



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
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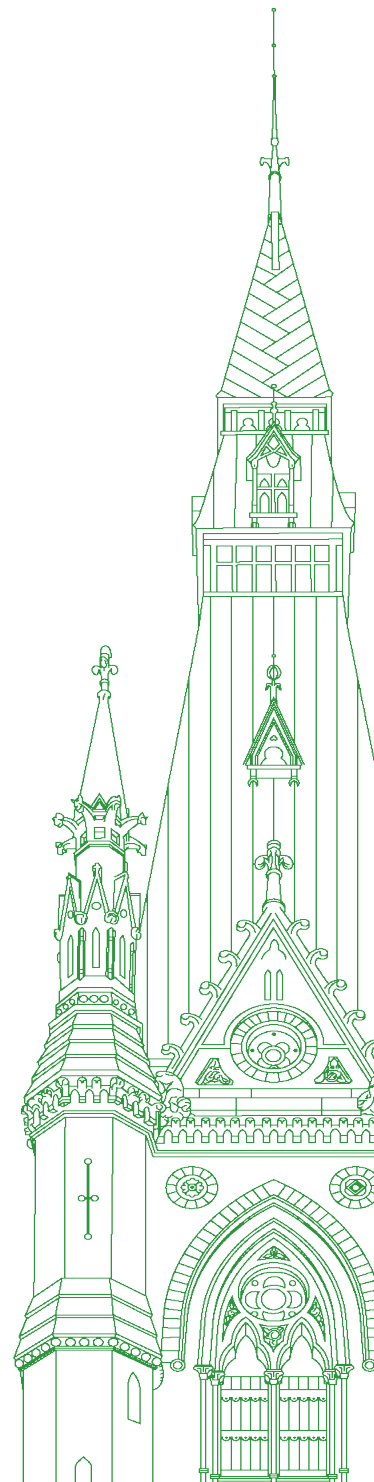
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 125

Thursday, September 26, 2024



Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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

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• (1105)
[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 125 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, meaning some are participating virtually as well as some in the room.

I would like to make a few comments before we begin.

Please address all comments through me, the chair. Wait until I recognize you before you speak. You can get my attention by raising your hand. Those appearing virtually, please click on the “raise hand” icon, and wait until I recognize you.

I also want to advise that, for the protection of interpretation services, when you're not using the earpiece, put it in the assigned location. If you have devices with you, make sure all alarms are turned off, because these noises can cause hearing damage to the interpreters.

As well, you have the option of choosing to participate in the official language of your choice. Again, by using the headset, click on the French or English channel. Virtually, click on the globe icon and choose the official language of your choice. If there is a disruption in interpretation services, please raise your hand. I will suspend while they are being corrected.

With that, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 8, 2024, the committee commences its study of Canada without barriers by 2040. This motion was moved by Mrs. Falk.

I would like to welcome our witnesses in the room today. From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Stephanie Cadieux, chief accessibility officer, office of the chief accessibility officer, via video conference. From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Paule-Anny Pierre, senior assistant auditor general; Milan Duvnjak, principal; and Susie Fortier, director.

We will begin. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

I understand Ms. Cadieux will be giving the five-minute opening statement.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Chair, before we begin, there's something important that I think needs to be brought up at this committee.

I would like to start off by saying that I am wearing a black blazer with a blue shirt, and I have blond hair.

We received, shortly before this meeting began, an email that I was copied on. It was sent to the chair of the committee by one of the witnesses who was supposed to testify today, Christopher Sutton. I reached out to Mr. Sutton, who has given his permission for that email to be read at the committee.

I want to start off by reading the email that came from Christopher Sutton.

He says, “I'm writing to express my disappointment and frustration regarding my recent invitation to appear before the HUMA committee, which was scheduled to discuss the goal of achieving a Canada without barriers by 2040. I was invited to participate at the last minute and dedicated the entire day preparing for my appearance. Unfortunately, I was informed shortly before the meeting that I would not be able to attend due to not using the approved headset. When the committee clerk contacted me, I made it clear that I am deaf and that I use both a cochlear implant and a hearing aid. I also explained that my audio assistive technologies connect directly to my Apple devices for streaming audio, and that I utilize an external microphone for transmitting sound. Wearing a headset is not possible for me. This is not the first time I've met with a government committee, and this accommodation has always been understood as necessary due to my accessibility needs.

“It is deeply ironic that, despite the subject matter of this meeting, my participation was prevented due to barriers related to accessibility. Given my long-standing experience navigating the ableism embedded in government policies and systems, I find this situation not only disappointing but also revealing. It raises important questions about whether the challenges facing the Accessible Canada Act are due to inherent structural issues, and whether the commitment to a barrier-free Canada is as strong as it should be.

“As someone who takes pride in being collaborative and building bridges, I hope this situation can serve as an educational moment for this committee. I encourage you to consider how the committee can take the lead in ensuring its work is truly inclusive and accessible. I've attached the speaking notes I prepared for today's committee meeting. I hope that, along with this email, they can be included in the record.

“I look forward to your response and hope the issue can be addressed so that future engagements are genuinely inclusive and accessible.

“Sincerely, Chris.”

That is the letter this committee received.

It is completely unacceptable that Christopher Sutton is not able to participate in this committee and that the Government of Canada does not have the ability to have Christopher Sutton and others like him testify at a parliamentary committee. Therefore, we need to address this.

Based on that, I would like to move the following motion, which is relevant to this. It's relevant to this committee's work and to the study we're doing.

I move that:

Given that Mr. Christopher Sutton of the Wavefront Centre was invited to participate in the committee's study on the goal of achieving a Canada without barriers by 2040, that Mr. Sutton was blocked from participating in this study because his audio assistive technologies did not meet the committee's or House administration's headset rules, and that this represents a clear barrier to access for deaf, deaf-blind and hard-of-hearing Canadians, the House of Commons administration unreservedly apologize to Mr. Sutton, reschedule the appearance of Mr. Sutton, and investigate the committee's audio device rules and report back on what changes they will be making, within a month, to remove this discriminatory barrier to access.

Thank you.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

Before anybody else wants to speak to this, I have a couple of points.

I will get to you, Mrs. Falk.

I'm as disappointed as you. I was advised late yesterday of the issue. I have a couple of clarifications. You referenced the Government of Canada. This committee is not the Government of Canada. It is the Parliament of Canada. It's the House of Commons. It follows the House of Commons' approved rules and takes direction from the House of Commons.

The information given to me by the clerk was that when Mr. Sutton was tested, the translation bureau said that it was not acceptable. That is independent and related to the House, but I do agree. I cannot proceed with a committee meeting unless it is available in both official languages. I do welcome your comments and agree that we as the House of Commons have to take the steps necessary to ensure that those with disabilities have the ability to appear, especially before the HUMA committee, when they are referenced as a witness.

Before we go to comments on this, I'll ask the clerk to address the steps taken in trying to accommodate Mr. Sutton. It was not my decision. When the translation bureau advises me that a witness communication is not acceptable to the translation bureau, then I cannot proceed.

Again, I just want to be clear that this is not the Government of Canada. This is the Parliament of Canada and the House of Commons. We can collectively give instructions to correct any deficiency that may be there. The rules that this committee operates under are the rules accepted by the House of Commons.

I want the clerk to address the committee on how we arrived at this. Then Mrs. Falk had her hand up and Mr. Fragiskatos.

Witnesses, just bear with us. This is a procedure that the committee has. I accepted the motion moved by Mrs. Gray, and I want it discussed until it's clarified.

The motion of Mrs. Gray is currently being translated, Madame Chabot, but I'm still allowing it to proceed.

