a more precise amount, we would have to take into account the interaction with other benefits.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** People living with disabilities are not a homogenous group, and there are many different circumstances. Some receive benefits for transportation, health care, assistance, etc. on top of a basic revenue or social assistance.

In your model based on guaranteed income supplement, are these benefits excluded from the calculation?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I think I understand the question. You are asking if payments made under different benefits are included in the calculation for the Canada disability benefit.

Frankly, that is why we have to negotiate with every province and territory to determine if they consider these payments as income. That will depend on the situation in the different jurisdictions. We will have to figure out if these payments are treated like income. As is the case for the guaranteed income supplement, we are going to set the amount based on each person's income taxes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Your objectives include acting in a way that complements Quebec, the provinces and the territories. In our last meeting, we asked witnesses to give us an idea of what is being done across the country, and they told about programs in three provinces. They did not really have a comprehensive answer to give us and we were told that there was no national inventory.

As parliamentarians and members of this committee, it would be very useful to have the complete picture of what exists in Canada in terms of help and supports for people living with disabilities. I think it would help us understand the issues.

Can you provide that for us?

• (1610)

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Definitely. We can provide the full spectrum—

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** So it does exist.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Yes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** All right. Last time, it was unclear.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** We can definitely provide you with a description of every provincial and territorial regime.

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

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

[English]

Madame Zarrillo, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm Bonita Zarrillo from Port Moody—Coquitlam in British Columbia.

Thank you so much, Minister, for coming to the committee today. I know that last week, when we had a technical briefing, there were a lot of unanswered questions, a lot of questions still left unknown. I guess one of the things to think about is the context in which we're having this discussion. Around us, the cost of living is soaring, and we know that rents, the price of food, heating costs—all these things—are rising at exponential rates, and people living with disabilities are finding it even more challenging to pay their bills and to make ends meet.

You mentioned today around six years. I'm going to mention that in the seven years your government has been in power, people living with disabilities have not been able to get the help they need to put food on the table and to get security around life planning. While grocery store CEOs right now are lining their pockets, persons with disabilities are finding themselves even more at risk.

Canadians living with disabilities want to know when the Canada disability benefit will reach their bank accounts so they can get by.



**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Without presuming the duration of this parliamentary process but assuming we get this through the House and through the Senate, day one after that, this bill becomes law. There's a regulatory process. I've estimated 12 months. The process will roll out as it rolls out. If that's the case, we're looking into 2024.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Minister, about the timeline, that 12 months, we know right now that there is some talk out of provinces—let's think about Alberta, for example—of potentially putting at risk the negotiations that happened around child care. If we are talking about a 12-month window, is it realistic to believe that each and every province and territory will be able to get a negotiation and a commitment in 12 months?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I very strongly believe it is. We did it with the Canada child benefit. This is a direct benefit to individuals. It's not a transfer to provinces, so the negotiation of child care is not exactly a parallel. It may indicate a political climate, but as I've said, this issue seems to rise above partisanship in terms of the honest and good-faith conversations that are happening now. These conversations have been happening since July 2021, when we had our first FPT ministerial meeting on this, at which we laid out and agreed upon a shared commitment to working through this together and individually to make people better off.

I have confidence in that, absolutely.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Is there an opportunity to have that written into the bill? At this point in time, is there a spot in the bill that talks about the timeline, that makes a commitment to the timeline?

• (1615)

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** In terms of when the act will be coming into force, or when people...? I'm sorry. I don't quite know what kind of timeline. I cannot tell you when the regulatory process will start, which means I can't tell you when it will end, which means I can't guarantee a timeline beyond those parameters.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** One of the things that people who are going to rely on this benefit, who need this benefit.... You mentioned the hundreds of thousands of Canadians across Canada who need this benefit. They need a timeline at least that says that when regulation starts, it will be a six-month window, an eight-month window or a 12-month window to end regulation.... It can't be an open-ended exercise on regulation.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** No.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Is there a spot in the bill where it says that once it's ready to go, the regulations need to be finalized within six, eight, nine or 12 months?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I don't have a sense of where that could be. With the complexity of the regulatory process, I couldn't estimate confidently what that magic number of months would be.

My best estimate, based on how other regulatory processes have gone, is 12 months, but I'm not sure I would have the confidence to say that in terms of putting it in law.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Talking about making some sort of a timeline, I'm sure you can understand that it's been very difficult for persons with disabilities who have been watching this process coming along, especially since the idea of it was introduced almost sev-

en years ago. People were expecting it last year and now it's taken a year. I think it's only fair—you used the words “fair” and “consistent”—that there be some sort of a timeline.

How could that be accommodated? How could that be addressed? How could there be an urgency embedded in this bill?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Listen, no one wants to get this done more quickly than I do. I know that's what you heard last week from officials. However, we have to get it done right. We are fundamentally changing the landscape of our social safety net in Canada. I can't imagine feeling worse than if, at the end of this process, I realized that someone is not only not better off, but might inadvertently have been made worse off because of this.

The complexity of these systems risks that happening if we don't take the time to do this, while also being mindful that there is absolute urgency. There is nothing that I am paying more attention to or care more about. There's nothing other than this on our plate within the ODI and the ESDC.

I think we have set ourselves up, with all the work we have done to date, to be able to start rigorously pursuing the regulatory process and the final negotiations with provinces and territories on day one, when this becomes law.

**The Chair:** Ms. Zarrillo, your time has gone over.

Mrs. Falk, you have five minutes.

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

I'm Rosemarie Falk, member of Parliament for Battlefords—Lloydminster, in Saskatchewan.

Thank you, Minister, for taking the time to be here with us today.

We know a benefit for persons with disabilities has the potential—and you've touched on this—to significantly improve the financial and overall well-being of many Canadians. As costs continue to soar and affordability is on everyone's mind, we know there is even greater financial pressure for Canadians with a disability, who already have a higher cost of living. While there seems to be general agreement on the stated intent of Bill C-22, which is the legislation before us, it really is just a shell, which I would say is another word for a framework. All the critical details of this bill have been omitted.

It's very reminiscent of when this committee studied Bill C-22 in the 42nd Parliament. That was when your government chose, once again, to exclude any teeth from the legislation and leave it all up to the regulations.

My question, Minister, is this: Why did you decide to exclude all the critical details from the legislation and ultimately shield it from the scrutiny of Parliament?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** First of all, I would beg to differ that Bill C-81 hasn't had a significant impact on the way this government has governed and the way law is made in this country.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** Sure, but listening to stakeholders who came to committee.... I recall; I was here. Stakeholders were not consulted. We heard that over and over again. We had over 200—almost 300—amendments through this committee. That was from stakeholders.

I just want to make sure that consultation is being done up front—because I agree that we have a once-in-a-generation time to make a difference—to make sure it's done properly.

• (1620)

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I am happy to provide this committee with a list of all the consultations for both Bill C-81 and Bill C-22, because I would suggest it was the most rigorous and fulsome consultation and conversation that any government has ever had on disability in the history of our country.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** Minister, you said in your opening remarks that this benefit will be “modelled after the GIS”.

How many of the GIS program eligibility parameters do you intend to apply to this disability benefit?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** When I say it's modelled after GIS, the most important aspect of that is the supplemental income nature of the GIS. It's not income replacement.

Of course, the GIS is its own type of benefit and doesn't need to interact in such a complex way with existing PT benefits. If you look at the OAS portion in our model, it is being delivered by the PT. On the GIS side, OAS is a federal benefit, so it's interacting with another federal benefit. It's not interacting with established, complex PT benefit systems.

