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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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

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• (1105)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 126 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 that witnesses are appearing virtually and in the room with us.

There are a couple of points I would like to review before I introduce the witnesses.

You have the option to participate in today's meeting in the official language of your choice. In the room, translation is available by selecting the channel you wish to participate in on the microphone in front of you. Those appearing virtually can click on the globe icon at the bottom of your Surface and choose an official language. If there is a breakdown in translation services, please get my attention by raising your hand, and I will recognize you. We'll suspend while it is being cleared up.

Again, I want to remind those members who are using older microphones today to make sure you're on the channel that gives you the language of your choice. Also, for those in the room, please make sure that all of your devices are on mute, including any alarms that may go off. As well, please refrain from tapping the microphone boom to avoid issues for the translators of today's meeting.

In the first hour today, we have a witness appearing in person: David Lepofsky, chair of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance.

From Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec, we have Paul Lupien, chair, by video conference, and Dominique Salgado, chair of the employee committee.

Appearing for Disability Without Poverty is Michelle Hewitt, and she is still connecting.

We also have Kevin Mills, goodwill ambassador for Pedaling Possibilities.

We'll begin with Mr. Mills, but before we do, for your benefit, if you're addressing questions to Mr. Lepofsky, please identify him so he'll know a question is directed at him, and identify yourself by saying which MP you are.

You have five minutes, Mr. Mills.

Mr. Kevin Mills (Good Will Ambassador, Pedaling Possibilities): Hello, everyone. I'd like to thank MP Tony Van Bynen for inviting me, and the HUMA committee for allowing me to speak about an issue that is really personal and important to me—accessibility.

I'm sure that everyone here has a loved one, whether a relative, friend or child, who has been affected by accessibility barriers. Thank you for your efforts to help improve and hopefully fix these obstacles that affect Canadians on a daily basis.

I recently had the opportunity to handcycle across Canada with my able-bodied friend, Nikki Davenport. In May 2023, we started our journey in Cape Spear, Newfoundland, and after over four months of effort, we completed our 8,400-kilometre trip in Victoria, B.C. I became the first quadriplegic to handcycle across Canada in my wheelchair.

I would like to start by saying how beautiful and amazing Canada is. We are lucky to live here. The thing that struck me the most was the people. Everyone was so kind and supportive. I met wonderful people in every province who wanted to help and were enthusiastic about what we were doing. We had people online who were following our trip, donating and spreading our message. Cars were honking in support and people on the side of the road were cheering us on and handing us food and drinks. The media coverage was phenomenal. We even had one woman come to our campsite to take our laundry home and wash it for us.

When we initially started planning this journey, we just wanted to do it. We quickly realized that what we were doing had the potential to help people and increase accessibility by starting a discussion encouraging Canadians, especially those with disabilities, to get outside and get active. We wanted to show that it was possible, so we created the not-for-profit Pedaling Possibilities across Canada.

One of the best parts about this trip was having people with wheelchairs and handcycles come in and join us for a leg.

I've travelled extensively, and when considering accessibility across our nation, Canada is doing well compared to many other countries, but there is still a lot to be done. I think the most important part of my message is that in terms of ability in the community of people with disabilities, there are vastly different levels of function.

I have paraplegic friends who can pop up a regular curb without difficulty, but for me, a three-centimetre lip might as well be 10 flights of stairs. At the same time, I have friends with more severe injuries who encounter obstacles I would never have thought of.

To continue to improve accessibility in Canada, you need to talk to and involve people with disabilities in the solution, which is what you are doing now.

I'm sure the committee is well versed on the challenges that Canadians with disabilities face in terms of travel, including flights, hotels and accessible showers. At one point in my journey, after not showering for nine days, the girls said I would not be allowed in the RV until I showered, so at the campsite they tossed me in a lawn chair and hosed me off. That mountain water was cold.

My main focus today is about an accessible bike route across Canada. Many people bike across Canada every year. What I did was not unique, but my perspective is. A lane that is wide enough for a bike is often too narrow for a wheelchair, rumble strips set off my spasms, which could send me into traffic, and gates that aid in animal migration are not possible for me to open.

Creating and making a truly accessible bike route across Canada would take time and resources. It is worth it. I have often heard the argument that not many people with disabilities would use this. While not many people will bike the entire route, many people will do sections.

I would also argue that it will not be used until it is established. We need to build it first. We have a great opportunity to invest in international tourism for people with disabilities. Let us make it happen.