The clerk has just advised me that the translation bureau identified to the clerk that they need more time working with the witnesses to address the issue that caused the bureau to advise the committee clerk that they could not provide adequate translation services with the device that was being tested. The timing was not there to correct that. All the proper steps were taken by the clerk and the translation bureau. It was the translation bureau that made the final decision.

That is the approved procedure that I must follow as chair of your committee.

Mrs. Falk is next on the motion by Mrs. Gray. Then it's Mr. Fragiskatos.

• (1115)

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

This is really embarrassing. Some of us, MP Long as well as yourself, Chair, were here when we debated Bill C-81, the accessibility act. That was a couple of parliaments ago, but our committee made exponential accommodations to ensure that every Canadian, no matter their disability or ability, was able to be heard.

It was half a decade ago that this was passed. Bill C-81 received royal assent in June 2019. I have the expectation, when we pass legislation in this place and when regulations come into effect, that it be purposeful and that it does what it should be doing.

We've seen with the airline industry that it's not doing what it's supposed to be doing. We heard testimony on that earlier this year; it's not doing what it's supposed to be doing.

From my understanding, I believe the House administration is a federally regulated entity, which would fall under Bill C-81. Therefore, I'm even more gravely concerned that this committee has accommodated persons with disabilities' abilities before, and now, all of a sudden, we can't. We've had a draft working calendar since September 9, the beginning of September. This absolutely shouldn't be happening. We need to make sure that all Canadians are able to be heard, especially.... The irony of this, on the barriers that those with disabilities have, is just outstanding. It's unacceptable. I know that when we had the debate on Bill C-81, when we were studying it at this committee, the Conservatives, the NDP and also the Greens brought up concerns about this, about making sure that the bill had teeth and making sure that employers would have to comply with making sure that all Canadians could participate.

I am so disappointed that we're not able to hear from this witness on such short notice as well. Maybe this does speak to inherent structural issues, but it's just unacceptable.

Chair, absolutely, the comings and goings of this place, of Parliament, the administration of this place is federally regulated, and we just have to do better, especially this committee. It's the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. This is supposed to be the place, for sure, where Canadians with disabilities should be represented, be heard and be listened to.

Given the fact that this committee has made accommodations in the past, more than once—because this isn't the first time that we've studied disabilities—it's just unacceptable, and I'm just disappointed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

We'll go to Mr. Fragiskatos, and then I'll have comments.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

My comment is very short, but I agree with the sentiment that's been expressed by colleagues already. It's not just unfortunate but also unacceptable.

I want to see the motion because I want to make sure that it says "House of Commons" so that we can ensure that it's dealt with in the right way. As we know, in the management of committees, all parties can contribute ideas through the Board of Internal Economy, I believe, if I'm not mistaken. Regardless, a Canadian had something of great importance to say here today. The committee would have benefited, and unfortunately that's not going to happen.

Therefore, yes, I don't think you'll find disagreement on this side at all.

The Chair: I still do not have Mrs. Gray's motion in both official languages, so I will not deal with it until it has been interpreted and has been circulated.

While we're doing that, Ms. Zarrillo, do you have your hand up...?

It's Madame Chabot.

• (1120)

[*Translation*]

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

I find it utterly deplorable that we find ourselves in this situation. I don't have the motion in front of me yet. There may be things that need to be changed, but I agree with the principle that every effort should be made to allow accessibility for witnesses. This is fundamental. We're talking about that very subject today, and groups have asked us if they could appear.

I asked myself the question because, in my riding, there's a group of deaf and mute people. We checked to see if it was possible to have them testify here. We were told that it was, but we were wondering if there were any barriers to interpretation tools. There shouldn't be, but I think it's more difficult.

I'll agree with the part of the motion that calls for us to invite the witness again. We have to make all the necessary arrangements and ask ourselves some essential questions. Are we in a position, as a parliamentary committee, to receive witnesses, in accordance with the rules of the House of Commons? I'm thinking of interpretation, which is very important.

Are we able to adapt and have the flexibility and accommodation needed to receive this testimony, which is very important for our study?

I will wait until the motion is distributed, but on the principle and the substantive issue, I will agree.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Ms. Zarrillo, do you wish to speak on the motion?

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

I thank my Conservative colleague for bringing this forward. I think it's absolutely a manifestation of the reality of Canada and the ableism in Canada. It manifests right here in the House of Commons.

On a similar note, at our last meeting, our witness was misgendered multiple times. That also deserves an apology.

I'd like to apologize to this witness that the time wasn't taken to ensure that everyone could be involved in this conversation. What I'd like to do is adjourn this meeting. I don't think it's fair that we leave people behind. We can come back at noon so that we can have our witness at noon, but for now, I'm not sure that we should carry on with a meeting when we know that people have been left behind.

I do want to respect the witness Mr. Paul Clark at noon and then get the House of Commons to work on getting our other witness back. Thank you.

I move that we adjourn this until 12 o'clock with that witness.

The Chair: [*Inaudible—Editor*] meeting in total?

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I don't think it's fair that we all enjoy our privilege while there are others who can't be heard.

The Chair: You've called a motion to adjourn, but before we do, just so everybody is clear, the House services are working with Mr. Sutton to accommodate him. That is not an issue. The witness list was submitted. The motion was moved on September 9, but the witness list was submitted over a period of time. Everyone whose name was submitted was contacted by the House administration and by the clerk and analyst. Only two expressed availability. As soon as they did, we reached out to begin the process of seeing how they were going to present.

Mr. Sutton chose to do it virtually with a device that he indicated he had used before. When it was tested by the independent translation bureau, they would not provide notice to the clerk and the team that it was adequate to provide translation services. He was advised of that, and we are still.... Members, I'm trying to clarify. The team is working with Mr. Sutton to accommodate him, and they can only do that when they know the situation they have to deal with, so they're dealing with that.

This committee can choose at any time to schedule and hear from Mr. Sutton, and that will be accommodated. I just wanted to be clear on that particular part so everybody understands. This is in the hands of the committee team, which is bound by the adopted official languages of this country, which I have to respect. That's what we're proceeding with from that perspective. We have the witnesses who are prepared to proceed as well as an independent witness. The rest of the list will be worked on, and the schedule will be adjusted to accommodate that.

With that, I do have a motion to adjourn the meeting, which, actually, I'm going to put to a vote because there was a motion to adjourn the meeting in total. Understand what you're voting on. You brought witnesses here. Witnesses were invited. The motion of Madame Chabot, which I'm going to entertain, is a motion to adjourn the meeting as a whole.

Clerk, call a—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: It was me.

The Chair: I'm sorry. It was Ms. Zarrillo, so we're clear. Ms. Zarrillo made a motion to adjourn the meeting totally, which would mean all the witnesses currently here would be dismissed.

Clerk, call a recorded vote on adjourning the meeting as a whole.

(Motion negatived: nays 10; yeas 1)

The Chair: We'll now return to the motion of Mrs. Gray, which is a very valid motion that this committee can decide, but I have two people who want to speak on the motion of Mrs. Gray: Mrs. Falk and then Mr. Van Bynen.

• (1125)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: For sure—

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: No, I still do not have it translated.

With that, I'm actually going to suspend until I have Mrs. Gray's motion in both official languages, because I will not proceed until it's circulated in both official languages. We'll suspend until that occurs. Thank you.

We are suspended.

• (1125)

(Pause)

• (1130)

The Chair: The committee will resume. When we suspended, it was to await the circulation of Mrs. Gray's motion in both languages. I'm advised that you should have that on your P9s now.

I'm moving to a vote on Mrs. Gray's motion, unless somebody advises or puts up their hand.