If you look at.... I can't even think of another example. It's fundamentally modelled after the GIS in the sense that it will be a supplemental income.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** Were there consultations done with the provinces to see how that will interact with the provincial and territorial benefits that are in each respective province and territory?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Absolutely. They are ongoing; they've been ongoing. The first round, I would say, resulted in an agreed-upon work plan among all 14 jurisdictions. We all agreed on the work that needed to be done to maximize benefit interaction and set out a schedule of ongoing meetings at the ADM level and the DM level; an FPT ministerial meeting in July 2021; an upcoming one in December 2022. As I said, we have to do this with the provinces. We actually joked before this meeting that I'm worried more that the provinces and territories are going to get sick of hearing from us on this, not that they are going to feel like they weren't heard.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** If there was consultation, is there any idea if there's going to be a provincial or territorial clawback?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Again, with the term “clawback”, I'm only hesitant because that again is shorthand for a bunch of different ways that a federal benefit within a provincial system could interact. There is absolutely, I would say, consensus that people will be better off. We have to work with each province and territory to

ensure that someone doesn't lose entitlement to a peripheral benefit, like a bus pass.

If by clawbacks, you're meaning the bigger one—

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** I mean in general, with anything. If it does affect somebody's bus pass, that's going to make life more difficult, not easier.

You mentioned this red line with the provinces and the territories. How is the federal government going to enforce this red line of making sure that the provinces don't do clawbacks or that type of thing?

I come from a province that your government has railroaded over and over again. My province has given two separate...when it comes to the carbon tax plans, and it's been rejected by your government but enforced anyway.

How do we ensure that the federal government in this aspect is going to respect the provinces and territories and the autonomy they have?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I said earlier, from the beginning, from day one, we were committed to working with the PTs. I've met with Minister Carr from Saskatchewan. I have an upcoming meeting with Minister Mekowsky from Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan has signed on to the FPT work plan.

Listen, if it doesn't work for Saskatchewan, if it's not going to work for the people in that province, then we're going to make sure it does.

**Mrs. Rosemarie Falk:** Exactly. It will be just like the carbon tax.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. Falk, your time is over.

We have Mr. Coteau for five minutes.

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

I'm Michael Coteau, and I represent the riding of Don Valley East in Ontario.

Thank you so much, Minister, for being here today.

I know this is an exciting time for Canadians to bring forward a program of this type. I just want to thank you for your advocacy and for the work you've done, not only in the House of Commons, but even prior to coming to the House.

I guess my question is a bit related to the relationship between the provinces and the territories. We know there are going to be important partners on this journey. There's no question. Many of the provinces and territories offer their own suite of programs and services.

I guess the question is this: How do you ensure that at the end of the day, from coast to coast, there's going to be consistency in program delivery? There are such a wide variety of programs. I know in Ontario there are specific programs that may differ from those other provinces.

How do you bring consistency within that kind of model?

• (1625)

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** It's a really important question. That's why the overarching work plan is so important. It's why the general principles are important. It's why we need to work individually. We need to work on a multilateral level to make sure that we're all heading in the same direction, but also on a more bilateral level as we negotiate benefit interactions with provinces and territories.

For example, we may be in a world where a province looks at a federal benefit, like the housing benefit or the CCB, and within its own system has a list of exemptions, things it doesn't consider for the purpose of calculating income for the purpose of enabling a person to get their benefits. The solution in that province might be to get this on that list, on that side of the ledger. Another province might not have that list; another province might have a different way of determining benefits.

What this government managed to do, very quickly, coming out of the 2015 election, was negotiate that every province in the country would not consider the Canada child benefit as income for the purpose of supports and social assistance entitlements. We have a model. We have a precedent within the time of our government. There are lots of variables, but there are also strong indications and a lot of hope that we will be able to get this across the finish line.

I don't think there's going to be a problem doing this, but we have to do it right.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** There's no question that this will impact thousands of Canadians if it goes through the process and is approved by the House and implemented through the regulations. Obviously, there will be so many complexities with regulations of this type. How do you make sure that if something does not work...?

Let's say the rollout happens and a year or six months into it something's not working. Do you have a mechanism in place through your department to look for ways to fix it as you're moving along?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I'll ask Alexis to jump in on this, but to my understanding, the flexibility afforded through the regulatory process would allow us to course-correct and pivot a lot more easily than if we were to bake this into law.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** Rather than coming back and changing the legislation—

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Exactly. If it turned out that an agreement with a province didn't yield the outcomes we thought it would, we could then negotiate just with that province and not bring all the provinces and territories to the table.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** That's a fair answer. You know, it's interesting, because there are these themes and guiding principles that you keep talking about—for example, “nothing without us”. You're working through the regulatory process to develop those key pieces

to ensure that the community's voice is captured in those regulations. It's actually an innovative way to go about creating a new program to service people across the country.

With regard to those conversations with stakeholders and these guiding principles, these values and these themes that came up, such as “nothing without us”, were there other pieces helping to guide you through this process?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Yes. The first and consistent message, as has been said here today, is, “We need this as quickly as possible, and we want to be involved at every stage.”

I believe the disability community understands the approach we've taken and the rationale behind it. I believe we have established an amount of trust with the community and they have confidence that there will be meaningful engagement and input received. They will be listened to through the regulatory process.

The disability community is terrified—I use that word intentionally—of the potential for clawbacks. They're worried about the idea of a race to the bottom. If I put out a number right now and all of a sudden the provincial and territorial landscapes started changing, there would be nothing I could do. We need to support the disability community and validate their concerns. They don't want to be imposed upon. Governments have done this forever. Let's work with them. Let's work together to get this done.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** Thank you very much.

Thank you, Chair.

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

[*Translation*]

Madame Chabot, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Okay.

I will give an example we are all familiar with: the guaranteed income supplement as it relates to retirement benefits.

It seems simpler because they are retirement benefits. There is a maximum amount that one can receive under the GIS with an income of, for example, \$20,700, to use a round figure.

I'll take that as an example and apply it to Quebec. It is only an example, not a real case.

Let us say that the basic income is \$24,000 for people living with disabilities in Quebec. Eventually, by regulations, the poverty line is set at an income level of \$24,000.

Does that mean that in provinces or territories that have more generous regimes, people with disabilities will not receive anything more? In other words, the amount of the benefits will be different depending on the jurisdiction. Is that correct?

• (1630)

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** That is exactly why we must work hand in hand with provinces and territories. I do not think it is fair if one province or territory contributes more.

[*English*]

It's a good problem to have if we have a situation in which a province has actually lifted people out of poverty. We then have to work with that province in creative ways to support other efforts on the disability file. There is absolutely room in these conversations to—I don't really know how to say it—celebrate if a province has that level of generosity, and respond to it.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I ask the question because we just went through the same thing with Bill C-31, under which eligible families will receive a cheque for dental care. In Quebec, some people will not get anything because they already have a dental care program.

Even if I appreciate that everyone means well and that the community wants to have such a program, is it possible that it could take several years before the benefits start flowing?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I am not sure I fully understand the question.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** As you said, the aim is to create a social safety net.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Yes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** There are still a lot of things to iron out.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Yes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** We could pass a bill where everything is supposed to happen through regulations. Then, at some point down the line, something happens and everything falls through. People may rejoice at the thought of a program like this being implemented, but it will possibly not see the light of day anytime soon.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I understand your concerns.

In budget 2021, we set aside \$12,000 over a three-year horizon.

[*English*]

We are well within that timeline, I would suggest. All the work we've done to date leads me to believe that we will be able to deliver on that timeline. As we work through, I think we'll find there will be things that we thought might be a little harder that end up being easy, that we all agree on and we move forward. Then we might have to work a little harder in some areas. However, I remain superconfident that we are going to get this past the finish line through the process we've established.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

We now go to Madam Zarrillo for two and a half minutes.