My wife and I run a not-for-profit neurological recovery centre called Walk It Off, which has been helping people with disabilities for over 14 years. We are currently expanding to a larger facility so that we can help more people.

• (1110)

While looking for our new facility, it struck me that so many places were inaccessible, even in terms of basic things like automatic door openers. We eventually signed a lease to move into a building, but we had to negotiate to get automatic doors installed to enter the main building, which goes into a common lobby. Our not-for-profit is paying half. We are responsible for the doors entering our unit. This is crazy for 2024. If we are going to make Canada truly accessible by 2040, we need to act now.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mills.

We'll now go to Mr. Lepofsky.

Mr. Lepofsky, welcome back to HUMA.

Mr. David Lepofsky (Chair, Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance): It's great to be here.

The Chair: You have five minutes or so. You have the floor, Mr. Lepofsky.

Mr. David Lepofsky: The federal government is to be heartily congratulated for deciding that Canada needs accessibility legislation to make this a barrier-free country for over six million people with disabilities. The federal government is also to be heartily congratulated for agreeing that we need new legislation to lift hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities out of poverty, which they do not deserve to suffer from.

However, the Accessible Canada Act, like the Canada Disability Benefit Act, have both proven themselves to be strong on good intentions but extremely poor in implementation and impact.

I invite you, as part of this review, to ask key questions. Since the Accessible Canada Act was passed in 2019, have we made 25% of the progress we need to make towards the goal the act sets, which is a barrier-free Canada by 2040, since we've now used up 25% of the time? What disability barriers has this act caused to be removed? What steps need to be taken to get us to that goal, since this act is not working to achieve its goal with the force and effect that is needed? What are the problems?

The act does not, at present, require any disability barrier to ever be removed or to be prevented in any organization that the federal government can regulate. Not one single accessibility standard that is enforceable in law has been enacted in the five years since this law was passed. As a result, progress towards accessibility has been glacial and agonizingly slow.

I was invited to speak at a conference in Montreal last spring called Accessible Canada Accessible World, with leaders on accessibility from across the country from obligated organizations and with the minister responsible. I don't recall anyone, in their many speeches, ever identifying a single barrier that has been removed in the past five years because it was required to be removed by this act. There may be some out there somewhere, but we should have an impressive list after five years and not be struggling to scurry and find a few.

I'm not saying nobody's doing anything, either to implement the act or to address accessibility barriers; I am saying that the Accessible Canada Act is itself, as a matter of legal force, not significantly contributing towards its own goal. Its implementation and enforcement is labyrinthine because the law is outrageously complicated to read and to even understand.

I have two law degrees. I practised law for over three decades. I now teach law part time, and I think I have a specialty in this area. I can't figure out what the damn thing says, and if I can't, I bet you can't either. If you can't, I bet your obligated organizations are having a tough time. If they're having a tough time, I bet people with disabilities are having at least that tough of a time.

People with disabilities deserve better. Our brief offers you 10 amendments that we need. We recommended all of these five years ago when this bill was before Parliament. Sadly, they were all turned down. Had they been accepted, we'd be in a better place. I'm going to mention a couple now. I invite your questions, if I get more time, to explain more.

Number one, we need to impose a deadline on the government to pass at least one accessible standard that is enforceable by law, not a voluntary guideline or standard that Accessible Standards Canada produces. That's thin gruel. Nobody has to comply with it. Pass one that's enforceable within one year and four more within two years.

● (1115)

We ought to be able to do that at this point.

Number two, this law's implementation and enforcement is splintered incoherently across three different organizations: the accessibility commissioner, the CRTC and the Canadian Transportation Agency, the CTA. Those agencies are in a race to see who can go the slowest.

People with disabilities deserve better. Can we just have a one-stop shopping agency that will do it all, implement it all, enforce it all, and bring the regulations to cabinet to do it all? We have Accessibility Standards Canada, but they can only give advice. It's a good start, but we have to do a lot better. Let's get rid of this splintered, incoherent, unnavigable mess.

It's good that the act requires obligated organizations to make accessibility plans and report on their progress, but it doesn't require them to be any good and it doesn't require them to actually implement them. We can't bring complaints, and those agencies can't enforce anything if the plans aren't any good or if the plans aren't enforced.