Mr. Van Bynen.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): I have a few comments, Mr. Chair.

I very much appreciate the intent and the effect of the motion. However, I have just had a look at all of the websites of every committee member in this room, and everybody's website, except mine, is not accessible. I'm just saying that if we have this awareness now as a committee on how important it is for us to have accessibility as a priority, then try vanbynen.ca and find out what an accessible website should look like.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

Madame Chabot, I'm going to a vote on the motion of Mrs. Gray.

We have Mr. Collins.

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): I'm just reading what was sent to me. This says that Mr. Sutton was blocked from participating in this study "because his audio assistive technology did meet the committee's". It should say "did not".

The Chair: Good catch. It's a friendly amendment correction, so is that the only one. Are we okay?

Madame Chabot.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

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

I want to point out a discrepancy between the French and English versions of the motion. In point B, in French, it says, "*de l'Administration de la Chambre en matière de casques*".

Shouldn't it say "*du comité*" instead of "*de la Chambre*"?

[*English*]

The Chair: They're the House's rules.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: In point B, in the English version of the motion, it says "committee" and, in the French version, it says "commission".

[English]

The Chair: So we're clear, on Mrs. Gray's motion, it is the House administration. The motion will read in French and English "the House administration".

We have Madame Chabot.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: You're right, the motion refers to the House Administration. I wasn't at that part of the motion, but in the part that says "Given that".

In English, it says "committee", and in French, it says "commission" of the House Administration.

[English]

It's not the same thing.

The Chair: I will have the clerk read the motion with the two friendly amendments into the record.

I'm removing "committee" unless there's an objection, and we'll only reference the House administration in French and English.

Go ahead, Clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Philip den Ouden): The motion reads as follows:

Given that Mr. Christopher Sutton of the Wavefront Centre was invited to participate in the committee's study on the goal of achieving a Canada without barriers by 2040, that Mr. Sutton was blocked from participating in this study because his audio assistive technologies did not meet the House administration's headset rules, and that this represents a clear barrier to access for deaf, deaf-blind and hard-of-hearing Canadians, the House of Commons administration unreservedly apologize to Mr. Sutton, reschedule the appearance of Mr. Sutton, and investigate the committee's audio device rules and report back on what changes they will be making, within a month, to remove this discriminatory barrier to access.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Chabot, do you agree?

I see that Ms. Chabot is in agreement.

[English]

Seeing no further discussion, I'm calling a recorded vote on the motion by Mrs. Gray, as read into the record.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Thank you, committee members, for a very understanding process that I fully expect will result in a satisfactory solution.

With that, Ms. Cadieux, you have five minutes for your opening statement.

• (1140)

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux (Chief Accessibility Officer, Office of the Chief Accessibility Officer, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you for inviting me to be here today.

[Translation]

I'm pleased to be here.

[English]

It is hard to believe that we've already reached and gone past the five-year anniversary of the Accessible Canada Act's coming into effect. I am encouraged by the level of engagement and progress made to date in areas where action has been taken, but, like many in the disability community, I am frustrated by the slow pace of change overall.

We have momentum and we have intent, but more actions need to be taken and more quickly. We need clearly communicated commitments, timelines and accountabilities, and we need more regulations, unfortunately. There is still a long road ahead.

Over the past two years, I've met with hundreds of accessibility-focused organizations, federal government departments and agencies, private sector companies, provincial and municipal entities and individual citizens.

My first report to the minister, which was tabled in the House early this year, was developed in large part based on what I learned through these engagements. Ultimately, the aim of that report was to paint a picture of the current state of affairs, how far we've come and where we need to go.

The report highlighted four key areas where I know, if we focus our efforts, we can effect real and meaningful change. Specifically, those are mandatory training, the ongoing development of regulations, dedicated accessibility funding and the gathering, sharing and publishing of data. These are areas that provinces, communities and the private sector should also be encouraged to invest in, because an accessible Canada doesn't stop with the federal government.

My report also considered the first slate of accessibility plans that were released over the last year and a half or so and offered examples of some of the promising accessibility initiatives undertaken by agencies and organizations inside and outside of government, including Via Rail, TD Bank, Service Canada and Ingenium. ISED and Bell, while they were not mentioned in the report, are also making some really good efforts.

I mention these examples not only to celebrate progress but to encourage others to do the same and to demonstrate what accessibility in action looks like. I have noted that, while there is a lot of willingness and good intentions, many still aren't sure what accessibility really means and why it matters. As we've seen just today, confusion, timelines and other real issues sometimes come into play and come into conflict.

That lack of understanding is definitely one of our biggest challenges. Federal government departments and industry need clear directives and expectations set for them, and continuous follow-up communication at all levels of organizations is required.

The Accessible Canada Act is still very poorly understood by many both internal and external to government. There needs to be much more proactive communication. I'm going to continue to monitor all seven areas identified as priorities under the act, but in the absence of being able to do it all, in the months ahead, employment and transportation will be my primary areas of focus.

I'll focus on employment because many people with disabilities have identified it as a priority. Ultimately, it will make a difference in so many different areas. It has an impact on the quality of life of people with disabilities but also on the economy. The more people with disabilities are represented in our workforce, the faster change will come, because they will show positive examples of how and what needs to be done.

• (1145)

Transportation is the other area where I'll be placing focus, as your committee also has, including air travel, which has been making a lot of headlines, but not exclusively air travel. The stories in air travel just illuminate the problems that exist across many other sectors.

My hope is that other sectors are going to take notice of the conversations happening around air travel and realize that they, too, need to be taking action. It's clear that we've arrived at a real turning point. We've seen that, when the disability community speaks with one voice, there is action.

It's worth noting that most accessibility plans didn't cover transportation; rather, organizations suggested that they didn't do transport, so they didn't need to discuss it. Let's face it: There's no benefit in increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities if they can't get to work.

For all the progress, the culture still has a long way to go in rooting out ableist attitudes and perceptions of people with disabilities, their needs and the obligations of society to include them.

There is a lot of work to do, but I thank you for your attention to these issues, which are of crucial importance to Canada.

I look forward to your thoughts and your questions today.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cadieux.

Madame Pierre, you have five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paule-Anny Pierre (Senior Assistant Auditor General, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for inviting us once again to appear to discuss our report on accessible transportation for persons with disabilities, which was tabled in March 2023.

Our audit covered a period of about two and a half years, which ended in 2022. I would also like to point out that we have not audited the measures taken by the government since our last appearance before this committee.

I would like to acknowledge that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Joining me today are Milan Duvnjak, principal, who was responsible for the audit, and Susie Fortier, director, who led the audit team.

In this audit, we examined whether VIA Rail, the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, or CATSA, and the Canadian Transportation Agency, or CTA, worked to identify, remove and prevent barriers for travellers with disabilities. In 2019 and 2020, more than one million people with disabilities who travelled on a federally regulated mode of transportation faced a barrier.

We found that all three organizations had identified some barriers and taken steps to improve accessibility. VIA Rail conducted consultations with persons with disabilities during the design of its new fleet. The corporation also held consultations on its accessibility plans and training programs, as did the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority.

However, improvements were still needed in many important areas. For example, online information wasn't fully accessible. According to Statistics Canada, this is one of the most common barriers experienced by travellers with disabilities. Inadequate accessibility means that information is hard to find or incorrect when someone is using a screen reader. This makes it difficult for people with disabilities to plan or book a trip on their own.

[*English*]

We also found that staff and management did not always complete accessibility training. This can affect the service provided to travellers with disabilities and their companions.

