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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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● (0845)
[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 54 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will commence its study of service standards for passport renewal.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. That means members are attending in person in the room as well as virtually.

To ensure an orderly meeting, for those attending in person, please raise your hand to get my attention. For those attending virtually, please use the “raise hand” icon on your screen to get my attention. When I recognize you, you will then have the floor.

You have the option of choosing to participate in the official language of your choice. For those appearing virtually, the option is at the bottom of your screen. If there's a breakdown in interpretation services, please get my attention. We'll suspend while it is being corrected.

As we have followed a practice that is now part of the process, for anybody who is appearing virtually without a recognized House of Commons approved headset, I will not recognize you to participate verbally in the discussion. You would have the option of voting but not participating.

In accordance with our routine motion, I have been advised that all the witnesses have been tested. We do have one issue with a departmental official whose sound quality is not adequate for interpretation.

I would like to welcome everybody and our witnesses.

Appearing first is the Honourable Karina Gould, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. Welcome, Minister.

From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Jean-François Tremblay, deputy minister, and Mary Ann Triggs, assistant deputy minister with Service Canada.

Members, Ms. Triggs is the one with the issue on the sound quality, so she will not be able to respond to your questions.

Also with us is Cliff Groen, the department's business lead in benefits delivery modernization.

We will begin with opening remarks from Minister Gould for five minutes or less.

Minister, you have the floor.

● (0850)

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Good morning.

Thank you very much, Chair and committee, for having me here today.

First, I think it is important to recognize that for decades the process of applying for and receiving a passport in Canada was one of the most seamless and predictable government services there was. The Government of Canada set a very high standard in getting citizens this critical document in a simple and timely way.

[Translation]

As we all know, there were some colossal failures in meeting this high standard in 2022.

About 10 months ago, we started to see an unprecedented increase in passport applications that we were unable to process, creating huge problems for far too many Canadians. There were line-ups and delays, which caused stress and uncertainty.

I have said it a number of times before and I will say it again today: this was unacceptable. So we sought to correct the situation. Service Canada worked very hard to meet some major challenges and get the passport program back on track in order to meet the legitimate expectations of Canadians.

[English]

Service Canada nearly doubled the operational workforce, from 1,365 employees in March to 2,639 in December. It expanded access to service for Canadians to more offices. It added processing capacity and streamlined operations.

Staff worked thousands of hours of overtime in processing applications, printing passports and helping Canadians directly, on evenings, weekends and holidays. Special attention was paid to make sure that Canadians with urgent needs were served in time for their travel.

These efforts paid dividends, restabilizing the program by the fall. As of October 3, Service Canada began to once again deliver within the service standards for well beyond 90% of new applications.

However, there were still thousands of Canadians who applied well before that time who had to wait. Some of those Canadians may just be receiving their passports now, despite having applied as early as the summer. I have seen these cases in my own office, as have MPs across all parties. To those Canadians and others who have shown such admirable patience during this difficult situation, I once again apologize.

Since its peak in August 2022, after dedicating resources to ensuring that these Canadians received their passports, over 99% of the backlog of applications has been processed. The backlog is now virtually eliminated. The 1,700 applications that remain are there for many possible reasons. Not every application results in a passport being issued. Some cases may have other complex issues to resolve, such as matters of child custody, eligibility or integrity.

Service Canada has assessed these complex files and is working diligently to complete the review and identify the appropriate outcomes while ensuring passport integrity. The efforts and resources that have been deployed over the past year are now focused on maintaining service standards and anticipating growth in application volumes.

The first wave of passports with the 10-year validity were issued in July 2013. Service Canada is now well positioned to handle the 2023 influx of renewals and beyond.

[*Translation*]

No program or service is immune to crisis, but that is no excuse for not being well prepared. The lessons learned since the spring have been put into practice. Should there be another crisis in the future, the passport program will have done everything possible to prepare for it.

I am grateful to Service Canada employees for the many overtime hours they worked to serve millions of Canadians in difficult circumstances. It is Service Canada's role to help Canadians get their passport. Service Canada's offices are operating at maximum capacity and are consistently meeting service standards.

[*English*]

As was the case prior to the pandemic, there are going to be seasonal peaks, which might mean lineups at offices sometimes. With March break and summer quickly approaching, Service Canada staff are prepared to serve Canadians as quickly as possible.

Now I'd be happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll begin with Madam Ferreri for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for appearing today.

Do you know the number of passports processed between April 2019 and March 2020?

• (0855)

Hon. Karina Gould: It was 2.3 million.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Okay, so those are pre-COVID numbers. Do you know how many passports were processed between April 2020 and March 2022?

Hon. Karina Gould: Between April and March of 2022....

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: It was 1.273 million, so just over a million less than before the pandemic.

In tabling to the committee, we have on record your saying, "Service Canada simply couldn't cope with the unprecedented surge in passport applications that poured into passport processing centres across the country."

Minister, the numbers do not make any sense. You actually had fewer passports to process. Who's wrong here, the numbers or you?

Hon. Karina Gould: Well, let me start by saying that those numbers don't tell the whole story. During the 2020 and 2021 years, we had a very reduced number of applications. In fact, during 2020 and 2021, all of those passports were issued.

The difference is when you go into the month-by-month comparison. If you look at December 2021 through February 2022, we got about 120,000 applications and we were able to process that number.

Then what happened, starting in March, is that all of a sudden that number jumped to 250,000. In April, it was 270,000; in May, 287,000; in June—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt. We have such limited time here—

Hon. Karina Gould: I think it's important to make sure that we have clarity on the record for what the actual story is that the numbers tell.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: There's clarity as well that the number is over a million fewer, so for you to say that you couldn't cope with the unprecedented surge doesn't reconcile itself.

Moving on—

Hon. Karina Gould: Right, but, Ms. Ferreri, it's important to understand what the capacity for processing is versus what the application is.

When you go from one month to another with a doubling of the applications, that's going to cause a strain in the system, and that happened consistently for about four months.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Minister, I'm going to move on, because your logic isn't adding up for us here.

"Virtually eliminated the passport backlog" is what you've also submitted to the committee. Those are your words, that you've "virtually eliminated the passport backlog," but we have members.... In particular, the member from North Okanagan—Shuswap had a constituent write in that on January 14 of 2023, he sat outside in the rain for three hours before doors opened on a lineup of over 80 people.

Is that virtually eliminating backlogs to you, Minister?

Hon. Karina Gould: Ms. Ferreri, I think it's important to understand what the backlog is versus what happens at a Service Canada centre.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Are you okay with people waiting that long?

Hon. Karina Gould: Ms. Ferreri, if you could let me finish, that would, I think, help clarify the situation.

What the backlog refers to was the number of applications that were submitted to Passport Canada that were not issued within the service standards. That has virtually been eliminated in the sense that now when people apply for a passport, they are getting their passports within the service standards, which is 10 business days if it's in person or 20 business days if it's by mail.

Of course we don't want people waiting outside, but I can confirm to Canadians that there is no need to arrive at a Service Canada centre or a passport office before it opens. They open at 8:30 at all of the busy centres. There are teams of managers who triage the line, usually from 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning, to make sure that they're serving people in a timely way.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you, Minister.

Going back to what you've just said about virtually eliminating the backlog, when we look at this information that's been presented, it says, "With regard to Passport Canada, the following volumes of passport applications remain in processing".

For 20 business days, which is your now service standard, and older, there are almost 22,000. For eight weeks, which is 40 business days and older, there are almost 20,000. For three months or 65 business days, it's at 20,000. There are 12,000 at 17 weeks, and at six months or older, the number of people waiting for their passport is almost 2,000.

Is that virtually eliminating backlog? Does that define backlog for you, Minister?

• (0900)

Hon. Karina Gould: The backlog is any application that is outside of the service standards; however, what I can confirm is that within processing since October 3, we are well over 98% with regard to passports that are processed in that time.

If there is a delay, it's usually because there's information missing from the passport application. Every application has been touched in the system and has been assigned to an officer, and they're working with Canadians.

Not every application results in a passport, because there may be other extenuating circumstances, such as integrity issues. We obviously have, unfortunately, people who apply fraudulently for passports, so it is the case that not every application will result in a passport.

Those that remain in the system are usually the most complicated cases. Often there are custody issues, and I'm sure you can appreciate that we want to ensure that we are doing everything we can as a government, as Service Canada, to make sure that we provide integrity in the service.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Ferreri. Thank you, Minister.

Now we'll go to Mr. Collins for six minutes.

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

Good morning, Minister. Welcome back.

Minister, a lot of attention has been paid to the human resource side of resolving the passport issue. Many articles and, of course, your own testimony talked about how we ramped up numbers in offices and extended hours. A lot of people worked overtime to try to meet the historic demand in passport renewals and new applications, but not much has been said about the technology and the investments that have been made to better prepare us for future events that might put us in the same situation as in 2022.