I have a final point. For the short part of our list, not one dollar of federal money should ever be used again to create new disability barriers. The act doesn't require that, its implementation doesn't require that, and as a result, the government is free to give out money to provinces and hospitals and others for infrastructure projects that can include disability barriers. Nothing is required in this act to stop it. People with disabilities deserve better.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lepofsky.

We will now go to Mr. Lupien for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paul Lupien (Chair, Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning everyone.

My name is Paul Lupien, and I am the chair of the Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec, or COPHAN. I'm also on the board of the Institut national pour l'équité, l'égalité et l'inclusion des personnes en situation de handicap.

I am joined today by Dominique Salgado, secretary, COPHAN board of directors, and executive director, Comité d'action des personnes vivant des situations de handicap.

Incorporated in 1985, COPHAN is a non-profit organization working to make Quebec inclusive to ensure the full social participation of people with functional limitations and their families.

We represent—

● (1120)

The Chair: Just a moment, Mr. Lupien, we're having an issue with the interpretation.

Mr. Paul Lupien: Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask whether you would permit Mr. Salgado to give part of the presentation as well.

The Chair: Just a moment, please.

All right, it's working now.

You can start over, Mr. Lupien.

Mr. Paul Lupien: Mr. Chair, we'd like a bit more time since Mr. Salgado and I will take turns giving the presentation.

Good morning. My name is Paul Lupien. I am the chair of the board of directors of the Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec, or COPHAN. I am a person with a disability. I am also on the board of the Institut national pour l'équité, l'égalité et l'inclusion des personnes en situation de handicap.

I am joined today by Dominique Salgado, secretary of COPHAN's board of directors and executive director of the Comité d'action des personnes vivant des situations de handicap.

Incorporated in 1985, COPHAN is a non-profit organization working to make Quebec inclusive to ensure the full social participation of people with functional limitations and their families.

We are the voice of nearly 60 regional and national organizations representing people with functional limitations or disabilities of any kind, for a total of more than 1.4 million people with disabilities across Quebec.

We are active across Canada and on the international scene in all areas that have an impact on the living conditions and social participation of people with functional limitations and their families.

COPHAN is the only francophone umbrella organization in the country that brings together organizations dedicated to people with disabilities.

The principles that guide our work are full inclusion, the rule of law, the right to equality, universal accessibility, accommodation and compensation for the additional costs associated with functional limitations. We want a barrier-free country.

In 2019, the Government of Canada passed the Accessible Canada Act, legislation aimed at making Canada barrier-free by 2040. The act highlights the limits and barriers that people with disabilities experience in a range of areas, from employment, transportation and the built environment to communication and information technologies. The government committed to working with people with disabilities, the business community and organizations to establish accessibility standards. Measures to monitor progress have been provided for. The goal is to ensure that people with disabilities can participate fully in Canadian society by 2040.

Organizations such as Accessibility Standards Canada play a key role in implementing that goal. Stakeholder consultations are under way to ensure that the specific needs of disability communities are properly taken into account.

I do want to point out, however, that the act does not require provinces to comply with accessibility standards established under the act. It does not have the teeth to impose accessibility standards on organizations other than those under federal jurisdiction. Provincial organizations are not required to ensure accessibility, unfortunately. None of the accessibility standards provisions in the act can be imposed on provincial organizations.

As Mr. Mills mentioned, a barrier doesn't have to be big to make something inaccessible to a person with a disability like me. If you don't want me to come over, all it takes is a two or three-centimetre high step to keep me from coming inside.

I think it is important for the Government of Canada to understand why imposing this legislation is so necessary.

Now I'll pass the floor over to Mr. Salgado.

• (1125)

Mr. Dominique Salgado (Chair, Comité emploi-revenu-logement, Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec): Thank you, Mr. Lupien.

Good morning, Mr. Chair.

Good morning everyone.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. The time has expired. You could address that in questioning, in questions that may come to you, but I do have to move to Ms. Hewitt.

Ms. Hewitt, you have not been tested, but begin, and translation will tell me if it's okay. If you could, please begin with your opening five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Hewitt (Chair, Disability Without Poverty): Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you today on the progress Canada is making toward being barrier-free.

I am Michelle Hewitt, and I'm the chair of the board of Disability Without Poverty. I'm a disabled woman and a full-time wheelchair user. I live in Kelowna with my husband, who is also a full-time wheelchair user.

Talking about accessibility to any level of government is always complicated, because responsibility is siloed. However, our lives as disabled people do not work in this way, and I believe the tone set by the federal government trickles down to other areas of influence. Therefore, I believe it's your job to set the bar high and expect that everybody else at least meets that standard.