As the organization responsible for enforcing accessibility regulations in the transportation industry, the Canadian Transportation Agency identified accessibility barriers through its inspections, and it worked with transportation service providers to remove some. However, we found that the agency conducted few inspections, and it could only request complaint data from service providers in certain circumstances. Consistent access to this data would help the agency improve its oversight.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority and Via Rail focused on resolving individual complaints, and they missed opportunities to use complaint data to better understand travellers' lived experiences.

Everyone has a right to participate fully and equally in society. If access to these rights is delayed or denied, the impact is that some members of society are excluded or left behind. To further improve accessibility of trains, planes and other federally regulated modes of transportation, responsible organizations need to broaden their consultations with persons with disabilities. They need to make their online content fully accessible and use complaint data to identify, learn about and prevent barriers.

• (1150)

This work is necessary to achieve the federal government's goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening statement. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee has.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Pierre.

Before we open for questions, I want to advise the committee that I've requested resources to take us to 1:15.

For this panel, we would go through group one and two to give everybody an adequate chance, which means we would conclude after the two-and-a-half-minute round with Ms. Zarrillo. This first hour will get extended to 12:30 or 12:35.

With that, I would ask those members appearing to accommodate us.

As nobody is objecting, we will begin with Mrs. Gray for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

My first questions are for Stephanie Cadieux, please.

Ms. Cadieux, during your time as chief accessibility officer, do accessibility complaints regarding federal departments or federal organizations come across your desk?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: They do in a limited way, occasionally but not really. Most complaints go directly to the agencies themselves through their feedback mechanisms and/or to the commissioner's office because I'm not an enforcer of the act.

That doesn't mean I don't hear from people about what they're feeling, experiencing and so on. When I do, I take that information in for the purpose of encouraging organizations to solve those issues and making sure those get moved to the right door, because we're not the right door in that situation.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

Do you think that it would be useful for the work that you do to receive those types of complaints from the different government agencies in your office? Would that be helpful to the work that you do, even if it's more on an information basis?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: From an information point of view, yes, I think it would. I mean, it does. However, we are small, so it could be very overwhelming, I expect.

The good thing that is happening is that I chair a table of the different groups associated with the monitoring and enforcement of the act. This includes the CTA, CRTC, the labour relations group,

the commissioner, Accessibility Standards and ESDC, which is the government department that is overseeing the act implementation. At that table, we have the opportunity to share. All of those organizations have been very forthcoming.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

In your 2023 report on accessibility in Canada, you wrote that in 2023, the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion and the Minister of Transport issued a commitment to “the mandatory collection and sharing of better data about” persons with disabilities.

Later, two entirely different Liberal ministers of transport and disability, in a press release following the National Air Accessibility Summit, only committed to “explore ways to collect and share data with Government representatives”. This sounds like the scenario of more government announcements without substance or action.

Is data sharing between transport operators and government regulators needed to better track and identify barriers, from your perspective?

• (1155)

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Yes, I would say it is.

My understanding is that Department of Transport and the CTA, through the bill that's currently in second reading, are looking at or hoping to put in place measures by which they can collect that data.

In my conversations with the airlines directly and with the air sector more broadly—I'm spending quite a bit of time with the air sector more broadly, including organizations outside Canada—this is actually a very big conversation. Everybody is aware of this as an issue, and it comes down to how those individual private companies collect and share data for the purpose of moving passengers.

There is a complexity to it that the industry is aware of. I think that government, whether that be Parliament or through the CTA as the regulator, will need to define and push for the data that is needed to really home in on what the issue is and how we fix it.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I'm glad you mentioned the airlines, because that leads to my next question.

In your response to the National Aviation Accessibility Summit, you welcomed the commitments made by the airlines, but you also wrote the following:

But progress overall is slow. People with disabilities are rightly fed up. Rights are not being respected, they are being “accommodated” in haphazard, often disrespectful ways, and when something goes wrong, remedies are inconsistent, time consuming, and physically and emotionally stressful for the person affected. We need concrete changes. Quickly.

You also wrote that the commitments made by the airlines didn't have deliverables or timelines attached.

We know that we have another new Minister of Transport. It's sort of a part-time minister.

With no given deliverables or timelines, how can Canadians living with disabilities trust that the commitments made at the air accessibility summit are actually going to happen? Do you have any comments?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Yes.

I think timelines and accountability matter well beyond the air sector. It's a recommendation I'm making for all organizations that fall under the Accessible Canada Act. The plans themselves that organizations are putting forward, in many ways, look more like reports. Plans have actions, timelines and accountability. That's something we need to see in order to see progress.

In the case of airlines, I will say that I am encouraged to see that work is under way and going on. I'm encouraging the airlines and the Department of Transport, through the deputy minister, to be more public about those timelines and the work that's under way.

The Chair: Mr. Collins, go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses this afternoon.

Ms. Cadieux, I'll start with you.

You mentioned four points in your opening statement. I come from the municipal sector, and there are a number of elected representatives around this table who formerly served as either a mayor or a city councillor. One of the things that always bothered me in my time on council was the lack of resources made available to municipalities. We would often, municipally, receive recommendations from our accessibility committee. We all have people in our community, at the grassroots level, who are trying to help their municipal councils create a more accessible city. That could mean anything from brick-and-mortar or transportation policy changes to a whole range of services that fall under municipal jurisdiction. One of the most frustrating parts was funding. We had those same frustrations with the province as well, which guided our legislation from a jurisdictional perspective.

Can you comment on how the federal government could do a better job in terms of supporting stakeholders—in this instance, municipalities—to assist with the accessibility plans they have, in order to make inroads and make life more accessible for people in their communities who have disabilities?

• (1200)

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I'll make two recommendations.

One, there needs to be, I believe, a centre of excellence of some type, so organizations know where to go for advice, good information about how to do this and so on. That's needed beyond the three levels of government and the organizations involved. It's right down to your local coffee shop. There's a need and a desire out there for trusted information. There is a lot of information on the Internet. How do you get trusted information, though? I think there

is a need for that. The U.S. Access Board is one model I've seen. There could be a version in Canada.

Two, when it comes to resources, there is a need for dedicated accessibility funding in all budgets. Anyone in charge of a budget should have a line item for accessibility and be thinking about what that means. There will never be enough money. As a former politician, I understand the challenges at all levels with that. Certainly, there's only one taxpayer.

I want us to think about how we look at accessibility. We have traditionally looked at it as something that is charitable. It's something we do if we get money or when somebody gives us money. We don't look at it the way we should. It's as essential as heat, lights or any other piece of business we do. Disability affects 27% of the population. That means it affects 27% of taxpayers. They deserve to have their needs met just as well as any other taxpayer. It's a shift in how we think about accessibility and what's necessary.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you for that.

I'm going to go to the flip side of that coin.

Sometimes we have partners who are reluctant to make investments in these areas. They see it as charitable and don't treat it as a priority. It goes back to that old saying of show me a government's budget, and I'll tell you what its priorities are.

You've worked at the provincial level. What can the government do, without stepping on the jurisdictional toes of the provinces and the rights that they have to govern, to create some healthy tension in terms of bringing some of our reluctant partners to the table?

I'm in a province where the ODSP rates haven't changed much in the last 10 years. People are probably getting \$20 a year extra from an income support perspective. It tells me that my provincial government really doesn't see the disabled community as a priority. I'm looking for your advice in that regard. You served at the provincial level, and you certainly understand jurisdictional issues.