Can you speak to the investments that have been made by the department and the ministry as they relate to replacing antiquated systems that may have been in place?

I had the opportunity to speak to a retiree, someone who worked in Service Canada for a long time. We talked about the system that was in place for many years. It was antiquated and certainly didn't help us when we started to see the problems that we experienced in 2022.

Can you provide some information along those lines in terms of investments that have been made?

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, absolutely.

I think it's important to note that one of the main challenges we had in the passport program, with the surge we saw following the lifting of travel restrictions in the spring, was that we just didn't have the human resources capacity. Therefore, since in the first year of the pandemic we received only about 363,000 applications and in the second year 1.2 million, and we're already on track to deliver 2.6 million passports this year and we anticipate probably another million before the end of the fiscal year, we did have to increase our human resources capacity. We have doubled that workforce, which has put us in a much better position to respond to the level of demand for passports.

At the same time, there was also a recognition that this is a very paper-based application process. It's very much an analog system in a digital world. It clearly doesn't always meet the expectations of Canadians in terms of receiving this service, so we made a number of changes originally. You may not have known this, but until this summer, if you went to a Service Canada centre, you could drop off an application, but you weren't actually able to check the status of your passport or request a transfer. Providing access to Service Canada centre personnel right across the country was one of the things provided in the current IT system.

We also upgraded the telephone system. It had a limited capacity, because we previously didn't have the same kind of demand.

We will also be launching—hopefully soon—an online status check and also moving towards a newer 21st century IT system to make the passport system much more efficient and effective, particularly for simple renewals.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you for sharing that information, Minister.

The 10-year passports will be expiring soon. I know you've made some public comments in terms of what the department is doing to better prepare for the influx of passports with that date we're soon going to see coming upon us.

Could you let us know how we're preparing for that surge and how we're maybe better prepared, this time around, to assist with those application renewals for those who have a 10-year passport in their hands right now?

• (0905)

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, certainly.

It's important to note that the first 10-year passports were issued in July of 2013, so the first 10-year passport renewals will happen in July of this year. We understand that this is going to mean a big influx. The fact that Service Canada has doubled the existing workforce is going to help with that.

We also expanded passport services to 13 additional Service Canada centres across the country, and we have plans to increase that by another 25 offices within the next fiscal year, which will expand access.

There's something very important about that, because we see in busy urban centres that it's not just the folks who live in those centres who go there to get their passports renewed. It's also people who are coming from more remote areas, so the more we can spread out the passport program around the country, the less busy those urban centres are going to be and the more access people in rural or remote communities will have to passport services.

We've also maintained the simple renewal process for anyone who has had a valid passport that has expired within the last 15 years.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you, Minister.

I have about a minute left, I think.

I'll just ask, for those people who are planning to travel abroad in 2023 and who may need to renew or apply for a new passport,

what's in store for them as travellers? I know no one has a crystal ball, but can you give some assurances that we're not going to experience what we did in 2022?

Hon. Karina Gould: Certainly. We are much better prepared than we were in 2022. Obviously when you shut something down and turn it back on, there are going to be some challenges in that regard, but we are in a much better place.

I can say that in January we received 374,000 applications, and we processed 357,000 of them. The reason for the discrepancy is that we received some at the end of January and we are processing them in February. We are meeting our service standards 98% or 99% of the time, both in person and by mail.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Collins.

Thank you, Madam Minister.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Thank you for being here, Madam Minister, and thank you for providing your speaking notes to the committee ahead of the meeting. When I read your notes, I found them predictable. It is much easier to talk about what is going well, especially now that you are meeting service standards once again, than it is to talk about the passport crisis, which was also predictable.

As early as last spring, the committee asked you about this. By last fall, your own employees, who did exemplary work, sounded the alarm, saying they expected an increase in passport applications. We cannot ignore this crisis; it was a real fiasco. During this hour of your testimony, I was expecting some accountability for what happened.

In your remarks, you said that this crisis had caused Canadian citizens stress and uncertainty. I can tell you that it caused more than that. It resulted in a loss of confidence in Service Canada's ability to provide high-quality and accessible services for all Canadians.

Do you acknowledge that the crisis was predictable?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

I agree with what you said about the exemplary work of Service Canada employees. As I said, they worked extremely hard in very difficult circumstances.

I also agree that the situation was predictable. Nonetheless, we could not have anticipated the huge number of applications we received. That is why we hired more people at Service Canada in January, precisely because we knew that there would be an increase in passport applications.

As you also know, it takes time to train employees, managers, and passport staff. We knew there would be an increase in applications as soon as the restrictions were lifted. What we did not know, and what no one knew in advance, was exactly when the travel restrictions would be lifted. That placed a lot of pressure on the system and, as you said, put a lot of stress on Canadians who wanted to travel after staying home for two years.

● (0910)

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, Yves Giroux, told a Senate committee last Tuesday that what happened with passports was a real disaster and that departments often have trouble evaluating themselves after that kind of thing. It is easier to say that the crisis is over, that things were sorted out, that things are going more smoothly now and that the demand is being met.

You have to do a self-evaluation of the crisis, though, because it was not a normal situation. I have heard you time and again, because you were also questioned by the media. They asked what mark you would give yourself for how you managed the crisis.

Your management did not make any sense. Where were you when people were lining up and waiting? Where were you during question period, after you tried your numbers system, which was also a fiasco?

Our constituency offices were swamped. We had to hire extra staff and work 24/7 to respond to the requests we received.

This was unprecedented because of poor management. Do you acknowledge that?

Hon. Karina Gould: Ms. Chabot, with respect, I never said the situation was acceptable. From the outset, I acknowledged that it was completely unacceptable, and I worked extremely hard, as did all Service Canada managers. They were also on the front lines 24/7. They were there.

The demand was incredibly high—

Ms. Louise Chabot: It was predictable that the demand would be incredibly high, Madam Minister.

Hon. Karina Gould: As I said... Please let me finish—

Ms. Louise Chabot: You stated a number of times that there were applications for children. We have heard all of that.

Hon. Karina Gould: It is important to explain the situation. As we know, the demand was high after two years of low demand. So the system had to get up and running again.

Ms. Louise Chabot: That is normal.

Hon. Karina Gould: Of course, no one at Service Canada wanted to see that. I can tell you that it was also an extremely difficult situation for Service Canada staff. Those people really want to help Canadians. They worked very hard and did thousands of hours of overtime.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, it is not the public servants who are at issue here.

Hon. Karina Gould: I am not saying that everything went smoothly. We had to make many changes, but we did some extremely difficult work and we are now in a new situation.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Have you done an assessment of the passport fiasco at Service Canada?

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, of course, we did a complete assessment. The passport program conducted that assessment, analyzed what happened and drew lessons from that.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, four million—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot and Madam Minister.

[English]

Go ahead, Madam Zarrillo, for six minutes, please.

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

I am hearing a little bit of echo. Are you able to hear me?

The Chair: You're fine, Madam Zarrillo.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

Thank you so much for being here, Minister. I realize that we are soon going to be heading into spring break, so I just wanted to get some confirmation from you that you feel confident that the spring break rush will be accommodated.

● (0915)

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, I absolutely do. As I mentioned, in January we received 373,000 applications, which is almost 100,000 higher than at any point in the past three years, and we are meeting our service standards over 98% of the time.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

Minister, while you're here, I wanted to have the opportunity to talk to you about poverty and community supports.

A part of your mandate letter was the advancement of the community services recovery fund, and I want to talk about that, Minister, because that's what's of importance in my riding right now.

I had a meeting this week with a number of women's organizations that have put in a pre-budget submission to talk about loss of funding for the capacity-building grants that they've had in the past. LEAF, the YWCA, Oxfam, the Elizabeth Fry Society and the Canadian Council of Muslim Women are all concerned about how it is going to impact families and children in the community when they lose this capacity funding.

We all know that COVID-19 has had a huge impact, a disproportionate impact, on women and gender-diverse people at this point in time. This organization, a coalition of women's groups, has asked for \$25 million over five years in relation to capacity-building funds, and I'm wondering if you could expand a little bit on what's happening with community services recovery funds and if they could benefit from that, because we cannot afford to lose this capacity that has been built in the communities at this point in time.

Hon. Karina Gould: Sure, I'd be happy to. Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

There are two things here. One would be applications through the Department of Women and Gender Equality, which I think has specific, dedicated funding for women's organizations. Then there's the community services recovery fund, which is a \$400-million fund that is being administered through three national funders: the Red Cross, the Community Foundations of Canada and the United Way.