I need to clarify something about my comments. Once I saw I was on this panel with David, I decided to concentrate on getting some basic examples on the record, as David is far more knowledgeable than I am about the labyrinthine details of the Accessible Canada Act.

My husband and I have just moved closer to downtown Kelowna so that we can go out more independently. We thought we'd go to a relatively new place that offers dinner and a movie, but no. The movie part is upstairs, and there's no elevator. It's been open less than two years.

We have to check every place we go to to see whether it's accessible for us. That's not something non-disabled people have to do.

Recently, I went for a blood test in a relatively new office. Again, it's downtown and it's the main location. The cubicles the blood tests happen in are too small to fit my wheelchair, so I have to have my blood taken in a hallway, in full view of everyone, with no privacy. Being disabled often equates to having your dignity removed.

The last time I flew was to Ottawa in April. Ironically, it was to appear before the transportation committee. Before boarding the plane, while it clearly says "full assistance" on my file, I was asked to leave my power wheelchair behind at the check-in desk and walk onto the plane. It's just one example of the many things that happen when we're flying while disabled. We are second-class citizens.

The national director at DWP, Rabia Khedr, is blind. She cannot vote without another person reading out the candidates' names and her telling them her choice out loud. Rabia regularly receives letters in the mail from all levels of government with personal information. She has to get someone else to read them to her, whereas if they come by email, she has the technology to read them privately. She's denied these basic rights of a full citizen.

My friend Glenda, an award-winning master's student at Queen's University, is non-verbal. I asked her for a recent example of a lack of accessibility she has faced. She told me she currently has an issue with her business account at the CRA, and the only way they say they can fix it is if she calls them, but she can't speak. This type of thing happens day in, day out.

Through our work at DWP, we can tell you that barriers are hard-wired into the federal government programs that disabled people living in poverty try to access. In 2022, the Auditor General said the government doesn't have a clear picture of the hard-to-reach people not accessing benefits meant to support them. It's like the government can't connect the dots between the programs it has and the people who need them.

We can see this happening in new programs, and it's simply unacceptable. Both the Canadian dental care plan and the new Canada disability benefit, which David mentioned—the first payment will hopefully be in July 2025—require the disability tax credit as the entry point. It's a program that is woefully inadequate.

There are 1.5 million severely and very severely disabled Canadians living in poverty who should be receiving the Canada disability benefit next year. However, the government's own figures say that roughly only half a million Canadians will receive it, so a million Canadians living in poverty will not receive a benefit they're entitled to. These people can't wait any longer, and certainly not until 2040.

In 1966, Paul Hunt, a prominent English disabled man, said, "We are society, as much as anybody, and cannot be considered in isolation from it." The examples I've given today show that disabled people are still considered in isolation from the rest of society.

• (1130)

Anyone who knows their sports history knows that 1966 was the only time England won the World Cup. While I might sound English, I was born in Canada during the 1966-1967 hockey season, which was the last time the Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup. Therefore, I ask you this: What's most likely to happen first? Is it England winning the World Cup, the Leafs winning the Stanley Cup or disabled people in Canada being treated as full members of society? Which of these things, if any, will happen by 2040?

Thank you so much for your time. I welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hewitt. I appreciate the way you put that in perspective. I'm not a Leafs fan.

With that, we will begin with Mrs. Gray. Again, identify yourselves specifically to each witness you wish to question.

You have six minutes, Mrs. Gray.

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

I'm Tracy Gray, the vice-chair of this committee on behalf of the Conservative team. I'm wearing a black blazer with a cream-coloured blouse and I have blond shoulder-length hair.

My first questions are for Mr. Lepofsky.

I'm not sure if you heard of the situation that occurred last week at this committee when the House of Commons administration created a barrier to testifying virtually for a person living with a disability. He said he had testified previously. Within minutes of being notified of this, my Conservative colleagues and I took action. We tabled a motion—which passed—to ensure that the person is able to testify and that House administration does an immediate investigation and reports back to this committee within a month.

My question for you is this: Do you think we can have a credible conversation about a Canada without barriers when even the highest government institution in the land—Parliament—currently isn't without barriers?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Governments of all political stripes often talk about the importance of leading by example on accessibility. Now, we don't believe that anybody in the private sector needs to wait until the government gets it right. God knows, none of us are immortal. However, it is important for government to get it right, especially being at the core of democracy, and especially when the government repeatedly talks about its commitment to the disability rights maxim of "nothing about us without us". Well, you can't do that if we have barriers to taking part.