How do we bring our provincial partners to the table when, in many respects, some of them just don't see this as a priority and haven't provided sufficient funding in this area?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I would say nobody has really prioritized this in the way it should be. The Accessible Canada Act, passed unanimously by government, sets a tone and it sets a stage for co-operative work. It does say that everybody, mostly everyone, does understand that people with disabilities are equal and deserving of having their needs met.

We've seen that with provincial legislation to this effect as well. It tends to be non-partisan and accepted. However, when it comes to actually doing the work and getting to the actions, that's where we run into challenges and that's where those competing priorities always come into play. The federal government does have an opportunity, through mechanisms like funding for infrastructure or other funding that flows through to the other levels of government, to insist on accessibility from the start. If government is issuing a program, service or funding, how is accessibility built into the qualification for that?

• (1205)

Mr. Chad Collins: The national housing strategy does that with minimum requirements for accessible units. Would that be a good example?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: Yes, it's a good example.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Collins. Your time is up.

[*Translation*]

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

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here. I'd also like to thank them for the work they do, particularly at the Office of the Auditor General. We know that all the studies they provide are important for our work and our role as parliamentarians.

Thank you as well, Ms. Cadieux.

Ms. Cadieux, you've been in your position for a short time, and you have a big mandate. In the first paragraph of the executive summary of your first report of 2023, you say, "Too often, throughout history, people with disabilities have carried the load of advocating for their own inclusion and equal participation in society." You also said was that "fundamentally changing the culture around disability" was necessary.

Do you think there's been any progress on the culture of change issue?

Do disability groups continue to advocate on issues as fundamental as inclusion in the areas of employment, transportation, accessibility and housing?

What is your analysis of the progress of the culture towards these people?

[*English*]

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: There has been a lot of progress. As absolutely frustrated as I am at the pace of change, as a person with a disability, we have seen and are seeing a change in the culture.

The fact that accessibility is now a conversation and a track of discussions at conferences about any number of things—airports, technology and what have you—shows that we're thinking about it proactively now in many more situations than ever before. That speaks to a shift in culture.

The fact is that, when I go to a restaurant and there isn't an accessible washroom, it's not me who says something. It's the person standing in line behind me who says, "This isn't acceptable. What

are you going to do about it?" The fact that it's on people's minds and people feel willing to talk about it is a shift in culture.

However, we have a long way to go. We still see examples on a daily basis where that culture isn't shifting and where the ableist bias we all often carry—including people with disabilities—shows itself in decision-making, so that people with disabilities still end up being seen as less or other, and that charitable sort of decision-making raises its head. We're not there.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Ms. Cadieux.

In your report, you talk a lot about the lack of data to be collected in order to take action, and I understand that.

Do you have any solutions to this problem? I think we need to take action.

Is it a barrier or a barrier to not having the data to be able to act? I don't think it is, but how could this data availability problem be improved?

[*English*]

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I think there is movement, again, in the right direction here. ESDC and Stats Canada have moved on a data strategy, and that's important. It's important when we're collecting national data that we make sure we break out and collect data about disability and the disability experience in these contexts, because it will give us that information.

When we talk about employment, we've not seen the dial move very far in a very long time. When we look at data, quite often we'll ask how many people are hired or working, but are we asking the right questions? Are they staying? Are they being promoted? We need deeper data. I would say that's the challenge.

It's an ongoing challenge, and it's a challenge we see not just in the government or in the federal sector. When I'm talking to corporations and others, they feel the same way about the data in their organizations.

We can do better. We just have to—

• (1210)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: How do we solve that problem? Do you have any ideas on how to do that?

[*English*]

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: If we're talking about data as the problem, the solution is to make a decision to collect data on disability in all circumstances when data is being collected.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Ms. Cadieux, you talked about role models. Could you give us some comparisons with what is being done elsewhere?

You mentioned the United States. Sometimes we think of them as a model, at least in terms of transportation, accessibility and mobility. Maybe we're wrong. Are there any models or best practices we could learn from? If you have any, I'd like you to provide them.

[*English*]

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: It's yes and no. The reality is that no country or organization anywhere is getting everything right or everything wrong.

I'm talking to folks in different countries. The U.K., for example, has done a lot of work on the employment side. That is work we can look to and model—and, in fact, we are. The Presidents Group out of British Columbia is modelling some of that work, and it's having an impact.

When I talk—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cadieux. You can carry on that train of thought with another question.

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

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much, Chair.

I appreciate so much the testimony today and, from the CAO, the comments about the cultural change. I know that when I speak to the disability community they talk about the additional barriers that happen in spaces of authority like the one we're in today.

As part of the top seven priority areas in the Accessible Canada Act, it actually doesn't talk about this cultural change and this attitudinal barrier. I'm going to take the rest of my six minutes in silence in this committee in protest, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

We will now move to—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: No, I'm going to take my six minutes.

The Chair: Well, Ms. Zarrillo, I can only conduct the meeting according to the rules that were adopted by the committee. You have the option to question any of the witnesses.

If not, I have to move to the next questioner who will participate.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I have the floor, Mr. Chair, for six minutes.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

Ms.—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Mr. Chair, I have the floor for six minutes.

The Chair: Ms. Zarrillo, you are now out of order.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: For six minutes, I have the floor, and it's my decision how I want to use those six minutes. I can use it by talking or questioning. I'm choosing to do it in silence.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

I will move—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Mr. Chair, is it your position, then, that you're going to silence my voice here around the table today, and your choice, not mine?

The Chair: Ms. Zarrillo, you—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Are you going to assert your authority over my privilege in this committee, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Ms. Zarrillo, you have the option to participate in the meeting as you choose. It's—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I will participate in silence for my full six minutes. Thank you.

The Chair: Fine. Ms. Zarrillo, we will—

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

The Chair: I can only entertain a point of order.

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

The Chair: What is your point of order?

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: There's no point of order. I have the floor.

The Chair: Ms. Zarrillo, a point of order can be raised at any moment.

Mr. Long, do you have a point of order?

Mr. Wayne Long: It's basically a suggestion to take a recess for a couple minutes, Chair.

• (1215)

The Chair: No, she has the floor, and I will respect how each member chooses to use their time.

With that, we will run out the clock for three minutes and 15 seconds.

[*Silence*]

We will begin the second round.

I want to advise that it has been confirmed that the committee has resources until 1:15.

Mrs. Falk, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much, Chair.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here.

Ms. Cadieux, I'd like to start with you, if that's okay.

When this committee studied the Accessible Canada Act, we repeatedly heard concerns from witnesses that the bill lacked clear and consistent requirements, that it used permissive language and that it lacked enforcement measures. As I said earlier in the meeting—and you did, too, in your remarks—we're five years after the passage of this act. It's important to evaluate the progress that has been made and address inadequacies in the act that will prevent achieving a barrier-free Canada by 2040.

We had the CEO of Air Canada here earlier this year. His testimony to this committee raised concerns around the issue of accessibility training. He could not confirm how much or if any of the airline's executive leadership had undertaken accessibility training.

To change the culture and the conversation around accessibility, which we heard a little bit about with MP Chabot's time, how important is it that accessibility training be mandatory for everyone?

• (1220)

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: It is one of the recommendations I made in my report. I feel that accessibility is only going to take root when leaders decide that it starts with them and that the culture goes all the way down through an organization. I think mandatory training is important, and I think it's necessary for us to move forward faster on regulations under the act because, ultimately, organizations will do what they have to do. Some will go further, and that's great, but the regulations will never set the bar where we would hope it would be. They'll set a minimum bar, and there will always be the ability to reach further and do better.