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

I just want to go back to a couple of things the minister said. One is that I just want to get some confirmation here. We are on a time-

line. I know the technical staff last week couldn't commit to any kind of a timeline, but what I'm hearing today is that it's a 12-month timeline from when this bill begins its regulation process. Could I just get some confirmation on that, please?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I said, that's my best guess, but it's 12 months-ish because processes take as long as they take to get things right. Based on how long other processes have taken, that's the best number I can give you, yes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Minister, you mentioned that Bill C-22 consultations were wide and vast. I'm just wondering why that didn't make it into the bill. That's my first question. Then I have one quick question after that.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I'm sorry. I had audio difficulty. What was the question?

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** The Bill C-22 wider consultation.... Why didn't that consultation make it into the bill, even around the eligibility factor, which the disability community is widely agreed on, and other...?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I would say two quick things about that.

First of all, there was a conscious choice to keep going down this path of framework legislation coupled with regulatory process on details when we retabled the law in 2021. That was in response to a lot of the work we had done with the community. It felt like...and I stand by the decision to keep going with that same approach.

Absolutely, everything we have heard, leading back to the Accessible Canada Act negotiations, quite frankly, puts us in such a great position to hit the ground running once the regulatory process.... It will all be fed in. It's being analyzed. Reports are being given to us. With regard to the community-led engagement piece, I think the wrap-up report is next month. The indigenous-led piece is ongoing. There's a lot of work going on. We are not starting from scratch. That work will all feed into it.

• (1635)

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thank you, Minister.

Can I please, then, just ask for those reports? We had those questions last week, and the technical staff was not as forthcoming that there was actually analysis done and that there are reports done. We would like to see as much of that information in the background as we can get to make a decision around this table.

Lastly, I just want to ask a question about co-creation, this “nothing without us” idea. Where in the bill is it ensuring that co-creation will happen?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** The “nothing without us” is in the preamble. It's baked into the Accessible Canada Act, which has a set of, I think, nine guiding principles that the government is supposed to be implementing across law and across policy and programming and service delivery. The preamble references, as I said, the UNCRPD—one of the specific ACA principles that laws, services, programs and policies have to be developed with the community of persons with disability—

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** I understand, Minister.

I'm sorry I'm going to have to cut you off, but just in the legislation, where is the spot on co-creation?

**The Chair:** Madam Zarrillo, your time has gone over.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** If the minister could send us a written answer to where co-creation is in the legislation, that would be great.

**The Chair:** Okay. Thank you.

Madam Gray, you are next, for five minutes, please.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, the legislation is intended for working-age persons, yet working age is not defined anywhere in the bill. What is the definition of working age?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** That is something that was purposely put in there to reflect the gap in support between the CCB, to which there is a disability supplement that ends at age 18 or 19—I apologize, I can never remember—and the OAS and GIS, which start at 65.

Again, we chose the term “working-age” Canadians because that seemed to reflect that gap.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** For clarification, though, how will that play out as you determine what the regulations are? Why not put some type of a definition in there, even if you don't have the specific ages, as an example of what that actually means? Why would that be left out of the legislation?

It's very confusing to people. It's a question that we get quite often, and we're not sure how to answer it. When it's not actually in the legislation, then people will be looking to the regulations. It all just seems very confusing to a lot of people.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I appreciate that.

My answer remains the same. We chose that term so as to reflect the time between being a teenager, getting CCB, and getting OAS and GIS. That was the term we chose to go with.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Is that something that will be determined as you go through the regulations, then? Will that definition be coming out during the regulations?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** It could be one of them, yes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Is that something you're committing to do? Like I said, I know it's something that's very confusing to a lot of people.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I think we could, yes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** All right.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I'm sorry. I don't want to overcommit, and I'm not meaning to be evasive, but yes.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** A big part of this is that people are looking for answers. When we have something like this that's very vague, it has more questions than answers for a lot of people.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** I appreciate that.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** There is another thing I wanted to ask.

This bill was previously introduced in the 43rd Parliament, before your government called the snap election. However, here we are a year later with no further details.

Over the last year, wouldn't that have been ample time to be working on the regulations? You might have determined things that should have been in legislation during the course of that time. You're actually starting all over again here, a year later.

Why wasn't that work done over the last year, if you knew this was something you were going to be reintroducing?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** A lot of work was done between the Speech from the Throne in October 2020.... The bill was tabled in June 2021 and retabled in June 2022. There was massive community engagement; there were massive online surveys, consultations, round tables. All of this will feed into the regulatory process. We're not starting anything over, and we're not starting from scratch.

A decision was made to keep going with the same approach, but we are way further ahead than we were in June 2021—way ahead.

● (1640)

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** I guess, to tag on to that, if there was a lot of learning during that time and a lot of consultation, why would the legislation be exactly the same? You would think there would have been things that were learned, that would have come up, and you would be saying, “Okay, this makes sense to put this in the legislation.”

The legislation is very.... You used the term “framework”, but it's really vague in many ways, and it doesn't give a lot of comfort to people in terms of knowing what might be coming down in the regulation.

During all of that learning, why weren't there even minor amendments made as you moved forward with this legislation?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** It's a fair question.

I would respond by saying that, quite frankly, we were very confident in the approach the first time. We are equally as confident in the approach this time. Again, we're not starting from scratch.

I wouldn't—and I'm not suggesting you are—minimize what this law is doing. It's creating, in law, this benefit. It's fundamentally creating an obligation to deliver this benefit and fill this really important gap in our social safety net.

It puts a stake in the ground to establish a new income supplement for hundreds of thousands of people. I don't think we can ever forget that's exactly what this legislation.... We're creating this benefit with this law.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** I will go back to one of my first questions, which was, what are the stopgap measures? What are the goalposts you're putting in to give people confidence for the benefits they'll be receiving, as you've determined, likely in 2024? What are the stopgaps? What are the goalposts?

What are the amounts you're working toward, as a whole for someone, regardless of what different programs they might be coming from already, whether they're provincial or federal?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I've said, that will all be determined through the process of regulations.

Whether it's based on the feedback we get with PTs on their openness on benefit interactions, whether they're the amounts and suggestions we get from the disability community or whether it's how we manage interaction with other federal benefits, the goalposts are lifting people out of poverty, making sure that people are better off and ensuring that across the country people receive a fair, consistent and accessible experience with this benefit.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** Minister, people don't know—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Gray. We have gone over.

**Mrs. Tracy Gray:** It's still very confusing.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your time.

To conclude this round, it's Mr. Kusmierczyk for five minutes.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Thank you, Chair.

It's Irek Kusmierczyk, member of Parliament, Windsor—Tecumseh, Minister.

I think this was a question that was already asked, but I just want to ask the minister this. Why is the focus on working-age Canadians with disabilities?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I said, the reality is—and I've said some of the poverty rates—that recipients who fall off a cliff with the CCP disability then have to wait until they get to 65 for OAS/GIS, with some exceptions. There's a gap. That fundamentally and historically would be the age within which Canadians work. For very legitimate reasons, including discrimination, stigma and barriers, that's not always the case in our country for persons with disabilities.

A companion piece, of course, to this CDB is our employment strategy for persons with disabilities. Of course, there's a whole other stream of work that's happening to remove those barriers, to build confidence in employers, and to understand and celebrate the creativity, innovation, skills and expertise this population has to offer the Canadian labour force. In the meantime, as people continue to experience poverty, face barriers and be discriminated against, they deserve to live in dignity.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Minister, do you have a sense, in looking at the analyses, how many Canadians could be made better off by this legislation?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I said, again, I'm not one to speculate. That's just my style, but we know this has the potential to lift hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Going back to that bedrock principle of “nothing without us”, will organizations that support persons with disabilities be involved in the education and the awareness part as this program is rolled out, to make sure there is uptake and that all Canadians are aware of this benefit? Will they be part of that awareness and education campaign?