They have an application portal that's open now to charities and not-for-profits to apply for funds that would be specifically for capacity building for HR, for wellness among staff. We know that the pandemic has had a huge impact on everyone, but it's also hit the charitable and not-for-profit sector, which provide services to Canadians, particularly hard. This fund was really launched in response to consultations that my predecessor, Minister Hussen, did with that sector, asking them what they need. This is directly in response to what they have asked for, and I believe that the application portal is open until February 21.

If you have charitable or not-for-profit organizations, certainly encourage them to apply. There are grants between \$50,000 and \$200,000, and there's both a local stream and a stream for national or regional bodies as well, recognizing that this is often funding that is not tied to programming and is not usually available to these organizations.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Minister.

I know there's a lot of anxiety in the community. A lot of organizations have really built capacity. They had to build capacity because the need is so high in the community.

I want to just put in your ear that we are looking for supports for women's groups that often have children involved. It's getting very difficult right now with the price of food.

That is the other thing I want to talk to you about right now. It's the school food program and the impact on children right now of inflation and the cost of food. In that regard, I know there are conversations in the agriculture committee and with the Minister of Agriculture around food security, but there are more conversations rising right now. I know you've met with a number of groups around food security and food banks.

I want to understand how that could intersect with your ministry and how those conversations are going. What I'm hearing from the ground is that they want this intersection between agriculture and your ministry, Minister.

Hon. Karina Gould: Certainly part of my mandate is poverty reduction. With regard to school food as well, it's making sure that we do have a national school food policy in place. As you noted, I've met with a number of groups right across this country that are interested in both of those things.

In fact, I'm not sure if it's happened yet, but I have a poverty reduction council and Minister Bibeau has a food policy council. We've actually put the chairs in touch to have a joint meeting to talk about the intersection between poverty and food security. If they

haven't already, they will be meeting to discuss this to provide some advice and guidance to both of us as ministers.

Of course, Minister Bibeau and I are jointly tasked with developing the national school food policy, which is something we've been consulting and engaging on.

I think what's really important is recognizing the links between food insecurity and poverty, recognizing where they are different, and making sure that we are developing policies and programs that address people who are living in poverty and people who are food insecure. I think this joint meeting in this new relationship between these two councils is going to really help us have a better understanding and a better approach when it comes to addressing food insecurity and poverty in Canada.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, minister.

In regard to that—

• (0920)

The Chair: Madam Zarrillo, you're way over time.

I would just caution members of the committee that the study reference is service standards for passport renewal. We should endeavour to stay close to the topic area.

Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Duncan for five minutes, please.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here this morning.

I am going to take my five minutes to summarize a lot of frustration that millions of Canadians have had when it comes to the performance of Passport Canada and yourself over the past several months.

I had to chuckle, though. I'm not a regular member of the committee, but I did notice in the introduction for our notes here that you were asked to appear at the committee to answer for this before December 14, 2022. I said to my staff in preparation this week that you couldn't even meet the customer service standard of the committee about the customer service failures you had the last several months with Canadians. That is kind of the height of irony, if you will.

I think your appearance here this week is timely. You might say that I'm a bit frustrated or angry at what's happened here with the customer service to Canadians.

This week the Parliamentary Budget Officer gave quite a scathing review, in contrast to the rosy picture you were trying to paint here this morning of how things are well. He appeared at a Senate committee and had quite a few things to say about your leadership and the department that you're responsible for. He said, "I think if you ask anybody who asked recently for a passport, employment insurance, old age security, and the list goes on, they are probably very well aware that the level of service Canadians are getting is not what one could expect from a world-class public service."

He said, "Another one is passports, which seem to be better but still not great." He said that "something is not right". He frankly called out some of the stats. I think "virtually eliminated" would be a reference to this.

He said, "I'd be curious to see in the next departmental results report what Passport Canada will claim are their achievements the next time we see a departmental results report. I wouldn't be surprised if they claim some sort of success, despite the disaster we've seen in the last couple of months. I think there is clear room for enhanced leadership to improve service delivery for Canadians."

That wasn't months ago when we were in the chaos. This was actually this week, and it was about where we currently stand.

Minister, is the independent PBO wrong or are you?

Hon. Karina Gould: Hi, Mr. Duncan. It's nice to see you. Thanks for joining the committee today.

To be clear, regarding your opening comment, I was scheduled to appear on December 14, but the House rose and the committee cancelled the appearance. I was very much looking forward to appearing at that time, but it was decided—because the House rose—that we would push it into the new year. That's not something that was my decision. That was a decision of the committee.

With regard to the passport program, I have been clear from the beginning: What happened in the spring was unacceptable, and Canada should never be in that position. Canadians should never be put in that position.

I want to clarify, though. For the in-person service, obviously, there were long lineups. The experience of Canadians getting a passport was not appropriate and should not have happened. We have now changed how that experience takes place at Service Canada centres and passport offices.

For the in-person 10-day service, service standards were met the entire time. If someone went to a passport office, they got their passport within the 10-day standard 93% or 94% of the time. The challenge was in the mail system. That's where we saw huge delays and that's where we saw the backlog.

I also want to comment—

● (0925)

Mr. Eric Duncan: The point is that there were millions of Canadians who attempted to go and stand in line, but after eight, 10 or 12 hours, they walked away and couldn't submit their application. The 10-day time frame was met for those who were lucky—those who waited with lawn chairs and everything like that for days on

end or overnight, or who showed up at two o'clock in the morning. We're not counting the millions of people who just walked away in frustration and couldn't get it in a timely manner.

In the interest of time, if things are so rosy, in terms of the workforce and increased number of staff... In the Library of Parliament report, I noticed the stats on workforce capacity. In November, you stopped publishing those online and giving regular updates. If things are good, getting better and now fine, why did you stop publishing them?

Hon. Karina Gould: We continue to update the passport information online. We can send you the link and you can check it, because we think it is something that's very important.

I want to say that there were a lot of lessons learned, obviously, from this situation. After we saw those reports—particularly out of Montreal, which was the apex of the crisis in the week leading up to the Saint-Jean-Baptiste holiday in Quebec—we very quickly instituted new measures to make sure everyone who arrived at a passport office was seen by a manager, assessed, given an appointment and assured they would get a passport.

Was it pretty? No, it was very messy, absolutely.

Mr. Eric Duncan: I would argue, in my remaining time.... We're running the clock out here.

Hon. Karina Gould: The fact is that we changed it. The situation is very different now.

Mr. Eric Duncan: If I could have some equal time to respond, I'll say the system was very broken. There were many people turned away who couldn't get that appointment because they had left in frustration.

Again, that's a deceptive description about how we do that, and it speaks volumes. This never should have happened in the first place, Minister. You should have known this was coming and—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Duncan. Your time has gone by.

I want to clarify that the minister is correct: This committee sets its own agenda, and not the minister. The committee chose its schedule and calendar.

Mr. Coteau, go ahead for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you so much, Minister, for being here today and joining us.

There's no question there was a lot of frustration and things were.... The system was not responding to the needs and what constituents and Canadians across the country were expecting.

I want to give you the opportunity, because there have been a lot of questions that haven't painted the full picture of what went wrong. Can you take a few minutes to explain what went wrong in the system so that Canadians can understand with a bit more detail?

Hon. Karina Gould: First of all, the big challenge was the very quick change from travel restrictions to lifting travel restrictions. Understandably, that meant thousands of Canadians wanted to travel. They had done the right things for two years. They had stayed home. They had made sure they were protecting themselves and protecting their loved ones.

When the travel restrictions were lifted, there was a clear desire to get out and see the world after that difficult time. That meant that we went from getting about 120,000 applications a month in the year prior to getting over 250,000 as of March 2022. That number was sustained over that period of time. Hindsight is obviously 20/20. Had we known three or six months in advance when travel restrictions would be lifted, absolutely, yes, we would have been able to hire those additional 1,200 people.

We knew there was going to be an increase in travel. If we take ourselves back to February 2022, the vast majority of the country was in lockdown. There was the omicron outbreak. The country wasn't thinking about travelling. When those restrictions were lifted, people wanted to get out, so we did start hiring folks in January. At that time, it would take about three months to train a passport officer, so we only started to see the benefit of those trained passport officers later in the spring. It was insufficient for the volume we received. Passport applications are very integrity-intensive in the sense that we have to make sure they are connected to the right people.

There were two other things that happened that were factors that led to the situation we saw in Canada in the spring.

First, we had about 80% of applications come in by mail, as opposed to in-person passport applications. That's the reverse of the prepandemic norm, when it was about 80% in person and 20% by mail. We're close to that ratio now. Processing by mail is a lot less efficient, because about 25% of applications are incomplete, and having to call someone to verify information, etc., takes additional time.