I agree these things need to be done, not only because they're embarrassing at a symbolic level but also because they're so easy to fix. The barrier you're talking about does not require us to tear down any buildings or adopt any new technology. It's technology we know how to use.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much.

You told the transport committee in March, earlier this year, that you "dread entering Canadian airspace." Do you believe other countries, such as the U.S., have better accessibility standards than Canada?

Mr. David Lepofsky: When I go to the States, which I do often, I feel like I'm going through a time machine into the future. I'm actually embarrassed to say this as a proud Canadian, but they're way ahead of us. It's not because they invented people with disabilities before we did. It's simply because, at a legislative level, they decided to pass something strong and effective way earlier—1990, not 2019—at the federal level. They put in place much more effective enforcement than we have. Their federal government has much more effective enforcement because they enacted much clearer and more comprehensive standards.

Now, are they the paragon? There is a lot they could be doing better, but they're way ahead of us. With a billion people with disabilities around the world, it means they have an edge in the tourism market for people with disabilities, with the goal of ensuring they can fully participate.

They're certainly ahead of us on multiple fronts. We should be catching up. We should have caught up by now and passed them.

• (1135)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

When I asked the minister of disability and inclusion in May, when she was at this committee, whether Canadians living with disabilities are facing a cost of living crisis, she wouldn't answer.

My question for you is this: Do you believe Canadians living with disabilities are in a cost of living crisis and have been disproportionately affected by it? As well, do you think it's more difficult when Canadians living with disabilities are disproportionately affected by the cost-of-living crisis? How does this play into creating a Canada without barriers, which this study is working on?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Absolutely, there is that cost-of-living crisis. When Parliament—this committee and the Senate—held hearings on the Canada disability benefit, you heard over and over how living with a disability costs more. During the pandemic, the federal government created a benefit for vulnerable folks across the country, and then it did another benefit for people with disabilities, but it was a once-only payment, and it took months after it was created just to get it out the door.

Yes, that is a huge problem, but just coming up with a Canada disability benefit that's only \$200 a month maximum really shows that the criticisms of that legislation from many of us were correct. We warned that this could happen. It did. It also shows that those of us who criticized Bill C-81, the Accessible Canada Act, because it didn't impose more deadlines and detailed requirements on the federal government, were, sadly, correct. We don't take any pleasure, pride or joy in that. We wish we were wrong.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I have only about 20 seconds left here, so I'd like to ask this: Given that the Liberals promised, with great fanfare, that the Canada disability benefit was going to lift hundreds of thousands of Canadians with disabilities out of poverty, do you see this as a broken promise? Also, do you see it being fraught with redundant bureaucracy and red tape for persons with disabilities and those who support them?

Mr. David Lepofsky: All the criticisms of the benefit, I think, are valid. What we also need.... There's a federal election coming up—as I hear by rumour, and you folks may have heard it too—and

it's going to be important for voters with disabilities to know what each of the parties will do on each of these, on the Accessible Canada Act and the Canada disability benefit. We'd like it to be treated by all parties as a non-partisan issue, because these laws were both passed unanimously, and all parties agreed we needed them, so we'd like all parties to try to outbid each other for what you'll do to fix them.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gray and Mr. Lepofsky.

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

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

First, I'd like to congratulate Kevin Mills on his incredible journey and the amount of work and effort that he's put into not just creating awareness in our community, but broadly.

My question is this: What are the primary challenges with the disability community in promoting accessibility, and how can the government better support your efforts?

Mr. Kevin Mills: Again, thanks for having me.

I think what you're doing here, having people with disabilities involved in committees like this and just that perspective.... My perspective is going to be vastly different from people without disabilities. I think I can help identify issues.

In terms of promotion, I think what I was doing there, in terms of demonstration and going out in public, was starting a discussion. Even if people weren't even following me online, they may have been driving by and seen me in a wheelchair biking along the highway, and it would make them think.

Also, when we went into campsites, we'd ask if they had an accessible shower, and they wouldn't, but then they'd say they should, and then they'd ask me what they could do. What would the shower need to be like?

I think the biggest thing is having more people with disabilities travelling to show the issues.

• (1140)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: I appreciate your efforts. I'm sure that my colleagues are eager to learn more, based on your lived experience.

I'll turn it over to my colleague Mr. Coteau.