• (1645)

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Absolutely: We've heard very clearly from the disability community that it's a really important aspect of benefit delivery that they would like to take a leadership role in, so for sure.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** That's fantastic.

I have another question. Again, I want to get back to the sense of urgency that we around this committee all feel, and that we heard in the House as well, really, when the bill passed unanimously at second reading.

How will passing this legislation, this framework—getting it through committee, getting it back to the House for third reading and getting through this process as soon as possible—impact on or help your discussions and negotiations with the various provinces and territories? Having this legislation passed and in our back pocket, how will it help your conversations with the provinces?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** As I said earlier, this puts a stake in the ground. This establishes a federal benefit in law.

While recognizing—again, in the preamble—the important role that PTs play in the delivery of social supports and services for people with a disability, it says very clearly to the provinces, as we have been saying all along, that this is happening and we need to get to a point at which we are all comfortable with how this is going to interact with their systems.

That's opposed to an approach whereby we theoretically sit at a table and say that this could happen; this might happen and, if it happens, can we agree to how it might work? That would give us nothing to lean on to show to the provinces the seriousness and the immediacy of the need for figuring this all out.

**Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk:** Minister, is there anything else we can do at this committee table to help make sure we accelerate the Canada disability benefit through the House?

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Well, listen, this is a very important part of the process. I'm very keen to hear from the witnesses from the disability community who you're going to hear from. I would encourage you to test their level of comfort with this approach and their confidence that when we say, “We're going to have you meaningfully involved in the next phase of the process,” it's going to happen.

I know there will be people who will tell you they want more details and aren't comfortable with this approach, but there are many, many organizations that appreciate that we are not imposing on them and that we are developing this with them. They have confidence that they will be meaningful partners at the table in the next phase of this.

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

Again, thank you, Minister and departmental staff, Mr. Conrad and Ms. Wilcox.

This concludes the first hour of the committee's hearing on Bill C-22. We'll suspend for a few minutes while we prepare for the witnesses for the second panel.

**Hon. Carla Qualtrough:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We'll suspend for a few minutes.

• (1645) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1655)

**The Chair:** Welcome back.

The committee will resume its study of 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.

To assist the interpreters in their work, I kindly remind all members and witnesses appearing today to introduce themselves when speaking and to speak slowly.

To the witnesses appearing virtually or in the room, you may choose to speak in the official language of your choice. If interpretation services are interrupted, please get my attention. We'll suspend while it's corrected.

Please wait until I recognize you before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. Please mute yourself when you are not speaking. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

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

I will now welcome our witnesses to begin the discussion. We have five minutes for opening remarks, followed by questions.

From the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, we have Thomas Simpson, executive director of public affairs and Bryanna Regimbald, program coordinator; from Disability Without Poverty, we have Michelle Hewitt, chair, board of directors and Rabia Khe-dr, national director; from the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, we have Julie Kelndorfer, director of government relations and advocacy and Marie-Ève Simard, marketing and communications director.

We will start with Mr. Simpson for five minutes.

Mr. Simpson, you have the floor.

**Mr. Thomas Simpson (Executive Director, Public Affairs, Canadian National Institute for the Blind):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Thomas Simpson. I'm the executive director of public affairs and Come to Work at CNIB. Joining me today is my colleague Bryanna Regimbald, a coordinator with our Come to Work program.

For 104 years, CNIB has been the largest organization supporting Canadians who are blind or partially sighted. We offer emotional and social support programs for those with sight loss, from coast

to coast to coast. CNIB is pleased to appear before HUMA today in support of Bill C-22. Our testimony represents the feedback and opinions of the sight loss community, based on extensive consultation CNIB undertook this year.

Let me be clear. People living with a disability need the Canada disability benefit, and we're pleased to see legislation introduced that removes people with disabilities from poverty. Today we will provide an overview of why people who are blind or partially sighted need this benefit, and we'll offer considerations to strengthen the legislation.

I'll turn it over to my colleague.

**Ms. Bryanna Regimbald (Program Coordinator, Canadian National Institute for the Blind):** Thank you, Thomas.

My name is Bryanna Regimbald and I am the program coordinator for Come to Work at CNIB. I'm a person living with sight loss. I have had sight loss since birth. We at Come to Work aim to support participants who are fully blind and partially sighted. In my day to day, working with participants has brought up many barriers and concerns relating to social assistance and the low amount holding them in an impoverished state.

Throughout many aspects of my life...I have faced many challenges pertaining to education, employment and daily living activities. Many participants I speak with in the vision loss community are on social assistance and do not want to continue to rely on it. The cost of living has gone up for everyone. For people with disabilities, this has been compounded. Imagine navigating societal barriers every day because of your disability, then imagine the compounding barriers faced by living in poverty.

People with sight loss face increased costs associated with their disability, including private transportation, high-tech items that assist with independent wayfinding and, in some instances, even veterinary care for guide dogs.

I hope this legislation passes quickly, so the government can quickly work with the disability community to define eligibility criteria and a dollar amount, and to establish a process with the provinces and territories that realizes the intent of this Canada disability benefit.

I'm going to now turn it back over to Thomas.

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** Thank you, Bryanna.

Committee members, I ask you to consider several recommended changes to help strengthen Bill C-22.

First, a Canada disability benefit must be implemented in tandem with a national employment strategy for persons with disabilities. This will ensure that the CDB does not keep people with disabilities who can work trapped on social assistance. The CDB must be designed to be a trampoline from poverty to employment rather than a net to catch people. This strategy must target employers and highlight the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, inclusive of sight loss.

While seniors are eligible for OAS and GIS, disability and poverty do not magically go away at age 65. In some provinces, once an individual reaches 65, some of their provincial supports end. For example, the guide dog benefit under the ODSP, which is an extra \$84 per month to help with the cost of a guide dog, ends at age 65. Seniors with sight loss in Ontario must cover alone those costs that had been subsidized. Members of this community should remove references to age restrictions within the legislation.

As Bryanna and I work with our Come to Work program, we see first-hand how current and inadequate provincial and territorial disability support programs disincentivize people from finding employment for fear that they will lose their essential medical services or other benefits associated with provincial programs. Quite simply, this legislation needs to address this and ensure that money or other benefits are not clawed back in a way that disincentivizes people who can work and want to work.

This legislation will confirm important elements of the CDB within regulation. The CNIB recommends that the legislation be amended to require that these regulations are adopted within one year of the legislation coming into force, to ensure no delay for the millions of Canadians waiting for this program.

Finally, we believe that the Canada child benefit is a program that the CDB should mirror. The Universal Child Care Benefit Act, the legislation that governs the Canada child benefit, spells out the amount that the program must remit to Canadians. CNIB suggest that Bill C-22 be amended to identify a mandatory minimum that people with disabilities will receive from the CDB.

In conclusion, the CNIB is supportive of Bill C-22. It must be passed and implemented as quickly as possible. The CNIB would also like to publicly support the briefs provided by the AODA Alliance and the Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians.

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

• (1700)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Simpson and Madam Regimbald.

Now we'll go to Disability Without Poverty.

You have the floor for five minutes.

**Ms. Michelle Hewitt (Chair, Board of Directors, Disability Without Poverty):** Thank you for inviting us to speak today.

My name is Michelle Hewitt, and I am the chair of Disability Without Poverty. With me is Rabia Khedr, the national director of Disability Without Poverty.

We come before you today to talk about the Canada disability benefit bill, Bill C-22, and the need for it to reach disabled people living in poverty as quickly as possible, including Black, indige-

nous and racialized people with disabilities, who are even further marginalized in our society.