There are two other points to that. One, we saw a huge increase in applications for children's passports. About 50% were applications for children, and those are more integrity-intensive.

The other thing was that about 80%-85% of the applications were for new passports, for first-time passport holders, as opposed to renewals. Renewals are much simpler. We have information in the system. It's a quicker process to go through. When you have to deal with new passports, it takes a lot more time to establish the identity. Of course, we just didn't have the staff to respond, particularly to the mail-in system.

• (0930)

Mr. Michael Coteau: It sounds like there were so many challenges all coming in at once and creating this big challenge within the system. I know there were some measures put in place by your officials in your department. What were some of those big mea-

sures that were put in place? Will we see some of those innovative measures remain in place as we go forward?

Hon. Karina Gould: Of course.

First of all, the system as it was moving for two years was at a low volume. When we saw this big increase, it did overwhelm the capacity at the time. There were a number of things senior leadership at Service Canada did to rectify the situation, but by that time a backlog had already accumulated.

The first thing was to hire additional resources so that we could process the applications that were in the system. As I mentioned, the—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. There is no interpretation.

Can you suspend the meeting until this is resolved please?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

We will suspend for a couple of minutes while we check out the sound quality.

• (0930)

(Pause)

• (0935)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order. We are resuming the meeting.

The minister has indicated that she's prepared to add additional time to her scheduled meeting next week.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, if I understand correctly, the minister has just said she would be available for another 10 minutes when she is here next week so I can finish the block.

I am agreeable to that.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Go ahead, Ms. Gray.

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

For clarification, it would be more like 15 minutes because of the finishing of the current line of questioning and then two more rounds of questioning, so—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, I cannot hear the interpretation of what Ms. Gray is saying.

[*English*]

Mrs. Tracy Gray: There's no interpretation again.

My question is this: Is the minister going to choose to be here in person next week, or will she also be virtual next week? That's for clarification.

The Chair: Madam Minister, can you clarify?

Hon. Karina Gould: I will be there in person on Tuesday, if that makes it easier.

The Chair: Okay.

Madame Chabot, is that okay with you? Are you getting the interpretation now?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Yes, I would like to tell the interpreters that they do not have to apologize. I appreciate their work, which is not easy.

Yes, that suits me perfectly.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Gray.

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

It's not a matter, to use the minister's comment, of making things easier; it's so that things function, because we know that when people work from home, there could potentially be Internet problems. If the minister's committing to being here in person, it will eliminate that potential issue.

The Chair: There seems to be consensus. So that we're clear, we will add the additional time slot to the next time the minister comes to conclude this round, which was two and a half minutes for Madame Chabot and two and a half minutes for Madame Zarrillo.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, we would also have another round on the Conservative side and the Liberal side, which is normally when we would have ended. That is what we've done with other ministers.

The Chair: There were only five minutes left of questioning time, which tends to be seven minutes. We were down to about two or three minutes left of our regularly scheduled hour. We started a minute late.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, to clarify, if we look at when this all started, we had that full 15 minutes when this issue started. If we look at the questioning with the other ministers we've had here, that's the exact timeline that we've had.

If you look at what the time actually was—and I was here—we had enough time, as you mentioned, for the Bloc and the NDP to finish their lines of questioning and then to go to another round for the Conservatives and the Liberals. We had enough time for that when this translation issue started.

Actually, to clarify, it was when the issue with the minister's Internet connection started.

The Chair: Okay.

Madame Chabot, do you have your hand up?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Yes, I agree with my colleague.

We can calculate that there were 10 minutes left. Of course, Mr. Chair, I understand that, but even the minister acknowledged it. Were it not for the interpretation problems, we would have had time to finish.

The minister is available. She will be here in person and is willing to make up the remaining 10 minutes. We have to respect that and we have to respect that another minister will be appearing the same day, so we will have to give him the time needed.

• (0940)

[*English*]

The Chair: I see Mr. Long and then Madame Gray.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Chair, thanks and good morning.

We would certainly agree with one more round. I think there have been a few hiccups through the whole hour, so an extra question for us and the Conservatives isn't going to hurt, in my opinion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Gray.

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

To clarify, for the next meeting, this will be added on to the meeting so that we don't lose time with the other work of the committee and the other minister who's going to be here next week. This would be in addition to the full time of the allotted time of the committee.

The Chair: On that, Ms. Gray, I'm at the control of the majority of the committee. I can only extend with the wish of the committee.

Madame Gould, we thank you for the time. There seems to be a consensus that we'll have you for 15 minutes when you next appear on the service standards for passport renewal. This time, I will restrict questions to the matter before the committee.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, just to clarify, then, the will of the committee, I would like to make a motion that we solidify for next week that the extra time that would be added on for the current minister would be in addition to the normal committee work we would do next week.

That's just so we're clear that we all agree to that today.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Maybe our clerk can help.

What is the schedule for next Tuesday? I should have it in front of me. I apologize.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Danielle Widmer): On Tuesday, February 14, it's the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B). It's the minister for families for the first hour and then the minister for housing in the second hour.

The Chair: Madam Chabot, do you have your hand up?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Yes.

I am just saying that I remember the agenda, and I also wanted to justify my motion that we will have to add the time needed to our meeting next week to welcome the Minister of Housing, Diversity and Inclusion for one hour.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Long, is that understood?

Mr. Wayne Long: Yes, I understand that, and I don't disagree at all. I guess the question would be whether House resources allow for a meeting of two hours and 15 minutes.

The Chair: Clerk, go ahead.

The Clerk: We will be making that request, so it will be dependent on that.

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay.

The Chair: Do you want me to call a vote? I am sensing a consensus on the motion of Ms. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, there is just one more thing, then.

If for some reason House resources will not allow for the extra 15 minutes, then I would like to ensure we have the minister back at a subsequent meeting in order to allow for that extra 15 minutes.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gray. That's at the control of the committee.

Do we have a consensus on confirming that the committee will request the resources to extend the first hour by 15 minutes to have Minister Gould finish her testimony on service standard renewal, which would involve one two-and-a-half-minute round to the Bloc, one two-and-a-half-minute round to the NDP, five minutes to the Conservatives and five minutes to the Liberals? I see agreement.

(Motion agreed to [See Minutes of Proceedings])

The Chair: With that, we will suspend the first hour of this meeting while we set up for the second one.

Thank you, Minister Gould. We are looking forward to seeing you again, as you always show up. Thank you.

Thank you, members.

We will suspend for a few minutes while we prepare for the second hour.

• (0940)

(Pause)

• (0945)

The Chair: The clerk has informed me that we are ready to commence.

Welcome back. For the second part of the hour, the committee will resume its study of the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23, vote 1b under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and votes 1b and 5b under Department of Employment and Social Development.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses who are appearing in the room as well as virtually.

You may choose to speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available. If you lose interpretation services, please get my attention by raising your hand. If you're appearing virtually, use the "raise hand" icon and we'll suspend while the problem is being corrected.

All comments must be addressed through me as chair, and wait until I recognize you before speaking.

As I indicated, this meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, virtually and in the room.

I would like to welcome Ms. Roberts and Ms. Larouche, two members who are joining the committee temporarily. Welcome to the committee.

As well, we have Minister Kamal Khera. Minister, welcome.

With you are departmental officials Jean-François Tremblay, deputy minister; Karen Robertson, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister; Elisha Ram, senior assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; Karen Hall, associate assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; Nisa Tummon, assistant deputy minister, program operations branch; and Cliff C. Groen, business lead for benefits delivery modernization.

We will begin with Minister Khera for five minutes. Minister, you have the floor.

• (0950)

Hon. Kamal Khera (Minister of Seniors): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Committee members, it's good to see you all.

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge that I am joining this meeting from the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

[Translation]

I am pleased to be here with you today.

[English]

Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm joined here, of course, by the outstanding officials you just mentioned, Mr. Chair.

As you all know, committee members, supporting seniors has been and will always be a top priority for our government. We are working hard to respond to the diverse needs of Canada's fastest-growing age group.

Over the last year and a half, I have been very fortunate to be able to travel across the country and meet with seniors and stakeholders from coast to coast to coast. As a result of this extensive engagement, we have outlined the following priorities in improving the quality of life for older Canadians: financial security, particularly during a time when global inflation makes affordability a challenge; aging at home comfortably; and remaining active and engaged members within their communities.

Measures taken in past budgets, and most recently in the fall economic statement, paired with the programs and services we're currently delivering, are working to address these key priorities. We are putting more money in the pockets of seniors, supporting efforts to age at home, and empowering seniors in their communities. Now it is a matter of further strengthening these programs and services.

In terms of the progress, I want to speak to you specifically about the recent work being done on old age security; the funding for the benefits delivery modernization; and of course the funding for the New Horizons for Seniors program.