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

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses today. Your perspective was very interesting.

I will join my colleague to congratulate you, Mr. Mills, on your accomplishment. Thank you for being with us today.

My question is to Mr. Lepofsky.

You talked about some of the recommendations that you made, and I think there were 10 recommendations. One of them was looking for ways to bring about a more coherent enforcement approach. You talked about the CRTC, the CTA and, I believe, the commissioner.

Can you talk a little bit more about how that would work in regard to your vision of enforcement?

Mr. David Lepofsky: I really appreciate the question.

Essentially, right now the law splinters implementation and enforcement among the three. They each have to make their own enforcement regulations and forms and stuff. They each set up their own procedures. They each have separate procedures for how they process complaints in their other work, and they're very different, so we essentially have to navigate three worlds.

Not only that: The same obligated organization can have some of its obligations under the Accessible Canada Act enforced by the accessibility commissioners and others by the CRTC or the Canadian Transportation Agency. It is impossible to figure this out.

In fact, the minister responsible for the bill, in speaking to the Senate, gave an illustration of this, which I recall related to airplanes. She actually got it wrong. I don't say that to be critical of her; it's to be sympathetic to her because it's so bloody hard to figure out.

Instead, how about we have one agency with a mandate to do all of this work, so it's one-stop shopping for obligated organizations and for individuals? It's one set of regulations instead of three. It will cost us less.

It also has an added advantage, which is that the CRTC and the Canadian Transportation Agency have very sorry records of implementing accessibility. They've had a mandate not for five years, but for decades, and they have done it really poorly.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Can I ask another follow-up question?

I know that a lot of responsibility lies at the municipal and provincial levels. I know you spend a lot of time working on that.

How do those relationships among the three levels of government work? Are there efficiencies there in regard to how the levels of government work together?

Mr. David Lepofsky: No, and I wouldn't expect there to be. We should all live long enough for it to happen. As a practical coalition trying to win results for people with disabilities who need action now, our best bet is to advocate to the provinces to handle the barriers they're facing and advocate to the federal government to address theirs.

However, the federal government has an incredible constitutionally valid power to influence at the provincial and municipal level, which is when it's giving out federal money. When it gave federal money to Toronto to build a subway extension up to York University and beyond, which opened before 2018, they used that money to

design subway stations that are replete with disability barriers. We put out a video. It's widely viewed online. People can google "David Lepofsky public transit Toronto" and they'll see these barriers that we filmed and documented.

The federal government should be attaching strings that simply say that if you want their money, there can be no new barriers.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I think my time is up. Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes. Please go ahead.

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

My sincere thanks to all the witnesses for their excellent remarks.

My questions are for the COPHAN representatives.

Thank you for your participation today and your commitment to over one million French-speaking people with disabilities. That is a great deal of work.

COPHAN is a disability rights organization. We're talking about the Accessible Canada Act, which applies to services under federal jurisdiction.

What are the main barriers that the people you represent experience when accessing services that fall under federal jurisdiction?

• (1145)

Mr. Paul Lupien: I'll let Mr. Salgado answer that question.

Mr. Dominique Salgado: Good morning Mr. Chair.

Good morning everyone.

Thank you for that important question, Ms. Chabot.

Every single day, people with disabilities encounter difficulties and barriers. That may have to do with the fact that the principle of universal accessibility is not adhered to in various places across the country, Quebec, in our case. People with disabilities also face barriers when it comes to transportation, particularly air travel. Canadian border services aren't always accessible to people with functional limitations. Accessibility barriers exist in workplaces and businesses. It's a very long list.

COPHAN opted for an approach based on co-operation. Yes, the federal government's goal of making Canada barrier-free by 2040 has moved the needle in terms of improvements and ideas—and we are, of course, thankful for that—but support across the board is really what's necessary.

We also applaud the efforts and progress other provinces have made. For example, spaces in Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and British Columbia are much more accessible to people with disabilities than spaces in Quebec.

I want to draw something else to your attention, Ms. Chabot. As you know, the rate of disability in Canada is 27%, which is equivalent to eight million people. The rate of disability in Quebec is 21%. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Quebec is expected to see one of the biggest increases in the population of people 65 and older by 2031. That means the number of seniors will double, even triple, in some parts of Quebec.