The statistics relating to disabled people living in poverty are appalling. There are twice as many disabled people living in poverty than those who are not disabled. This is Canada in 2022. No one deserves to live in poverty, and certainly not from the lottery of life that saw them born with a disability or acquire one later on.

Disabled people do not live in poverty because they are worthless to society. It is quite the opposite; it is because their worth is not valued. In fact, people with disabilities contribute over \$47 billion to the Canadian economy.

Being disabled is not cheap. Tylenol goes from being a headache pill to a daily pain control medication. Our most personal daily activities, like toileting, are not free. I have a friend who waited three years for a replacement power wheelchair through her provincial program, only to find that the only wheelchair offered does not fit her. It's way too big.

We talk about lifting disabled people out of poverty, but what does that really mean? Canada's official poverty lines use the market basket measure, which fails to take disability into account.

We hear the stories of disabled people living in poverty on a daily basis, as they are our friends and family. We can tell you about the man who approached Rabia in the parking lot of a grocery store offering to swap bus tickets for food, or my friend who lives month to month with MAID approved, wondering if this month will be her last because she can't afford to live.

Throughout these hearings, you are going to hear many unique stories about disabled people living in poverty, but there will be a common theme. We are all united on the fact that there needs to be an end to disability poverty, and that the time is now.



On October 19, we had the honour of being in the gallery when the vote for second reading of Bill C-22 took place in the House. It was very emotional for the 10 members of our delegation to see the unanimous vote unfold in front of us. We are here today to ask that you continue in that spirit of bipartisanship to move this bill along to third reading, get unanimous support there, pass it to the Senate with all speed and ultimately have it receive royal assent.

We believe that this benefit will be most effectively delivered if the details are co-created with disabled people like us. That collaboration cannot happen in this committee, in the House or the Senate. It can happen only in the development of regulations with disabled people as equals in that process of collaboration.

Take a second to reflect on that person in your life that you have crossed paths with who is disabled. Ask yourself what they need this committee to do.

Right now, they need you to move this framework legislation on. Implore your parliamentary colleagues to do the right thing for disabled people by continuing that bipartisanship and moving it through third reading unanimously, with no further debate. Tell your colleagues on the finance committee that they must put money in the spring budget of 2023 to start paying this benefit out in the fall of 2023. Urge the civil servants working on the implementation of the benefit to ask themselves if the processes they create truly benefit disabled people, or if they are caught up in the old ways of ableism that are so endemic in our systems.

Time is of the essence. Food inflation is at 11.6%, yet provincial disability payments are not index-linked. This means that in real terms, disabled people fall further behind every day.

There is yet another hard winter in front of disabled people, but you have the power to make sure it is the last one with so many living below the poverty line. Thank you.

• (1705)

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

Now we'll go to the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada for five minutes.

**Ms. Julie Kelndorfer (Director, Government Relations and Advocacy, Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon, members of the committee.

My name is Julie Kelndorfer, and I, along with my colleague Marie-Ève Simard, are here representing the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada. We are honoured to present to your committee as you study Bill C-22, the Canada disability benefit act.

To begin, Canada has one of the highest rates of MS in the world. With this autoimmune disorder, the body mistakenly attacks its own central nervous system, disrupting the signals coming from the brain and spinal cord. No two people experience MS in the same way. Symptoms vary from loss of vision or mobility to fatigue and incontinence. While some begin experiencing the disease as a progressive decline in ability from the outset, the majority experience MS in a cycle of relapses and remissions known as episodes, so this is an episodic disability. Unfortunately for many, the damage from these episodes accumulates over time, resulting in permanent disability progression.

Currently, we have no cure. For many like me—I was diagnosed 18 years ago, when my son was just one year old—living with MS means a life of uncertainty: the uncertainty of not knowing if a symptom like the tremors in my hands when I couldn't even cut my own food at dinner will last a day, a month or a year, or if they will ever go away. Each day we wake up not knowing what lies ahead.

The MS Society's goal is to ensure that Canadians living with MS and their families can participate fully in all aspects of life despite this uncertainty. Income security is fundamental to that. We're here today to stress the urgent need for the Canada disability benefit act and to stress that it be inclusive of Canadians living with episodic disability by amending the act to include the same definition of disability as the one found in the Accessible Canada Act.

The effects of poverty for Canadians living with MS cannot be understated. Research on the disease has found that individuals with lower socio-economic status had a higher risk of disability progression and poorer prognoses, reaching physical disability milestones faster, like difficulty walking.

Research also shows that the serious economic consequences of MS begin within the first few years of diagnosis. Challenged by paying for medication, rehabilitation treatments and transportation, living with MS is compounded by the need for services and equipment to aid lost abilities. Feeding, mobility and bathing aids are just some of the items needed in a list that's as lengthy as it is expensive. Imagine having to choose between heating your home or travelling to medical appointments, or between buying decent food or seeing a physiotherapist to help you walk.

Early intervention with life-altering, disease-modifying treatments can slow or halt irreversible disability, but the cost of treatments is significant. A 2020 Conference Board of Canada report found that in just one year, Canadians living with MS and their families paid over \$39 million out of pocket.

If you or your family are unable to afford treatments, your MS can get worse, making it more difficult to work and live an independent life, putting further pressure on your financial situation and leading to even worse symptoms. It's a downward spiral.

The challenges that living with MS bring, coupled with multiple barriers in current government support systems, have only been amplified during the pandemic and by today's rising cost of living, and there is a gender dimension, as 75% of Canadians living with MS are women.

Just as the Canada disability benefit targets working-age Canadians, so, too, does MS. Most people are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 49, which are prime career, family-building and earning years for people.

Ray, who lives with MS, worries about his stop work day, as more than 60% of people diagnosed with MS eventually reach unemployment, which is high, given their educational and vocational histories. This HUMA committee in 2019 studied the needs of Canadians with episodic disabilities, describing the income and employment context, and produced an excellent report.

The committee has an important opportunity to align this act with the most current definition of disability found in the Accessible Canada Act.

The MS community, alongside episodic disability partners, worked hard during the Accessible Canada Act consultations to be recognized by having episodic disabilities included in the definition of disability. It was monumental for our community; we now had a definition of disability that included us. The expectation was that, moving forward, all legislation and programs would explicitly contain this inclusive definition of disability.

• (1710)

Each day, people with MS wake up to adversity and do everything in their power to persevere.

As they struggle to make ends meet, let's work together to pass this legislation quickly, ease their struggle, reduce poverty, and support the financial security of working-age persons with all types of disabilities, including episodic ones.

Thank you.

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

Now we'll start our opening round. Before we do, I'll just remind members again to please introduce yourselves when I recognize you, and clearly identify which witness you want to direct your question to.

Ms. Ferreri, you have six minutes.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hi, everybody. I am Michelle Ferreri, the member of Parliament for Peterborough—Kawartha. I'm happy to be here. This is a very important bill that we are discussing.

I would like to start my question with Thomas—if I may call you Thomas. Thank you very much for your testimony.

Thank you to all of you for your testimony.

Michelle, yours was very powerful as well.

Your points about a national employment strategy really hit home. I think you're bang on with a lot of what you were saying about making sure workplace employers are open-minded to a lot of this. What I really want to delve into is.... You referred to the fact that you're supportive of this bill. I think everybody is supportive of helping and doing what we need to do, doing the right thing. There's a fine line, and I'm trying not to be too critical, but we have to be fairly critical to ensure that it is done properly. You made reference to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance, AODA, and that you are supporting their recommendations. It's a fairly harsh letter.

If you don't mind, I'm just going to read a couple of things, and I'm going to get your feedback, if that's okay. It says, "In summary, here is what's wrong with the bill as it is now written". I'm not going to read the whole thing, because there are a few pages here, but I'm going to read a couple of paragraphs.