As you all know, the old age security program is the first pillar of Canada's retirement system. Last year alone, it paid over \$60 billion in benefits to seven million beneficiaries, making it, unquestionably, an essential program. That's why, as of July 2022, we made a historic increase of 10% to the old age security pension for seniors aged 75 and over. This is the first targeted increase to the OAS pension since 1973. It will provide full pensioners with an additional support of approximately \$800 over the first year. This increase has strengthened the financial security of 3.3 million seniors, 56% of whom are women.

In addition to the increase, Canadians can rest assured that support benefits such as the OAS pension, the guaranteed income supplement and the Canada pension plan are all indexed to inflation to help keep up with the cost of living and will actually never decrease. However, to effectively serve and support older Canadians, we need to increase the pension call centre's capacity. As such, ESDC has requested \$46.4 million in these supplementary estimates to support those efforts. This will lead to lower wait times and to better support for inquiries so that seniors can easily access the benefits they need, when they need them.

In budget 2021 we committed to accelerating the replacement of the OAS platform to guarantee that our systems remain strong and resilient to ensure safe, timely and effective delivery of the OAS benefit.

The BDM, as I'm sure you've heard, is transforming how the government delivers benefits, ensuring that Canadians are at the core of our services. An additional \$13.5 million in operating expenditures will enable the creation of a new contact centre model equipped with a well-trained, integrated workforce to better deliver service excellence to Canadians.

Finally, I would like to discuss the New Horizons for Seniors program and the tremendous impact this program has had in empowering seniors in their communities. I know that many of you are very familiar with this program and know the impact of this program in your own communities. I consider myself very fortunate to have seen first-hand how much these programs positively impact the lives of seniors. The NHSP is a great way to create opportunities for older adults to share their knowledge and skills with others and to stay socially active. That is a key to staying healthy and having a high quality of life. That is why we've looked to further enhance the capacity of the program to support more projects that fight social isolation, combat senior fraud, teach digital literacy and support healthy aging in an inclusive and accessible environment.

ESDC, as you know, Mr. Chair, has requested \$10 million to enhance the New Horizons for Seniors program so that we can support even more projects that improve the well-being of seniors. As stated earlier, seniors are and will always be a key priority for our government, and our record reflects that.

Thanks again for this opportunity to speak to the many measures we're taking to deliver on our commitment to improve the lives of seniors.

● (0955)

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Before we begin, I'm going to remind committee members to stay as close as possible in their questioning to the subject matter the committee is studying.

We will begin with Madam Roberts. You have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for giving us some time to ask you some very crucial questions.

You say that you have lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty, so help me understand. What indicators of poverty are you using when you reference the statistic of 45,000 seniors being lifted out of poverty? What is the formula or metric you're using to determine these numbers?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Thank you, Mrs. Roberts, for that question. It is a very important question.

Let me start off by saying that I think ensuring that we improve the quality of life for seniors—particularly improving their financial security—has been a key priority for our government since we took office back in 2015. However, we also recognize the challenges that seniors are facing, particularly—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I am sorry, Minister. I have only a few minutes, and I apologize for interrupting you.

My question relates to what formula or metrics you used to determine the 45,000 seniors you have lifted out of poverty.

Hon. Kamal Khara: I could turn to my officials to give you the breakdown of that.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I'd really appreciate it. I'll move on until we can get that information.

Seniors with notably high poverty rates include single seniors and seniors from vulnerable groups. Examples are women living alone, recent immigrants, persons with a disability and indigenous seniors. Of the 45,000 seniors who have been lifted out of poverty, how many belong to these groups? Can you give us a percentage of that 45,000 you mentioned whom you lifted out of poverty?

Hon. Kamal Khara: I can certainly get my department officials to allude to the breakdown of that number, but let me talk about why financial security for seniors is extremely critical and about the work to be able to support seniors from the very beginning.

First and foremost—as, Mrs. Roberts, you would know—we restored the age of eligibility for seniors to retire back from 67 to 65. We increased the guaranteed income supplement. As you know, that actually helped—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: That's great news. We have heard it before.

I am sorry to keep interrupting, but I have so many questions that I really need to get to. If you could get those numbers for me, it would give me a better indication of what this true example is of 45,000 seniors lifted from poverty.

I am going to move on to my next question.

You say you have lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty. Where did this statistic come from? If you do not have the breakdown for me, can you tell me how you determined the 45,000?

• (1000)

Hon. Kamal Khara: With all due respect, Mrs. Roberts, if you allow me to answer the question.... I know my officials are there to have that breakdown for you to answer that specific question you are asking.

Allow me to briefly go back to the fact that the guaranteed income supplement that we have enhanced has helped over 900,000 of the most vulnerable seniors. Most of them are single women—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Can we get the officials to provide me with that information? I need to get that information because I cannot wrap my head around that, so—

Hon. Kamal Khara: I can absolutely turn to my officials. I know they are in the room.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: If you could, please allow them to do that. I would appreciate those numbers.

I am going to move on, as I am short of time.

According to Statistics Canada, the poverty rate went from 14.5% in 2015 to 8.1% in 2020. It's a dramatic decrease. Specifically, the rate of poverty among seniors dropped dramatically as well. However, Statistics Canada stated that these decreases were driven mostly by income from temporary pandemic relief benefits.

Due to these temporary payments, according to Statistics Canada, this measurement of poverty is skewed, so can you explain to me how the rate of decrease in poverty was impacted by the CERB payments?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Again, I want to try to go over all of the ways we have helped seniors and lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty.

As I first mentioned, one of the very first things that we did was restore the age of eligibility that your government wanted to raise to 67. We restored that back to 65. We enhanced the guaranteed income supplement, which has helped 900,000 of the most vulnerable—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: We hear those—

Hon. Kamal Khara: With all due respect, I would love to answer the question if you would allow me—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I know, but I am short on time, and I am sure the chair wants me to move on.

Can you get your officials to give me those responses on the 45,000 seniors from the previous questions we asked?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Absolutely. I know they're in the room.

Go ahead, Jean.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay (Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): The numbers come from statistics from Statistics Canada. If you look at StatsCan, you see that the poverty level for seniors in 2015 it was 7.1%. In 2019, it was 5.7%, and, as you said, it went down in 2020 to 3.1%, partially due to the COVID measures, for sure. We have to remember that we went from 7.1% to 3.1%.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: The number I have is 8.1%, but my question is, what are the metrics? How did this decrease happen? Did it happen because of CERB? Did it happen for any other reason? I don't know the answer to that.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: Between 2015 and today, there have been a lot of measures put in place. The top-up on the GIS is one of them. There has been an increase in OAS pensions too, and other initiatives that contribute to making sure that seniors are not in poverty.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Can you table to this committee the report for us so we can...?

I would appreciate that. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Roberts.

We have Mr. Van Bynen for six minutes, please.

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

First of all, thank you very much, Minister, for joining us today.

You have some real challenges ahead of you in your portfolio, and I commend your efforts in reaching out and speaking directly to the seniors who are impacted. In particular, we had a very successful meeting with a large number of seniors at the Aurora Seniors Centre just recently, so I'm sure you're finding that very informative in your challenges in terms of what we've commonly heard as "the grey tsunami". That's going to add to the number of clients you'll be serving, but it will also aggravate the labour shortage of people who are serving an aging population. In fact, I'm sure you will have received a copy of our recent labour shortage study in the care economy.

Thank you for being here and sharing your information with us.

The pandemic shone a light on the tragic and awful conditions in long-term care facilities. Can you please outline how our government has stepped up to provide national leadership to improve the quality of care in long-term care facilities?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Thank you so much, Tony.

Thanks for your leadership. I have a tremendous amount of respect for the work that you do. We were in your community not too long ago, in January, and it was a robust discussion with stakeholders and community members talking about the things that I know we need to do to support seniors.

In terms of long-term care, we all know that this pandemic has highlighted long-existing, uncomfortable truths and gaps in long-term care homes across Canada and how seniors were cared for within them. I know how extremely difficult that was for all Canadians. It was especially devastating for those living in long-term care homes, their families and those hard-working health care staff who cared for them.

Tony, you, of course, know this. I saw some of the challenges first-hand when I put my scrubs back on and returned to the front lines. In one of the hardest-hit long-term care homes in Ontario in my community of Brampton, I knew that we had to do more. I'm very happy to say that we did. We have been showing leadership on that front.

Just two weeks ago, we welcomed the release of long-term care standards by CSA and HSO. For committee members who may not know, they are the Health Standards Organization and the Canadian Standards Association. We provided funding to these organizations to support enhanced engagement on consultations.