Some organizations, especially in some of these highly regulated sectors like transportation or banking, function well when they have guideposts. I think that, in some cases, unfortunately, that is necessary.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: To segue into my second question for you here, should accessibility training be a legal obligation for federally regulated industries?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: That's not my decision to make.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: But...?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I would say that there are a lot of organizations that are doing it as a matter of course, that are choosing to do it and that recognize that it's necessary. Perhaps it should be: Have all of you taken it? Have I?

I have in lots of different contexts now, but yes, I think we all get something from that experience. We can't know what we don't know, and the training would vary. The kind of training would vary by job role and organization. That's where it would get tricky, but I do think that training is a fundamental piece of changing the culture.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Can we realistically expect to achieve a Canada without barriers without getting greater training requirements? Can we achieve a barrier-free Canada by 2040 without training?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: It would be hard. I say that because, again, we don't know what we don't know. The act is, I think, brilliant in some ways, in that having to involve people with disabilities in the creation of the plans and in the feedback mechanisms is essential, and we don't see that anywhere else in the world. That is leading, and everybody is watching us for that. That does get at rooting out and bringing to the forefront the real barriers that exist for people who haven't experienced them themselves and don't know.

I still think training goes that little bit further. It's a time when you have to sit down and think about it. You have to have a conversation about it, and you can't pass it to someone else to do it for you. You can't put the responsibility of creating the plan down be-

low and then it's "we have one, right?" That's not the culture we want.

We want a culture where, right from the top, we're asking what we are doing about accessibility: What am I doing about accessibility? Am I making sure that I'm doing all of the pieces that I can do as a CEO, CFO or frontline service delivery?

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Mr. Van Bynen, you have five minutes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the information that we've been gathering here.

My questions will also go to Ms. Cadieux.

As we've seen here today, in terms of the Internet being a source of information, there's only one person in this room who has a fully accessible website.

What role do you think the government should play in terms of requiring other governments and other levels of information and/or departments to have a fully accessible website, largely because the website is becoming more and more a source of information? How could that be implemented?

• (1225)

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: In fact, that is already in the works. Accessibility Standards Canada has adopted the same standard for information communications technologies as the European Union, and it is my understanding that ESDC is moving forward with a recommendation to put that into a regulation here in Canada. That would be the first regulation under the act beyond the requirement for plans. That would affect MPs' offices, government agencies and all of the folks under the act.

I think it's very important, because, again, so much of what we do these days is dependent on websites or information technology apps. We're doing things on our phones all day long, and too many people are left out when that isn't considered.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: You mentioned an earlier frustration on the difference between reports and plans, and that there was an absence of actions, timelines and accountability.

Is there a mechanism that you can do—independent audits or mystery shoppers—to determine if, in fact, some of these organizations have the level of interest that you think is important?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I probably have the ability to do that. I don't know that I have the capacity in my office to do that. There's a lot to monitor, and we're having to pick and choose what we do and what we're looking at. Largely, at this stage, we've been working with the coalition of the willing, those who want to have conversations.

We have done a review of 100 or so of the accessibility plans, at random, to see and get a feel for where organizations are. There are thousands of very engaged public servants that are doing this work, both inside government and beyond in the corporate sector. There are people who are very committed. It's important to hold up those examples for others to follow.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: You mentioned earlier that you would like to see some centres of excellence.

What would a centre of excellence look like?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: There are probably a number of models that could be followed, but I often fall to the U.S. Access Board and the way that it was created with subsidiaries to help with the implementation of the American with Disabilities Act. It pushes information out to the public about what is accessibility, what it means, how to meet the requirements of the act, etc., both online, in terms of written materials, but also webinars and other ways of getting information out.

There are probably other ways to do that as well, but I do think it's its own body of work that, currently, I don't think anyone has the capacity or obligation to do.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: To get the best benefit of the dialogue that we have now, what specific recommendations would you suggest the committee include in its report to ensure there's meaningful progress towards a barrier-free Canada?

Ms. Stephanie Cadieux: I think that if you focus in on the things that I've recommended in my report around mandatory training, dedicated funding, data measurement and the faster adoption of regulations, those are the things that will move the dial. If we don't have those things, it's going to be hard to see organizations make the progress they need to make.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

• (1230)

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

Ms. Pierre, you have a beautiful first name.

In 2023, the Office of the Auditor General produced a progress report on your own accessibility targets. In that report, you talked a lot about consultations held with persons with disabilities themselves.

From what I understand, you'd like to systematize this type of consultation. However, the groups often feel that they are consulted a lot. I'm not saying that consultation isn't important, but there's a gap between consultation and action. Some groups even tell us that we already know what they need.

Is the act strong enough to achieve the objectives of these groups?

I only have two and a half minutes. So I'll stop here, but I hope you understand.

Ms. Paule-Anny Pierre: Mr. Chair, as part of our role, we won't comment on legislation or policy. However, I can talk about the experience of the Office of the Auditor General.

We did hold consultations in order to develop our plan. We've even done a progress report.

I can give you a very concrete example of where action followed consultations.

Over the past few years, we have begun to make changes to our work environment by incorporating new furniture. We also looked at technologies that would allow us to collaborate post-COVID-19. Consultations with people with disabilities helped us identify some barriers, and we took immediate action on that. Also, their participation in the testing of equipment and so on helps guide us in our work.

I think any organization that's serious about this shouldn't just be consulting; it should also be taking action.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Zarrillo will conclude this round with two and a half minutes.

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

I'll continue to take the floor for the next two and a half minutes in silence, in protest for all the persons with disabilities who have been excluded from these spaces of authority since their inception.

[Silence]

• (1235)

The Chair: I want to thank the witnesses for participating today and for providing testimony on the very important questions that were directed to them. Thank you so much.

With that, the committee will suspend for two minutes while we transition to our next round.

• (1235)

(Pause)

• (1240)

The Chair: Committee members, the committee is now back in session.

I would like to welcome the witness for this round of the committee's hearing. It's Mr. Paul Clark, optometrist, and Mr. Clark is appearing by video conference.

Mr. Clark, you have five minutes to make your opening statement. Then we will go to questioning.

Mr. Clark, you have the floor.

Dr. Paul Clark (Optometrist, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to speak today about the barriers faced by disabled individuals in Canada.

At a young age, I realized the financial burden that comes with living in a wheelchair. There are home modifications, specialized adaptive devices like wheelchairs, and medical supplies to maintain health—not to mention the time needed for medical follow-up. I was determined not to become a burden to my family of five children. With that drive, I pursued my education with intensity and determination, and earned a professional designation to contribute to society.

However, the costs were staggering. My family could not afford my wheelchair. Thankfully, a service club stepped in. When home modifications were unaffordable, members of our church came to help.

I've always been determined to find solutions rather than complain. Today I'm here to advocate for changes that will make our great country more accessible for all.

The first is on building code mandates. The outdated view that disabled individuals are largely institutionalized must change. We live, work and contribute in the community, yet the building codes don't always reflect that. Canada needs to lead with national mandates for accessibility in private and public spaces.

As an example, when I opened my business in a new location, there was no requirement for a door opener. Even as a disabled person, I overlooked it. Had it been mandated, the installation would have been timely and cost-effective.

Mandates must be consistent across the country, ensuring that new buildings are standardized with accessibility in mind. The design and construction should be carried out by professionals accredited in accessible design.

Next is health care costs. This is the price to pee. As a paraplegic, I incur significant medical costs just to handle basic bodily functions like urination. The supplies alone can cost upwards of \$10,000 per year. Most disabled individuals are not high-income earners and if these costs are not fully covered by extended benefits, they can be overwhelming.

Many insurance plans also fall short. My most recent wheelchair cost \$16,000, yet my insurance only covered \$10,000. While that's better than my previous plan, which covered only \$2,000 once in a lifetime, it's still a financial burden.