The bill does not ensure that there is a swift, fair, non-bureaucratic and accessible way for people with disabilities to apply for the Canada Disability Benefit, or a fair and swift appeal process for people who apply for it and are refused it.

The bill's stated purpose is itself impoverished. It does not seek to eliminate poverty among people with disabilities. It does not even seek to significantly reduce poverty facing people with disabilities. ... The most tiny improvement for people with disabilities would entirely fulfil that paltry goal.

It also talks about how the bill "sets no minimum amount for the Canada Disability Benefit or a start date for the Government to start paying", as well as the age.

How do you feel about this? In trying to meet those timely...and get it done and get this rolled out, how feasible do you think these recommendations are?

• (1715)

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** First, I will say, of course, that I believe David Lepofsky of the AODA Alliance will be joining committee as a witness in testimony, and I'm sure he will love to answer that question as well.

The CNIB, as an organization that.... We like to say we're a megaphone for the voices of people with disabilities. This brief we've come up with is not one where we've had people in a room in Toronto who just came up with it. This is based on the experiences and thoughts of people living with sight loss, people who are blind or partially sighted, or have deaf-blindness. There are folks who have wide thoughts on the bill, saying, "We need the money now. Get it over and done with. You people on Parliament Hill can figure it out quickly."

People are saying there are problems with it. I think what you will find within our brief, which will be submitted after this as part of our testimony, is that there are small tweaks that can be made to the legislation to ensure that those anxieties are overcome by certain people within the disability community and that timelines are put into the legislation. The Accessible Canada Act, when it was being developed, put into the legislation timelines for the first regs to be developed. I don't know why we can't do the same thing here, ensuring that this is done within one year of the coming into force of the legislation.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** Thank you. That's great feedback.

Michelle, if I may turn it to you.... I mean, it is disturbing—to put it mildly—to hear you, but it's reality when you have so many people living with disabilities who are considering MAID, medical assistance in dying, instead of living. Do you want to expand on how real that is for the disabled community?

**Ms. Michelle Hewitt:** It's extremely real.

I gave testimony to the MAID committee, the joint committee of the House and the Senate, earlier this year. The friend I mentioned is somebody with post-viral syndrome, basically, and, as we live in this post-COVID era, we don't know how many people are going to join that. She's somebody who just cannot afford to pay for treatment. We know there are people in Ontario who have used MAID this year because their housing was toxic to them, not because they didn't want to live and not because their suffering was irremediable. The remedy to their suffering was financial: Their suffering was because they lived in poverty.

I truly believe that we're out of whack at the moment, in that we have legislation by this government that is moving forward. In March 2023 it will include more people who can apply for MAID, but that's only half the picture. We're not looking at the poverty angle and at the way people are being forced to live.

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** Very quickly, you commented that it needs to be co-created with the disabled community. I'm just curious. We just had the minister testify. Do you not feel that the community was consulted enough on this bill?

**Ms. Michelle Hewitt:** I know your time is short.... Do you mind if I pass it to Rabia?

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** Please do.

**Ms. Rabia Khedr (National Director, Disability Without Poverty):** My name is Rabia Khedr. I also happen to be blind, by the way, and I work with people with all sorts of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities. The idea of co-creation goes well beyond consultation. Yes, we have been consulted, as people with disabilities, as allies and as supporters for the last couple of years, and for years we've been advising and appealing to government to put in more financial supports for people with disabilities.

“Co-creation” means we are sitting as equal partners at the table—that people with disabilities from diverse backgrounds, with diverse lived experiences, are involved as equal partners in the spirit of equity around a table with folks from government, with bureaucrats who are going to nail down the regulations, from design and development to implementation.

● (1720)

**Ms. Michelle Ferreri:** Thank you so much.

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

We have Mr. Collins for six minutes.

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

It's Chad Collins, member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, speaking.

If I could, through you, Mr. Chair, I'll start first with Mr. Simpson.

Part of Bill C-22 is to support the financial security of working-age persons with disabilities. What does financial security look like for your constituency with the CNIB?

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** That's a great question.

The reality is that if you're living with a disability, regardless of what type of disability, there are extra costs associated with it. In a second, I will ask my colleague Bryanna to explain her experiences as someone with a lived experience.

It includes many things, such as the extra costs to get around in your community, because someone who is mildly or partially sighted does not often have the ability to drive, for example, and without having support from a family member or a friend to do so, it means having to take a bus, an Uber or any other ride-share. There's the cost of veterinary appointments, as my colleague has pointed out, for those who have a guide dog. The list goes on, but I will ask Bryanna to share her lived experience.

**Ms. Bryanna Regimbald:** Thank you, Thomas.

As Thomas stated, there are many costs that people—and this is not to blame—often don't think about as we understand it, whether it be supplies for a guide cane or supplies for guide dogs and things like that, which may not be covered by certain finances. For example, for me, previously.... If I was living in an area on the outskirts, for example, in the suburbs, sometimes there might not necessarily be public transportation available, or there's a further walk that, across the board, people with sight loss sometimes don't.... There are people from partially sighted to fully blind who aren't comfortable doing certain things at different stages. Maybe someone is not comfortable with walking to an accessible bus stop, so they would have to call for a taxi to get to employment, and things like that.

Across the board, there are many finances that aren't considered, unfortunately, and that's just based on the knowledge of what comes with sight loss for different people. For me, throughout school, there were different resources I needed, which sometimes would cost various amounts of money. As for trying to get those supports, it varies.

**Mr. Chad Collins:** Thank you both for those answers.

The minister was very clear: The benefit is to supplement existing provincial and territorial benefits. Mr. Simpson, I think you referenced that in your opening—the importance of ensuring there are no clawbacks. Part of her explanation today was that the legislative framework now requires us to go through consultation with the provinces and territories to ensure that this is a top-up and that we get as many people out of poverty as possible.

Could you elaborate on the issue of clawbacks and the point you made in your opening about the importance of ensuring this is topping up and a supplement to the existing support payments your constituency already receives across the country?

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** Absolutely.

As the minister stated earlier today, there are 13 different jurisdictions with different support programs already in place. The hope of our community is that there's some form of harmonization to ensure that regardless of where you live across this country, from coast to coast to coast, a person with a disability has the appropriate financial means to get ahead.

This shouldn't just be about deciding what the line of poverty is and going a dollar above that line of poverty. It should be about ensuring people with disabilities across the country are able to be economically and financially self-sustaining. For those able to work...it's ensuring they can get the supports, then enabling them to thrive in employment situations.

**Mr. Chad Collins:** Thanks very much.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to cede the rest of my time to my friend and colleague, Mr. Coteau.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses here today. I really appreciate their being here.

I want to ask a question of Rabia Khedr.

Thank you so much for coming to Parliament Hill on the day of the vote. I know you came to meet me with a group of individuals—

By the way, it's Michael Coteau from Don Valley East.

I want to say thank you for coming to meet and talk with members about the co-development piece. When you left my office, that was one of the messages that stuck with me: co-development and making sure we stick to the general principle of “nothing without us”.

There have been members here who have suggested that going straight into a framework that allows for the regulations to outline the program details, and focusing on that through co-development, is not the right approach. They would rather see it all in the legislation.

Can you speak to the importance of co-development through regulation?

• (1725)

**Ms. Rabia Khedr:** Again, lived experience is what will bring the knowledge, expertise and nuances that people in positions of power, who are charged with developing regulations in their job descriptions, wouldn't necessarily know. That is information you can't get out of a focus group or a consultation or a research paper. When you're sitting around the table discussing every detail as equal partners, that's where lived experience comes in. It's key. It's like people feeling... For example, I'm blind. Not every blind person is the same, but generally, we have some common need.