Canadians can feel extremely confident that their voices are reflected in the new standards that have been announced. These new national standards provide guidance to long-term care homes to deliver safe, quality care while also making sure that we're providing support to health care workers.

More importantly, we are centred on the needs of residents. We're setting the bar high so that all seniors, regardless of where they live and where they are in the country, get the best care possible.

As you also may know, Tony, in budget 2021 we put aside \$3 billion over the next five years to support provinces and territories in their efforts to improve and implement standards in long-term care. This is in addition to the \$1 billion in the safe long-term care fund

that we announced. I'm happy to say that every single province and territory has signed on to that agreement.

I want to be clear: This is not it. The release of the standards is not the end of the federal response. There's a lot more work. As has been announced just this last week on our funding, there's an awful lot of work to do, and we're committed to doing more work with provinces and territories to make sure that seniors, regardless of where they live in the country, get the best quality care, rooted in dignity, safety and respect.

• (1005)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: I mentioned earlier that we just completed a study on the shortage of health care workers in the caring economy. Health care workers are the heart and soul of our health care system. They continue to go above and beyond to support Canadians every day.

Can you please inform the committee on the work you're doing to address the health care worker crisis that exists in Canada?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Absolutely. You've raised an extremely important question.

As you know, our government is working extremely closely with partners, including labour and health care unions, to seek solutions to improve retention and recruitment. That's particularly for personal support workers, home care workers and essential workers involved in providing care for some of the most vulnerable Canadians.

Tony, you know this; you're applauding.

Earlier this week, we announced we're going to be providing \$198.6 billion in additional federal funding over the next 10 years for improvements in health care. This includes planned increases to the Canada health transfer and new funding of \$48 billion over the next 10 years. This is a major new investment that we're making to ensure that we're providing that support to provinces and territories.

We also know, and you know this as well, that money is not the answer. We need to make sure there are real, tangible results for Canadians. We will sign agreements with the provinces and territories to make sure that Canadians have access to family doctors and nurse practitioners and that there is support for people who power our health care system, as well as to reduce backlogs. We need to help people have good mental health and substance support, and ensure that health information is available where they are. I want to take a moment to recognize all of our tremendous health care workers—nurses, doctors and personal support workers.

We are also infusing \$1.7 billion over the next five years to the provinces and territories to implement a goal of reaching a minimum of a \$25 an hour for personal support workers. They have been working extremely hard over the pandemic and are really the forefront of supporting seniors in long-term care homes and in home care.

There's a lot of work ahead of us, but I'm really looking forward to making sure we provide support to those who have been providing support to us from the very beginning.

• (1010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen and Madam Minister.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here this morning, Madam Minister.

I do not know what to say when I hear that seniors are a priority for your government. You said you travelled across Canada. Did you come to Quebec?

[*English*]

Hon. Kamal Khera: Yes, Madame Larouche, I've been to Quebec twice already in my two tours. I've been meeting with folks around the region, not just in the urban centres in Montreal but also in rural Quebec. I spent a lot of time there in the summer meeting with seniors organizations.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Okay.

I am surprised. Groups in Quebec, including the FADOQ, the Quebec federation of senior citizens, and the AQDR, the Quebec association defending the rights of pre-retirees and retirees, have unanimously said that seniors have clearly not been a priority for your government since it took office.

As recently as last fall, a study by the AQDR and the Observatoire qu b cois des in galit s, or Quebec observatory on inequalities, reported that half of seniors did not have sufficient income to live with dignity. We could again debate the issue of the 45,000 seniors who have been lifted out of poverty, because numbers can be manipulated to say what you want, but we are talking about income to live with dignity.

Furthermore, it is not just seniors aged 75 and over who do not have sufficient income. The numbers do not reflect the record inflation rate that is affecting the cost of groceries and housing. Nor do I want to hear that you have helped seniors by helping food banks. I think it shows a lack of respect for seniors to expect them to line up at food banks. Unlike the government, inflation does not discriminate against seniors according to their age. The study confirms that half of seniors do not have sufficient income.

What will it take for your government to treat seniors with respect? They built our society and certainly deserve to be treated fairly and with dignity. Separating seniors into groups aged 65 to 74 and 75 and over is not fair to them, Madam Minister.

Hon. Kamal Khera: Thank you very much for your question.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, through you, let me first and foremost reiterate to this committee and to seniors who are listening that my priority and our government's priority from the very beginning, since we took office back in 2015, has been to support seniors. We have done a number of things that I'm extremely proud of to support seniors from coast to coast to coast.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to go back and perhaps get into a little bit of detail on the measures we have taken forward.

As the honourable member knows, one of the very first things we as a government did was to restore the age of eligibility for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement back to 65. We then enhanced the guaranteed income supplement, which has helped over 900,000 people, some of the most vulnerable seniors, the majority of whom are single women, and that has lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty. We've also enhanced the Canada pension plan, which will actually help future retirees, because we need to make sure we're also taking care of those who will be retiring soon.

It's also important to recognize, Mr. Chair, that—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Madam Minister, I do not have much time. You have already talked about the measures.

You said you lifted seniors out of poverty. As to the GIS, the guaranteed income supplement, anyone with an income over \$20,831 cannot even claim it. Given the current rate of inflation, can you say that a person can live with dignity on \$20,831 in 2022?

You talked about priorities. During the pandemic, we had to come to Ottawa regularly to ask questions because you were helping everyone except seniors. You finally offered seniors a cheque for \$300, or \$500 for those receiving the GIS. Do you think that is making seniors a priority?

You let half of seniors down. Your 10% increase to old age security for seniors 75 and over means that half of seniors did not see any increase in their income.

I do not think poverty waits for people to turn 75. I do not think that everyone under the age of 75 is able to work. Do you really want to force seniors back into the labour market? For all kinds of reasons, some of them are not in a position to work.

I am asking you again: why did you create two classes of seniors? With the rates of inflation we are seeing, all the studies have shown that people on a fixed income are the most vulnerable, including seniors who receive OAS.

Why do you discriminate on the basis of age? I would like a 30-second answer.

• (1015)

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khara: With all due respect to my colleague, Mr. Chair, first and foremost I want to clarify something.

All the benefits the Government of Canada has put forward to support seniors, whether the old age security pension, the guaranteed income supplement or the Canada pension plan, are indexed with respect to the increase in the cost of living and increased global inflation. These numbers and seniors—

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Madam Minister, during the pandemic, there were seniors whose pension was indexed by an amount that would not even buy a coffee at Tim Hortons. It is the FADOQ that is saying this, not me. The indexing method no longer works in 2023 and it does not properly reflect rising costs.

Seniors are writing to my office. They are getting a few extra dollars on their cheques. They are insulted. We also have to talk again about how the GIS pension indexing is calculated.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[English]

Madam Minister, could you give us a short answer, please?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Again, Mr. Chair, through you, I would like to reiterate the fact that all the benefits that the Government of Canada has put forward, particularly old security and guaranteed income supplement, are indexed to inflation. They actually increase with the cost of living quarterly, every few months.

As you also know, Mr. Chair, when we returned last fall, one of the first things we as a government put forward was support targeted to Canadians who need it the most. That's why we doubled the GST credit, which puts on average an additional \$225 in the pockets of Canadian seniors. We've also delivered a \$500 one-time top-up to the Canada housing benefit for low-income renters. I've spoken to many seniors in my own community who have benefited from that.

We've also launched, Mr. Chair, an affordable—\$20 per month—high-speed Internet plan for low-income seniors who are on the guaranteed income supplement.

I'm sure I'll get to a point where I'll be able to answer a question in full and to talk about all the measures that we have put forward to make sure seniors, regardless of where they live in the country, have the supports they need for financial security. Strengthening their financial security has been a priority for us, and we're going to make sure we deliver for them.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Madame Zarrillo, go ahead for six minutes, please.

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

I thank the minister for coming to committee today.

The minister mentioned three pillars today. The top two were financial security and aging at home. I want to talk about the most vulnerable seniors, who are intersecting between not having enough financial security and not being able to age at home. More of them are finding themselves homeless.

Recently, I was out visiting the Lookout Society, which provides a shelter and emergency housing here in my community. More and more seniors need this service. On top of that, I was at a local seniors housing development yesterday. They want to expand their ability to offer housing to seniors. They have put forward some bids for projects in our community. They're finding themselves unable to keep up with the number of seniors in my area of Vancouver who need rent under \$1,200 a month, or even \$1,400. They'd like to be able to do it, but it just doesn't exist. Minister, my question is around this fact.

The other thing I want to add is that seniors who have gone into hospital and have been discharged have lost their homes because they couldn't afford to pay the rent. These are the things happening in my community in the Vancouver area.

My question is about poverty and seniors. What statistics are being used to measure the seniors living below the poverty line, and how are you going to fix it?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Thank you for the question, first and foremost.