We obviously would like to see coercive measures to remedy that lack of leadership in Quebec. There are laws, but they aren't respected. Here's a simple example. The national building code, which falls under federal jurisdiction, is not respected in Quebec, or at least very little. A contractor who fails to comply with Quebec's building code will get a slap on the wrist from their professional association and a \$500 to \$1,200 fine. That's it. In Ontario, the penalties are much harsher.

We'd like to see the work being done elsewhere serve as a model. To achieve a fair Canada, accessibility standards must be adhered to all over the country.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I have a follow-up question. As I think about what we heard from witnesses last week, I'd like to look at the broader context.

By the way, you're right about the aging population. That's actually why we are calling on the government to better support seniors, including seniors with disabilities.

Would you still say there's been a cultural change in attitude towards people with disabilities over time? I'm talking about society overall. We know that these people have fought for their rights. On the whole, has there been considerable progress in your view?

Mr. Paul Lupien: Ms. Chabot, what I would say is that it's really a problem in Quebec. I've said this a lot, including in radio interviews I've done all over the country, from the east coast to the west coast. I often commend provinces on the progress they've made. Quebec, unfortunately, has gotten rid of a number of services for people with disabilities, but they have access to medical assistance in dying—euthanasia, rather. That's our reality in Quebec.

We want the Accessible Canada Act to apply across the country. After all, the legislation is based on a UN convention to which Canada is a signatory. Nevertheless, we were forced to threaten the government with a complaint to the UN. Quebec has a responsibility and is required to adhere to the UN convention Canada signed. All too often, it isn't respected, so we have to use threats. It is only thanks to a complaint we submitted to the UN that the government did away with the retirement pension penalty in Quebec.

• (1150)

Ms. Louise Chabot: Certainly, there is room for improvement.

Nevertheless, what we're talking about here is the fact that the Accessible Canada Act isn't meeting its own objectives or doing its job at the federal level.

Besides the provincial disparities that may exist, does the Accessible Canada Act need more teeth? Should the act make it mandatory for companies that provide transportation or services to ensure accessibility, instead of just establishing standards those companies can choose to comply with or not? In other words, should the act be strengthened and include obligations around results, and perhaps even penalties?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

The time has gone.

Next is Mr. Cannings for six minutes.

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Thank you.

It's good to have all of you here before us.

I'm Richard Cannings. I'm with the NDP, but I'm not the usual NDP person on this committee. I'm substituting today. It's been very interesting to hear this testimony.

I'm going to start with Ms. Hewitt in Kelowna. I happen to live over the hill in Penticton. I'm not over the hill myself, I hope.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Richard Cannings: It's good to have someone from the Okanagan here before us, even virtually.

Ms. Hewitt, you made some very compelling statements, I think, particularly about the Canada disability benefit, when you suggested that one and a half million people should be receiving this benefit but only maybe a third of that number qualify. I've read elsewhere that only a few thousand people will actually be raised out of poverty because of this benefit.

Part of that problem, as you said, is the requirement around the disability tax credit, which is a very difficult credit to apply for. I know that probably all the MPs here, and certainly all my colleagues in the NDP caucus, have regular workshops to try to explain how to navigate that process of getting the disability tax credit. It's a very convoluted process.

I'm wondering if you could explain how you see this disability benefit and how people would qualify for it. What would be the simplest and most straightforward way for the government to make sure that we're actually raising people out of poverty?

Ms. Michelle Hewitt: Thank you.

Thank you for being here from the Okanagan as well.

As David mentioned—and I'm sorry, but my service dog has decided that our time is up, and you may hear a little bit from him in the background—the co-operation between federal and provincial levels just doesn't exist, but we have excellent systems, by and large, in the provincial systems, in comparison to the federal government, for getting people to jump through the hoops to be awarded provincial disability assistance payments.

We believe, as do many other disability organizations, as do some provincial governments, that once you've jumped through that hoop, that's enough, and you should be automatically eligible for the Canada disability benefit. Because the government is adamant that the only list they have of disabled people is the disability tax credit, that may mean that those people are made automatically eligible for the disability tax credit. It sounds so simple that it just floors me that it can't happen.

Again, it comes to this lack of ability for different levels of government to talk to each other. These responsibilities to stay siloed, and there's also the lack of imagination and the lack of drive to want to make this happen. You know, everybody working on this at the CRA in the government should be so embarrassed and working desperately hard to work out how those extra million people get this benefit, and that simply isn't happening.

I spend my days working on this as a volunteer for my organization, and we spend our time trying to come up with every method that we can. Can we do rolling workshops? Somebody suggested to me that we can use the army medical corps to roll through and get people signed up for the disability tax credit.