There are employment barriers. Employment opportunities are significantly limited for disabled individuals, often because the infrastructure—like our transportation and building codes—doesn't accommodate us. Having primary building access such as ramped, automatic door entry and fully accessible washrooms can go a long way.

Simple adjustments like flexible working hours and remote work options would allow the disabled community to contribute meaningfully to the workforce. It's a largely untapped resource of talent and potential.

A national policy for disabled parking must be created with consistent and distinct markings for the wider parking spots we need. These spots should never be used, even temporarily, for construction, snow storage or courier parking. This is not just about convenience; it's about dignity and safety.

On permanent disability recertification, requiring those with permanent disabilities to repeatedly fill out forms and go through the process of recertification is a waste of time and resources. If a disability is permanent, there is no need to prove it again and again.

Despite all the challenges, I remain optimistic, just as I was 50 years ago when I first became disabled. Barriers can be reduced. Disabled individuals are not a burden; we are a resource. Our potential to contribute to this country is enormous. With the right changes, we can build a more inclusive and accessible Canada for all.

Thank you.

● (1245)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Dr. Clark.

There will be one six-minute round with the time we have remaining. It will begin with Mrs. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Dr. Clark, for being here at the committee today.

I want to say I think you're being a little modest as to some of your accomplishments. In addition to what you've expressed here today, you also competed in the 1980, 1984 and 1988 Paralympics, and you have won multiple gold and silver medals. Thank you for all of your accomplishments over your lifetime.

I know you've done a lot of advocacy work with different organizations and committees looking to make meaningful suggestions with regard to issues and ways to make suggestions, so I wanted to ask about a couple of things here.

You had written in a letter that “one in 10 Canadians over the age of 15 have a mobility disability,” but thanks to advances in technology, mobility devices can go further and faster. However, you said that accessible infrastructure is still too often designed for the wheelchairs of 50 years ago.

I'm wondering if you can comment and expand on this a bit more. Is this also something you've seen in federally regulated agencies and spaces such as airports and other buildings?

Dr. Paul Clark: Yes, certainly. The wheelchairs of past eras tended to be wider and slower-moving and had larger front wheels. A lot of our infrastructure is such that it accommodates that size and not, for example, the front-drives, scooters and other devices that are used for mobility. As we progress, we will find more problems as well. For example, the rental scooters and rental bikes that are present in our city are scattered all over the walkways and sidewalks, making it even more difficult to get around.

However, the biggest thing that I see is the maintenance of accessibility. It's all nice to have concrete that has little separations of brick and then concrete again, but the brick sags, and that is a danger for the wheelchair. It doesn't matter if it was 50 years ago or today. Fifty years ago, the front wheels would have been bigger, but today, the front wheels are smaller, and they get stuck on those little lips, so maintenance is important. Hospitals remain more usable for many years because they are well maintained. Cities are not.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much.

You had written in the past about aging ramp slopes being steeper than what is currently allowed to be built right now. I wonder if you can expand on that a bit for this committee.

• (1250)

Dr. Paul Clark: Sure. With ramps, there is a standard of slope for a long section, but there is nothing for a short joining section, and that creates a barrier. For example, if the sidewalk rolls down toward the street to cross, it's always rolling down because that's for drainage, but at the bottom of that roll-down, the curb has lifted because there are two different types of concrete and one lifts. This is dangerous for friends of mine who are quadriplegic and who roll down that slope. Once they hit the bump, they will tip forward and certainly do a face plant, so slope has to be considered for the short distances.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Great. Thank you very much.

I do have limited time here, so I wanted to get through a couple more things. I know you're connected with a lot of different people, and I'm wondering if you've seen the affordability crisis affect persons with disabilities maybe even more so than others.

Dr. Paul Clark: Certainly. Some of the people I know are essentially in poverty because of their disability. They can't afford the devices. They simply can't afford anything new. They're cobbling together anything old to make it work. This is very difficult. The newer devices can be more comfortable and more functional and are more able to integrate into society.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

You talked about certifications and filling out forms. We know that what has passed through Parliament unanimously is the Canada disability benefit. A lot of the feedback we've been getting on that is about the bureaucracy and the red tape in terms of redundancy and filling out forms.

Can I have your comments, if you've heard anything on that?

Dr. Paul Clark: Yes. I talked to a friend yesterday who was required, for air travel, to have forms filled out in order to bring her front-drive on the aircraft. She said that, when she arrived at the plane, nobody even looked at the papers.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have six minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know Ms. Chabot wanted to introduce a motion that's very important to her. I'm going to yield my time to her so she can do so.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank my colleague Mr. Fragiskatos for giving me his time.

I'd also like to thank the witness for his participation and his commitment, as a person with a disability, to the people he supports in his community. I congratulate him on his achievement in creating an office for people like him. Hear, hear!

With all due respect, I'm going to move a motion, since it's time to do so. This is a motion that I brought forward at the last committee meeting, and it has to do with seasonal workers and the EI system.

The motion reads as follows:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee undertake a study of the situation of workers in the seasonal industry with regard to the inadequacy of the employment insurance program to meet the needs of these workers, who often face job insecurity and financial difficulties for themselves and their families; that the Committee devote 3 meetings, including 2 to hear witnesses; that it invite the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Official Languages and public servants to answer the Committee's questions for one hour, as well as groups defending the rights of the unemployed; And that the Committee report its recommendations to the House.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Chabot had previously moved this and it was adjourned.

I would like to ask the witness to bear with us for a couple of minutes while we deal with this committee procedure.

Mr. Fragiskatos, go ahead on the motion by Madame Chabot.

• (1255)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: There are just a few amendments. They've been sent in to the clerk in both official languages so they can be easily circulated. It's a few additions and a few subtractions, if you like.

First of all, in the first sentence, regarding the second line, "the Committee undertake a study of the situation of workers in the seasonal industry with regard to", here's the addition: "necessary improvements and changes to". I'm also suggesting we strike the phrase "the inadequacy of".

To the first part, I would add "and other relevant witnesses". In the second part, I would strike "and that" and simply begin the sentence with "that the Committee report its recommendations".

Finally, the last addition is the following: "and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the Committee request a comprehensive response to the study."

The Chair: Okay. We have an amendment to the motion. It was put forward by Mr. Fragiskatos.

Is there discussion on the amendment by Mr. Fragiskatos?

I have Mrs. Gray and then Madame Chabot.

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

We don't have a copy of it yet. There are a number of amendments that we need to see before we can....

We should probably recess to have a discussion, since there were a number of amendments, before we proceed.

The Chair: I'm going to suspend for two moments while it is being circulated. It will give members an opportunity to discuss the amendments.

Mr. Clark, please stay online. We will return to you.

We'll suspend for two minutes.

• (1255) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1255)

The Chair: Committee members, the committee is back in session.

Who had the floor? Was it Mrs. Gray?

Mrs. Gray, if you still have comments, go ahead. If not, I'll go to Madame Chabot.

Madame Chabot.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, we agree with my colleague's amendment in two respects, except that the last of the proposed amendments doesn't correspond to what we had agreed to—let me put it that way.

We want to keep the part about the committee reporting its recommendations to the House. I don't know if we could vote on that separately or if I need to move a subamendment to remove the last proposed amendment. I don't know how to do it, procedurally.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Chabot, you can move a subamendment to the amendment.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I move a subamendment to remove the last part that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request a comprehensive response to the study.

I therefore propose that we keep the original text.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have a subamendment from Madame Chabot to the amendment of Mr. Fragiskatos.