Let me start by talking about affordable housing for seniors.

First, I agree with you completely, Ms. Zarrillo, in terms of the many Canadian seniors who face incredible challenges when it comes to housing. These challenges are of course exacerbated by escalating housing prices, the aging housing stock, inadequate supply and a growing senior population.

As you know, Ms. Zarrillo, helping seniors access affordable housing and stay in their homes and communities are top priorities for our government. We've done many things. You'll also be hearing from my colleague, the Minister of Housing, with whom I work extremely closely.

Canada's first-ever housing strategy, created by this government back in 2017, is helping seniors access affordable housing and stay in their own homes and communities. It will reduce the number of seniors in need of housing through \$13.2 billion from the national housing co-investment fund. This fund is expected to create at least 7,000 new affordable housing units for seniors. This is going to support much-needed renovations, including improved accessibility to allow seniors to age in place, and it—

• (1020)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Minister, if you don't mind, I don't have much time, and you're hitting on the topic I'd like to talk about: that co-investment fund.

I've been meeting with not-for-profits in my community that supply affordable housing for seniors, and they do not have the expertise or capacity to manage that. Can you give us an idea of other kinds of supports? Sometimes they need logistical support, expertise or architects who can help them with renovations. What kinds of supports are available? Yes, they can apply for the grants. They have the capacity in the community, such as the land or the building, but they don't necessarily have the expertise to make it happen.

How will the government support those not-for-profits that don't necessarily have the expertise to renovate or build housing?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Absolutely, I think that's a very important question.

As I mentioned, my colleague who holds this portfolio, the Minister of Housing, will also be appearing before the committee.

There are a number of things I want to highlight that we're addressing in terms of the two parts of your question. When you talk about aging at home and aging in their own communities as long as possible, which is something I've heard is extremely important for seniors, there are a few things we're doing on that front.

First, as you may know, Madame Zarrillo, we put billions of dollars into home care for the provinces and territories, which was reiterated in the announcement on health transfers just this week.

I also want to talk about an initiative that we put forward, which is the "age well at home" initiative. This provides practical supports to some of those lowest-income vulnerable seniors. It provides them with....

Ms. Zarrillo, you may know this, and this is something I've heard from talking to seniors. It's that sometimes it's something very practical that prevents seniors from leaving their own home in their community, whether it is shovelling their driveway or someone coming and giving them a good meal or giving them a ride to pick up their prescription medication or such things.

In budget 2021, we put aside \$19 million over three years for the "age well at home" initiative. We actually launched the call for proposals for this program last year. We will have more to say this year about those organizations that have received funding.

Another thing that we've done, Madame Zarrillo, is that just a few months ago, both the Minister of Health and I tasked our National Seniors Council to serve as an expert panel on what an aging-at-home benefit could look like. They're working tremendously hard on this fund, and I'll come back to this committee again to showcase some of the results of that study as well.

As you know, in the last budget we also put in other measures, doubling the home accessibility credit and introducing the multi-generational home renovation tax credit. These measures were in the budget to make sure that those living with disabilities and those seniors who want to stay in their own communities and their own homes for as long as possible get that support. We are always looking at different ways to support them.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

I wanted to talk a little bit about the \$500 rental subsidy. I'm wondering—

The Chair: Make it a short question, please.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Some of the seniors in my riding and in some of my colleagues' ridings have had clawbacks based on their \$500 rental subsidy. What steps have you taken to mitigate this clawback?

Hon. Kamal Khera: That's very specific in terms of.... A person who is on a full guaranteed income supplement would not have a clawback if they received another housing benefit.

If you have a very particular question about seniors, I'm happy to take it back with me and get back to you personally.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Yes. It's rental subsidies and transit and that sort of thing that they're having clawed back.

I will. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Zarrillo

Thank you, Madame Minister.

Now, Madame Roberts, you have five minutes, please.

• (1025)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to go through these quickly because my time is limited.

Minister, I have spoken to a senior, Sonia, from Winnipeg, and I was very emotionally touched by her story.

Her story is that the carbon tax increase is going to triple her fees. This she cannot afford. She is currently living from overdraft to overdraft. She has maxed out her Visa card. She has maxed out her line of credit. She can't even afford to go to the grocery store because she can't afford to put the gas in the car. She cancelled her doctor's appointments because she can't afford to drive there. I try to listen to these seniors and I can't help but get emotional.

Can you explain to me how a single senior is telling me that the benefits you're putting forward are not helping her with the cost of living? Your government is failing on this account. Do you have an explanation for that?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Let me just talk about...and hopefully, Ms. Roberts, you will let me finish.

We've done many things to support seniors.

As you know, Ms. Roberts, when your government was in power, your government actually wanted to increase the age of retirement to 67. That would have actually come into place right now, in 2023. It would have been the year that the age of eligibility—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Going back is not the solution.

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, I have a point of order. I think the minister should be allowed to finish the question that was asked of her.

The Chair: Madame Roberts, it's your time.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I need to get to some questions. I'm going to get to this one.

Bill VanGorder is the chief operating officer of CARP. I'm sure you know who he is, since CARP is Canada's largest association for older Canadians. He said that in the time that he's been working at CARP he has never, in his experience, heard and seen so many angry seniors. This is based on a focus group that he conducted with CARP. They are angry. They are feeling that this government is not taking care of them. These are the seniors who built our country.

Can you please explain to me, and to the seniors who are listening today, your understanding of how we are going to support them financially? You continue to talk about the increases, but this woman is not living on the programs you have.

How can you explain that to her? Would you please do that?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Absolutely, and I again will reiterate a number of things that we're doing and that we're going to continue to do.

First, as I mentioned, we've increased the guaranteed income supplement. That has helped 900,000 seniors. The majority of them are single vulnerable women, Ms. Roberts, as you mentioned. We've actually lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty because of that.

We've also increased and enhanced the Canada pension plan for future retirees. As you know, we have an aging population. By 2051, a quarter of the population is going to be 65 and older, so we want to make sure they're supported.

All the benefits we've put forward, whether it is the Canada pension plan, old age security or the guaranteed income supplement, are actually indexed with an increase to the cost of living, so they will only increase and never decrease.

They don't have to worry about their financial security.

We've also—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I'm sorry to interrupt, but can we get back to my topic? I just want to understand something. How many focus groups have you held in the last 18 months?

Hon. Kamal Khara: That's a great question.

I've actually travelled from coast to coast to coast and have spoken to hundreds of thousands of seniors in the year that I have been a member of Parliament, including in your own riding, Ms. Roberts. I was there spending time with them in the fall. I was in every region of the country, speaking in many members' ridings. I was in Mr. Coteau's riding and held a town hall in his community. I was in Tony's riding earlier in January.

If you don't mind—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you very much for doing that. I'm going back to my—

Hon. Kamal Khara: I do want to say, Ms. Roberts, that I was in your community, and some of the seniors actually came to me and thanked me for the work we were doing with our New Horizons for Seniors program in your own community. I want to give a whole

shout-out. In your own community, I think it's a Human Endeavour program that—

Mrs. Anna Roberts: How does that pay their bills to heat their homes in wintertime?

It's great, and I'm not complaining about the horizons program, but how does that help those single seniors who are living from overdraft to overdraft, maxed out on their credit cards and maxed out on everything they have, and can't even afford to heat their homes?

She's living under five blankets at night just to stay warm, but can't even afford to go to the doctor. How does that help them?

Hon. Kamal Khara: We've increased the old age security for those seniors 75 and older. We have helped with the increases to the guaranteed income supplement. We're continuing to be there. Part of my mandate is making sure that we're supporting them as we move forward.

With all due respect to my honourable colleague, thank God her government wasn't in government. She would still be working at this time if she was 67, because that's one of the things that would have—

• (1030)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: We never had a carbon tax.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Roberts. Your time is over.

Thank you, Madam Minister.

Mr. Long, you have five minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good morning to my colleagues.

Minister, thank you for being here with us this morning.

I have a few things I want to say before I actually ask you questions.

We as a government have no reason to be on the defensive here—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Mr. Chair, there is no interpretation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. We can continue now.

Hon. Kamal Khara: I do have interpretation now. I didn't in the beginning.

The Chair: Madam Larouche, if there's still a problem, get my attention.

Mr. Long, please continue.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, good morning to my esteemed colleagues.

I've heard the questioning this morning, and I certainly understand the questioning from the opposition viewpoint, but as a government, we have no reason to be on the defensive with respect to what we've done for seniors.

One of the first things that I became very aware of when I was going door to door and campaigning back in 2015—which seems like yesterday—was the plight of seniors and how they felt abandoned by the previous government and how there was no support. They felt totally neglected.