We like to know who's in the room. When people choose to overdescribe, because they assume we need to see every little detail the way they see it... That's not necessarily the approach we need. It's important to have individuals at the table who have been on ODSP and know what's covered and not covered, and how clawbacks, in reality, happen in their lives.

Perhaps it says “no clawbacks”, but there are other elements of provincial supports and services that haven't been considered through the research and expert knowledge that come with co-creation. Again, it's the spirit in which we do the work. Doing the work with a genuine mindset of “nothing about us” means including us at the table as equal partners, not just through “engagement”. That is one way, and consultation is one way.

It's about co-creating and working together. Therefore, if there are barriers, we're able to address them, because we've lived those barriers on a daily basis.

**Mr. Michael Coteau:** Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

Madame Chabot, you have six minutes.

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** I sincerely thank the witnesses. Thank you for sharing with us what you are going through as people living with disabilities and for speaking on behalf of the groups you are representing.

I think your message has been heard loud and clear.

I heard one group saying that we should pass the bill without amendments. I also heard the representatives for the MS Society of Canada mention that maybe the bill should be amended to include in the definitions the fact that MS is episodic in nature, as we know.

I would like you to tell us a bit more.

We agree that this should be done by and for people living with disabilities. However, as parliamentarians, it is very unusual to pass a bill when the most important aspects, like eligibility criteria, benefit terms and conditions and benefit amounts, are unknown.

During consultations, we asked for your opinion on these matters, because it seems important to us, especially when everything is to be set through regulations. We also appreciate the urgency of establishing that particular benefit, but we know that regulations can take a long time.

My question is for the representatives of the MS Society.

When you talk about amending the bill to state that some diseases and disabilities are episodic, what are you thinking about specifically?

Why is that important? In which parts of the bill could we make the required changes?

• (1730)

[*English*]

**Ms. Julie Kelndorfer:** As I mentioned in my opening statement around the definition of “disability”, we were so excited during the Accessible Canada Act consultations that we were a part of and with the act itself that the definition of “disability” included “episodic”. This committee has also studied episodic disabilities and has produced an excellent report. Unfortunately episodic disabilities are not understood and not included in many of the programs, so they are left out.

We're concerned with this act that they also will be left out. I think there's a really important opportunity for this committee to include episodic, and there is a definition that's already inclusive. That's where we'd like to see it, because we know this intermittent connection to the workplace is very difficult. The needed supports for people with disabilities are very difficult.

[*Translation*]

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

If you have something written down to share with us, we will take the time to look at including this in the bill.

I have only one question, and you can take turns answering it.

What does lifting people out of poverty or reducing poverty mean to you? What would be the minimum income required for that to be achieved?

Mr. Simpson, we can start with you and Ms. Hewitt can chime in afterwards.

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** Thank you for the question, Madame Chabot.

[*English*]

Given that there are 13 different provinces and jurisdictions across the country, that there are different social support programs that already exist, that the cost to exist across the country depends on where a person lives—rural or remote versus urban—far be it from me to create a number and say this is what the amendment should be. I think this is where there can be consultation with the disability community and this committee to come up with a mandatory minimum that says this supplementary support program will be, at minimum,  $x$  dollars that will be indexed to inflation year over year.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Do we have time for other answers?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have one minute.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Louise Chabot:** Ms. Hewitt, do you have anything to add?

[*English*]

**Ms. Michelle Hewitt:** On the question that Thomas just responded to in relation to an amount that would lift people out of poverty, in Canada we currently have something like 54 official poverty lines. To lift people out of poverty, presumably, it would be above that line; however, it costs to be disabled.

We know from research that's been done outside Canada, in comparable jurisdictions like Ireland, Australia and the U.K., that for the amount it would take for you to be eligible for something like a provincial disability program or CPPD, it's roughly 40% more. For people who are severely disabled, it can cost 65% to 75% more.

It depends, really, as Thomas mentioned before. Is it one dollar over the poverty line and we've lifted people out of poverty? For disabled people, that's not the way that we can do things. It needs to take into consideration the cost of disability.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

We'll go to Madame Zarrillo for six minutes.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I'm Bonita Zarrillo, the member of Parliament for Port Moody—Coquitlam, out in B.C. I'm participating virtually today as well.

I know it's a very short window, so I'm just going to get right to it around the eligibility definition.

Madam Hewitt and Madam Regimbald, I would like to know from both of you if you think the Accessible Canada Act definition would be a good base for eligibility for this benefit.

Ms. Hewitt, do you want to go first?

• (1735)

**Ms. Michelle Hewitt:** Are you okay if I pass it over to Rabia as well? She's probably more knowledgeable.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Absolutely.

**Ms. Michelle Hewitt:** Following on from my good friend Julie, who is somebody with MS, obviously I support everything that relates to “episodic”.

I just wanted to highlight what she was saying by saying that when people have any form of episodic disability and they jump in and out of the benefit system or a workplace system, it takes time for things to react. That's why we need special work to be done around things related to “episodic”.

Rabia, I'll pass it over to you.

**Ms. Rabia Khedr:** Thank you, Michelle.

The ACA definition is something the disability community and national organizations worked extensively and came to a general consensus on. Not everybody will necessarily fit into that definition. That's why the co-creation piece is really key.

The ACA definition is a starting point, but let's have a more comprehensive discussion around eligibility and who qualifies as "disabled", whether they're episodic, temporary or permanent, within that definition, in those conversations and in the spirit of co-creation.

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

Ms. Regimbald, would you mind letting me know how you feel about that as an eligibility definition?

**Ms. Bryanna Regimbald:** Yes, I definitely think it's a comprehensive definition, in short.

**Ms. Bonita Zarrillo:** Wonderful. Thank you very much.

Madam Kelndorfer, I wanted to come back to you around life planning and how income supports and lack of income security can affect life planning.

I wonder if you could just give us a bit of a vision of why it's so important to have stable income support in regard to life planning, and how an episodic illness can be affected by that.

**Ms. Julie Kelndorfer:** As I said, MS and episodic disabilities bring a life of uncertainty. It's uncertainty knowing about work, family and your path forward. In a life of uncertainty, we need predictable supports. We need predictable supports, and income in particular. Income is so fundamental to so much of life—housing, food, treatment, wellness. We hear from so many people who need rehabilitation supports to be able to continue. As a disease like MS progresses over time, sufferers need supports in order to remain as well as possible for as long as possible.

We heard from a witness in the committee study who said she doesn't fear losing her ability to walk; she fears losing her ability to work and contribute financially to her life. She fears poverty. That's a really unfortunate situation. As we've heard from everybody, it's a very complex system. The income and disability supports system is very complex. We really need to look at that from multiple perspectives over the life course.

What we heard from people was, "What if I can't work at this point in time? Perhaps if I can be supported, I can continue my attachment to the workforce." People want to work, but they struggle to work. We need to support them for as long as possible. I think income supports like the Canada disability benefit are one solution. There are multiple solutions. There are multiple recommendations in the HUMA report on episodic disabilities that are helpful to many, including people with mental health conditions.

• (1740)

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

Ms. Khedr, I have a question about persons with disabilities who are not going to work and who need to have those income supports. Perhaps you could give me some information about the fact that a

provincial government is not able to cover all of this and why in this area it is so important for the federal government to step in.

**Ms. Rabia Khedr:** Essentially, in Ontario, for example, somebody living in a group home receives \$1,227. The institution where they live charges them for room and board, approximately \$1,075. They're left with just around \$150 or so for their basic needs. With the recent 5% increase, essentially they received a \$5 increase.