Go ahead, Mr. Fragiskatos, on the subamendment.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: With apologies to Madame Chabot, I thought there was some understanding. There seems to be still some misunderstanding. I want to continue to engage with her on the motion and the amendment from our side, but so that we can continue to hear from Dr. Clark—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: There's no interpretation, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: So that we can continue to hear from Dr. Clark, I'm going to suggest to Madame Chabot that I continue to engage with her on an amendment that would be good for our side as well.

With that, Mr. Chair, I move to adjourn debate on the motion.

The Chair: We have a motion moved to adjourn debate on the motion. I don't see anybody contrary.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The debate on the motion currently on the floor is adjourned and we will return to the witness.

With that, I will go to Ms. Zarrillo to conclude the last six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much to our witness today for being here.

I have two questions that I'm going to put up front, because we don't have much time.

I know that you are a successful business owner with a disability. I wanted to know if there are tax incentives for entrepreneurship specific to persons with disabilities, and if you would recommend ones that are positive or if we need more.

The other thing is that I think you are one of the professions that can sign the disability tax credit certification. I wonder if you could share if there are some changes that need to be made there so that we can make sure that more people who are entitled can get the disability tax credit certification.

Thank you.

Dr. Paul Clark: Thank you.

To my knowledge, there is no tax credit or financial assistance to business owners who are disabled or to make their business disabled.... Further, I have never been requested to fill out a certification for disability. I'm not sure why, but I know I'm on the list.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

Just on the topic of the disability tax credit certification, I know that there is a need for thousands of Canadians, if not a million more, to be eligible for and to apply for the disability tax credit certification. Do you have any suggestions for the government on how they could potentially assist persons like you, professionals who can certify these certificates, to make it more widely known to people?

• (1305)

Dr. Paul Clark: Yes...such as just using the available avenues such as the Rick Hansen Foundation, which does a great job in connecting communities and just in making sure that it's well known. There are various disabled organizations. If they know, then they could maybe pass on the information, but I don't know of any other method—no.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much for that.

I'm going to close by thanking you for introducing the idea of these mobility devices, these scooters or rental ones, that end up being all over sidewalks and blocking paths.

I just want to take this moment, Chair, to thank Lelainia Lloyd, in my riding in Coquitlam, who has done a lot of press and publicity around how unaccessible sidewalks and pathways can become when there are rental scooters and other devices on the pathways.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Zarrillo.

Dr. Paul Clark: May I add one thing to that?

The Chair: Certainly. Go ahead, Dr. Clark.

Dr. Paul Clark: A sidewalk is only as good as its width. The standard for sidewalk width is 1.8 metres, and the old standard from 50 years ago, as I mentioned before, was 1.5 metres.

What happens is that, when 1.5 metre-wide sidewalks require sections to be redone, they are simply repaved or reconcreted at 1.5 metres. They could easily be done at 1.8 metres, and that would allow for two wheelchairs to pass each other, provided the shrubbery from private properties is not in the way. That's a major problem. The shrubs from properties grow over the sidewalks.

The Chair: Thank you, again, Dr. Clark. You can see from the questioning that your testimony here is very much appreciated, and we thank you for participating.

With that, Dr. Clark, you can leave as you choose.

I have a few items I need direction from the committee on before we conclude, and I'm going to read it so that people are clear.

The committee needs to make a decision on its calendar, moving forward. Canada without barriers by 2040—Mrs. Falk's study—will conclude on October 3 as scheduled. As per the schedule, the committee should begin its study of homebuilding technologies on October 8. That said, with the motion adopted on September 17 to invite the ministers, the committee will need to provide direction on its approach to upcoming studies. Should the homebuilding technologies study be pushed...?

For your consideration, ministers can be invited but are not guaranteed on the schedule, so I do not want to lose time. If the homebuilding technologies study will go forward as planned and begin on October 8, the clerk and analysts will need witness lists by October 1. It is a planning perspective.

We have Mrs. Gray or Mr. Fragiskatos.

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

We should still proceed with the committee.

I don't have the motion in front of me, but most of those studies say a minimum of so many meetings. If we have to, we could always tag something on if we need to. However, I think we can start the study as we had planned.

The Chair: Okay. It's the technologies one.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Chair, our side has not had an opportunity to discuss that in terms of what members are hoping to see come next. I wonder if we could return to this at the next meeting.

The Chair: It's already been agreed to.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: You're offering the committee, as I understand it, an opportunity to decide, so I would just respectfully ask if our side could have another couple of days to look at it and return to it.

The Chair: It's fine, but I want clarification and direction at the next meeting, because we don't know how Mrs. Falk's study is going to conclude at this stage of scheduling.

Mrs. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, that doesn't work within the timeline, because we would need to have the witness list by October 1. Actually, is that what the analysts were about to point out? That would mean that our meeting would be after the deadline that we would need in order to follow what we've already agreed to.

We've already agreed to this study. It has actually been on the books for a while, so the minister should have been well aware of it.

• (1310)

The Chair: Based on that, yes, it's already been prioritized by the committee and adopted, unless there is a motion to move it. I'm going to instruct the analysts in planning that we'll proceed with the schedule as it currently exists.

The last item is on Starlight Investments.

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, that being said, though, we do have ministers ready and willing to come. I think that we should prioritize the ministers before the housing study. Why can't we do the housing study after?

Would the committee not agree that we want to have the ministers in?

The Chair: If somebody wants to make a motion to change the schedule and it's carried by the committee, then it's binding.

Mr. Wayne Long: I'll make a motion, Mr. Chair, that we prioritize the ministers first and move the housing study to after we've had the ministers in.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on that brief motion?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I think Mr. Coteau had his hand up. He may wish to say something.

The Chair: No...? Okay.

Seeing no further discussion, is the motion of Mr. Long clear?

Mrs. Gray.

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

Doing this on the fly... We agreed to the agenda of this committee, and now you want to call a whole variety of ministers sooner than we agreed to. How would that work? Are they...?

The Chair: To begin with, the motion you brought forward to bring the ministers in, which was adopted, altered the agenda that was previously agreed to by the committee. Mr. Long has a valid motion to give direction on the scheduling, and I will call a vote on it unless there is discussion.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have a point on the motion by Mr. Long. There seems to be some disagreement on the path forward. My suggestion, Mr. Chair, is to adjourn debate on this motion and come back to it at our next meeting, as it seems you were prepared to do just a moment ago.

With that, I move to adjourn the debate on Mr. Long's motion.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: With that, as chair, I am going to proceed with the schedule for planning that was already adopted by the committee.

Ms. Zarrillo.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Can I just get full clarification of what our next study is and when we need to have witness lists in by, please?

The Chair: We'll provide that to you, Ms. Zarrillo. We appreciate that.

I have one final item, which is the Starlight Investments letter. It was last discussed.... I need clear directions so that the analyst can conclude version one of the housing report.

Is it the wish of the committee to accept the Starlight Investments brief that came in seven days after the deadline?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I agree with that brief being brought forward, but I'm a bit confused. Are we back on Mr. Long's motion now, as my motion to adjourn the debate was defeated?

The Chair: You're quite correct, Mr. Fragiskatos. Mr. Long's motion to adjourn the debate was defeated, so that leaves it....

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Maybe Conservative colleagues have a different perspective on this, but I do not remember the housing study of Mr. Coteau being prioritized. I think there's some effort that needs to be made among all committee members to understand what we're going to be doing next.

I also see that it's 1:15, Mr. Chair.

● (1315)

The Chair: Are you calling to adjourn?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I will call to adjourn. I move to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: Our authorized time has been reached, and there's a motion to adjourn.

With that, the committee meeting is adjourned.

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