Look, I'm blessed. My mother is still in my life. She's in her 86th year. Mom gets her old age pension. She gets her supplement, with a bit of support from us, but she's very appreciative. In fact, she called me just recently to say that she got an increase in her pension. Obviously, it was indexed. Again, Minister, I think we have done great things and I think we've been there for seniors.

I want to give you a chance, without being interrupted, to go through the programs we have done. They're significant and they have made a difference to hundreds of thousands of seniors across this country.

Minister, if you want, you can have the floor for a bit just to go through the programs again to remind my colleagues and Canadians of what a significant impact our government has had on seniors in Canada.

Thank you.

Hon. Kamal Khara: Thank you so much, Wayne, for that very important question.

Thanks to your mom for sharing the fact that the benefits are indexed, and they're indexed quarterly for seniors. We have one of the best pension systems in Canada and we should be proud of that. Should we be doing more? Absolutely, yes, we should be, because there are vulnerable seniors whom we need to make sure we're supporting. This has been a priority.

I remember I got elected with you, Wayne, back in 2015. One thing we ran on was to make sure we were going to restore the age of retirement back from 67 to 65, which the Conservative Party of Canada wanted to increase for seniors. They wanted them to work longer. Do you know what, Wayne? That would have come into force this year. At this time that we're seeing all these affordability challenges throughout the country, if the Conservative Party of Canada were in government, seniors would be working even more right now. We know the challenges they would have been going through right now. Thank God for the work you do in your own community to make sure we support seniors.

As you know, we restored the age of eligibility for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement back to 65. We then increased the guaranteed income supplement, and I want to spend a little bit of time on this, because this measure supports some of the lowest-income seniors in our country. The majority of those we are supporting are the most vulnerable, the majority being single women. Because of this measure, I know that 45,000 seniors have been lifted out of poverty. This measure alone has helped over 900,000 seniors in our country.

We've of course enhanced the Canada pension plan to make sure we're thinking of those future retirees and making sure they have supports as they move forward.

Last July we fulfilled the commitment we made to Canadians by increasing the old age security pension by 10% for those 75 and older, because we know Canadian seniors are living longer, which is a good thing, but that also comes with increased costs. They're also more likely to have a disability or more likely to have challenges, which is why we increased that.

So—

• (1035)

Mr. Wayne Long: Minister, my time is precious here, but I thank you for this. I do have another question.

We always hear from our colleagues about people who come into their offices and about comments from their constituents. Well, I happen to be in Market Square, where there's a seniors complex, and lots of seniors come into my office.

This is a true story. I had a senior come into my office a few months back, and he asked my advice about Bitcoin. He actually said to me, "Look, I've heard the Leader of the Opposition on TV talking about Bitcoin. Do you think that's a good thing I should invest in?" Obviously, for a senior at that age I was saying, "Whoa, whoa, hold on. You shouldn't touch that."

Can you talk briefly about what would have happened with seniors if they had invested in that?

Hon. Kamal Khara: Oh, my goodness. Thanks for that very important question, Wayne.

Let me say I think the Conservative leader had a very specific plan for Canadians to opt out of inflation, and it was to invest in volatile cryptocurrency and Bitcoin. That is completely irresponsible advice for so many seniors who are on fixed incomes and facing affordability challenges. By my accounting, if a senior had taken his advice and invested \$10,000 of their hard-earned retirement savings, it would be worth approximately \$5,000 today. Seniors' hard-earned money is not a joke.

I see some of our colleagues laughing on the other side. It's not a joke. We know global inflation has made it extremely difficult for many people, but this—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Kamal Khara: —reckless advice would have seen their savings completely—

The Chair: Madam Minister, a point of order has been raised.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much.

The minister had made the comment that others were laughing on the side. There are two of us on this side over here, and neither of us was laughing. I wanted to clarify that.

The Chair: Madam Gray, that's not a point of order.

Okay, Madam Minister, we'll conclude with that.

[Translation]

Ms. Larouche, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have another question for the minister.

As you know, we learned last fall that 70,000 newly retired persons, including thousands of Quebeckers, had not received their OAS cheques on time, despite the fact that they had contributed their entire lives. This is another striking example of your government's incompetence, Madam Minister; these people are entitled to receive their pension but are unfortunately paying the price.

Can you follow up on these 70,000 newly retired persons who were supposed to receive their pension but were abandoned by your government? Has this matter now been resolved?

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khera: I'm happy to turn to my officials for your specific question.

I will just say that ensuring that seniors have support to access information about their pension benefits is extremely important to our government. As you know, the old age security program is one of the largest programs of the Government of Canada. In 2021-22, it paid \$60.8 billion of benefits to 6.9 million Canadians—

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Madam Minister, I do not need an explanation of the OAS program: I want to know whether the matter of the 70,000 seniors who did not receive their cheque because your government was unable to deliver has been resolved or if you still have to follow up on it.

[English]

Hon. Kamal Khera: I will be happy to turn to Cliff, but I can tell you that the funding we have put in the supplementary estimates, which is \$46.4 million to increase the old age security workload capacity, is exactly that: It's to make sure that seniors get all the benefits they deserve.

However, I will turn to Cliff or any of the officials to—

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Madam Minister, I will listen to Mr. Groen's answer, but I must first point out that all the measures you are talking about, including the GST credit and CMHC, are general measures that will not in any way help seniors financially in the long term.

You mentioned the new horizons program, which is good. It helps seniors stay active, but it does not put money in their pockets or wallets to pay for groceries and medicine and get to the end of the month. What could help them is increasing OAS. For people living in poverty, their needs do not begin at the age of 75. I am repeating this because you have not been able to tell me why you continue to divide seniors into two classes with this program, which is offered to everyone as of the age of 65.

I will let Mr. Groen use the few remaining seconds to answer the question about the 70,000 seniors.

• (1040)

[English]

The Chair: Madam Larouche, the time is expired.

I would also like to caution members to keep in mind the interpreters who are providing translation services. If you could speak slowly, it would greatly assist the interpretation.

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

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

I want to revisit the rates of poverty and the extreme conditions that are happening in Canada in relation to seniors. I don't want to see what's happened in health care happen to seniors with housing and poverty rates. We can forecast that there will be many seniors who will need income supports, so I want to revisit this OAS conversation around those aged 65 to 75.

The price of a loaf of bread is the same whether you're 65 or 75. At this point in time, the government has chosen to only increase the OAS for seniors over 75. It's been mentioned today and it's been mentioned by my colleague, our critic for seniors, that this is discrimination.

Why does the minister believe that seniors under 75 don't deserve the same financial supports and the same ability to pay their rent and buy food?

Hon. Kamal Khera: Let me first reiterate that I think our record speaks for itself in supporting all seniors. That is precisely why one of the very first things we have done was to restore the age to make sure seniors who are 65 and up rightfully get the benefits that they need and deserve.

As the member also knows, we actually increased the guaranteed income supplement for all seniors aged 65 and up who needed that support. As Ms. Zarrillo would know, these are some of the most vulnerable, lowest-income seniors. They are some of the poorest seniors in our country. Because of these measures of enhancing the OAS and the guaranteed income supplement, we have lifted 45,000 seniors out of poverty. It has actually helped 900,000 seniors.

In terms of your question on why the old age security increase is for those 75 and up, stats have shown us that Canadian seniors are living longer, which is a good thing. That means we're doing good things in Canada. However, that also means they're more likely to have a disability, lose a spouse, have increased health expenses and be more likely to outlive their savings. We needed to make sure that we're providing that additional support to Canadians who need it, particularly those seniors during that time as they are aging.

With that being said, all the benefits that we have put forward for all seniors, such as the old age security, the Canada pension plan and the guaranteed income supplement, are designed to provide benefits that increase with the cost of living. These payments only ever increase or stay the same; they actually never go down. Old age benefits rates are reviewed quarterly to ensure they reflect the cost of living, and CPP is reviewed yearly.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much, Minister. I just want to—

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo. Our time is gone.

Thank you, Minister Khera.

I have one item left under business before we adjourn the meeting.

Before we do that, thank you, Minister and departmental officials, for appearing today. You may leave.

Committee members, last night you received in your electronic binders a draft of the news release referencing Bill C-35. If I am seeing consensus, the clerk may release the news release if there are no objections.

Go ahead, Mme. Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, can I have some time to look over the press release? I will get back to you with an answer some-time today.

I'm sorry, but I have not had the chance to look over the press release.

Can you give us until 4 p.m. to send you our answer?

It should not be a problem, but—

• (1045)

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I will send you my answer by email, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: For all committee members, then, if we do not hear from you by four o'clock, the press release will be released as it has been presented to you.

Thank you so much, committee members, for this morning.

The meeting is adjourned.

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