If they do not have family to supplement their basic needs, then they are forced into a life of poverty—again, by no doing of their own. They were born with a genetic condition that gave them the journey of life to live with autism, with global developmental delay, with cerebral palsy, with Down's syndrome and so on. In many cases, it's so severe that they don't even understand the concept of work, or it's simply that the nature of the disability they have prevents them from being productive enough to earn.

Everybody desires work. People with intellectual disabilities desire a job. They want to be productive. However, in terms of the barriers to employment they face, not every barrier can be remedied or accommodated. In many cases, as I said, there are people like my late brother, who did not understand the concept of work. My brother, who lives in a group home right now, wants to work, but he just cannot hold down a job due to the nature of his disability. If I were not there, if my parents were not there, if his family were not there, he would be offered charity for his clothes, for his hygiene products or for any personal care items that he would need, because the income he has left is insufficient. If he did not live in a group home environment, well, he would be on the street, because he wouldn't be able to afford rent.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll conclude the last session this afternoon with Mr. Aitchison and then Mr. Van Bynen, for four minutes each.

Go ahead, Mr. Aitchison.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC):** Thanks, Mr. Chair, and thanks, everybody, for all the presentations today.

I understand that the public process is sometimes time-consuming on purpose, and it's important to get things right. However, this is one of those areas where I hear you loud and clear. We've been talking about this for an awfully long time, and it seems a little frustrating that we're still talking and not moving along quickly...maybe more quickly is the appropriate description.

I would like to start with Thomas.

You indicated a couple of points that you were suggesting could improve this bill. The one that stuck out for me—I know it's been mentioned before—is that this must be done in conjunction with what you described as an employment strategy. I trust that the CNIB will in fact be presenting its suggested amendments to this.

Could you speak briefly—because we don't have a lot of time—about what an employment strategy might look like and what it needs to encompass?

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** Sure. Based on the last research that the CNIB conducted, people who are blind or partially sighted have a full-time employment rate of 31%, which is quite abysmal.

A national employment strategy must be one that takes into consideration a few things.

It needs to ensure that the skills development is there to enable people who have a disability to go into the workforce and be successful at the job they wish to do. It needs to take into consideration the cognitive load of job-seeking, what it means to have to compete again and again for a role, and the barrier that may create for someone who wants to become employed.

More importantly, it needs to take into consideration the cultural and attitudinal changes of employers. I don't think many Canadians who are employers actively seek not to hire people with a disability. However, I don't know that they know what they don't know, if that makes sense—the unknown barriers that they create. Employers need to understand that a bit better, and the benefits that an individual who has a disability—or is blind or partially sighted, in the case of the CNIB—will bring to employment.

Accessibility enhancements also need to be considered to ensure that people can get into their workplace, be it a ramp or those new-fangled elevators, for example: You press a screen that has no tactile buttons that then visually shows you which elevator to go into. If you're blind or partially sighted and you can't do that to get to the floor you need to get to on your first day, how are you going to be successful?

There are a number of different things that need to be taken into consideration for a comprehensive employment strategy.

• (1745)

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** Very quickly now, because I'm down to a minute, I'm thinking in the context of Ontario, because that's the area I know best as a former mayor. AODA covers an awful lot of these types of issues for employers, for accessibility and the design of public spaces, for example.

How would the federal government fit into some of the existing provincial legislation, which I think covers a lot of the areas you're discussing?

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** The federal government could do a number of different things.

Public awareness campaigns are always great to try to ensure that people understand the importance of this work. It could work with organizations that are doing the work to ensure that their programmatic offerings are trying to do that, whether it's skills development, mentorship for people with disabilities or outreach to potential employers to open the doors for employment opportunities.

**Mr. Scott Aitchison:** I have seven seconds, so I guess I'm done.

Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

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

I have Mr. Van Bynen for the final four minutes.

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

I appreciate all the information we've been receiving from this group. It certainly is eye-opening and important for us to understand.

As a former mayor as well, I know some municipalities have disability advisory groups for their municipalities. I'm hoping that, to some extent, that can be folded into some of the programs we have here.

Mr. Simpson, you mentioned earlier that we need to make sure the national employment strategy complements this disability...

I know we committed \$285 million as an employment strategy for people with disabilities. Can you tell me how we might be able to bridge that into what's being proposed here?

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** Absolutely. As I said, social assistance needs to be a trampoline from poverty to employment for those individuals who can and want to work. It's to have an alignment where there are opportunities for people who are eligible for what will become this Canada disability benefit to, at the same time, receive information on employment agencies or organizations that serve people with disabilities, who have employment programming as well.

Again, social assistance shouldn't be a net to capture people in but a trampoline to help propel them to the goals and wishes they have.

**Mr. Tony Van Bynen:** It's a great analogy. I believe Napoleon Bonaparte said that he who sits in the saddle best knows where it pinches, and so your engagement in this process is truly appreciated.

I will cede the balance of my time to Mr. Morrice.

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

My name is Mike Morrice. I'm the member of Parliament for Kitchener Centre.

Thanks to each of the organizations here today for your really important advocacy.

Rabia shared earlier her comments about people with disabilities wanting to work. I want to briefly share some comments from a constituent of mine who emailed me over the weekend. These were his words: "We should not be doomed to poverty because a rich person fears we won't work if we are aided." I hope members of this committee will keep that in mind.

In terms of the work this committee will get to do, there's a chance to put forward amendments. I want to ask this of the CNIB folks in particular. One of the amendments you suggested was about requiring regulations to come into force within a particular amount of time. Could you share more about what you envision with that amendment?

**Mr. Thomas Simpson:** Absolutely. Thank you very much for that, Mr. Morrice.

As I shared earlier, while HUMA, in Bill C-81, was studying the legislation, the disability community sought out timelines for which regulations would be developed. I think it's very apt here that we learn from the same success.

The minister spoke today of her wish for the regulations to be done within a year. Why not legislate that within the framework that is here in front of you as Bill C-32?

I'm no lawyer. I'm sure you can figure out where it fits properly.

• (1750)

**Mr. Mike Morrice:** Do any of the other witnesses want to share any proposed amendments related to the timeliness? We've heard from so many in the disability community about the urgency they're looking to see parliamentarians move with. Would either Ms. Kelndorfer or either of the folks from Disability Without Poverty want to share amendments with respect to the timeliness of the bill?

**The Chair:** Each of you can give a short answer, please.

**Ms. Michelle Hewitt:** I would just like to say that we need to think about the timeliness of this in terms of the crisis it is for disabled people.

We've done so many things in the last two years that we never thought we were going to have to do. We've rolled out a whole vaccination program. We've rolled out various benefits. We can do this. We have the capacity as a country to roll out this benefit to disabled people in less than a year if we all believe it's the national crisis that disabled people who live in poverty see it as being. Whether that's an amendment or whether it's just my words saying that things need to move, I'll leave it there.

**Ms. Rabia Khedr:** This is Rabia, from Disability Without Poverty. I will echo Michelle's sentiment that where there's a will, there's a way.

One story of a disabled person living in poverty represents and reflects thousands of untold stories. We don't need to consult more. We don't need to hear more. We need to roll up our sleeves, get the job done and deliver the money to the people who need it most. It will stimulate our economy at the same time, let's not forget. We all need this benefit to flow quickly.

**The Chair:** Finally, Madam Kelndorfer, please.

**Ms. Julie Kelndorfer:** Thank you for this opportunity.

It's exactly what Michelle and Rabia have said. Our community wants us to prioritize this legislation as quickly as possible. The urgency is there, and we need it yesterday. Whatever we can do to ensure that it moves as quickly as possible is what our community is asking for.

**The Chair:** Thank you to the witnesses. Thank you so much for your testimony this afternoon.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adjourn?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned.









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