It's like filling Okanagan Lake with a teaspoon instead of a firehose. The firehose is getting people automatically signed up once they've already jumped through significant hoops at the provincial, territorial and federal levels, including, as I understand it, the people who already get CPPD—the Canada pension plan disability—who are not automatically eligible for the Canada disability benefit. You're receiving a federal disability benefit, and you still do not become automatically eligible.

You can hear my passion for this. We are desperately letting down severely and very severely disabled people who live in poverty.

• (1155)

Mr. Richard Cannings: Thank you very much, Ms. Hewitt.

Mr. Lepofsky, you said in your statement that you wouldn't have time to go over everything. I can give you the one minute I have left here to add anything that you haven't had the opportunity to outline so far.

Mr. David Lepofsky: In the 2019 election, the federal government commendably promised that they would apply a disability lens to all federal policies. Require that in the act.

In the Senate, the government made an amendment to the bill that actually hurts people with disabilities. It provides that even if you win a case against one of the huge airlines and you prove that they have a barrier, if the barrier was actually one that the government's own regulations allowed, which no federal regulation ever should, the CTA can't order one penny in damages. They can say to

fix the barrier that the regulation should never have permitted, but they can't compensate the victims.

That should be out of this act.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cannings.

Ms. Falk, you have five minutes.

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

My name is Rosemarie Falk. I'm from Saskatchewan. I'm a member of Parliament. I am a female with brown hair and I'm wearing a floral dress today.

I'd like to thank everybody for their testimony today and for taking the time to come here.

Mr. Lepofsky, I'll start with you just quickly, if that's all right. Thank you for your return to this committee and for your continued advocacy for persons with disabilities.

When you appeared at this committee during its considerations on Bill C-81, you raised concerns that the bill was “strong on intention but weak on enforcement and implementation”.

Five years after the passage of this bill, and from your opening remarks, would you say that those concerns still stand?

Mr. David Lepofsky: Absolutely. In other words, the core frailties with the bill are exactly the ones we identified six years ago and sought to get corrected, as did a number of other disability organizations.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes. I know that we brought forward many amendments for that bill. This whole side of the table voted for a lot of those amendments to make sure that there was accountability and enforcement. Why would we go through all of this work and not have any enforcement or accountability? It just doesn't seem like a good use of resources.

You've mentioned a few times this one-stop shop, basically, this agency where you suggest that everything would be. Would you say that if something like that were implemented, everything else would kind of fit together? Would that be the most important recommendation? What would you recommend?

• (1200)

Mr. David Lepofsky: There are two things, really, at the top of the list. One is the one-stop shop. The other is that accessibility standards regulations have to be enforced.

Let me make this clear. If you want people to remove barriers, yes, we could bring human rights complaints and then die of old age waiting to get them heard. Yes, we could bring CTA or CRTA complaints about the same thing, but instead, the whole purpose for this act—which the minister at the time, Carla Qualtrough, got absolutely right—is that we shouldn't have to fight barriers one at a time. Let's pass accessibility standards regulations that identify the barriers to be removed, and the timelines. Without that, nothing else does much. They haven't passed any of those in five years.

Accessibility Standards Canada has come up with volunteer guidelines, but that's all they could do. Commend them for their efforts and commend them for doing what they could do, but as I said before, it's thin gruel. Nobody would obey the speed limit if it were voluntary.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much.

Ms. Hewitt, I'd like to turn to you, if possible.

You've mentioned a couple of examples of barriers. I think a lot of times people think of a barrier as something that's only physical, but there absolutely are invisible barriers that we don't necessarily see. I would chalk this up to too much bureaucracy or red tape, which makes it difficult for people to be able to access the supports they need.

I know that you mentioned a couple of examples previously, just with the CRA. Are there any other invisible barriers in place, knowingly or unknowingly from the federal government, that if removed would make it easier? I can think of plain language, for example, as being something so simple. We can just change the language to make it easily read and understood.

Is there anything that you would suggest the federal government could change?

Ms. Michelle Hewitt: Certainly Ms. Gray knows that I have MS. MS Canada has long fought for people with invisible disabilities and how that happens in our society.

I gave the example of my friend Glenda, who, as I say, is non-verbal. The attitudes that people who have communication disabilities face.... Often, first of all, people start to shout at them, because they decide that they're deaf, or they treat them as if they had intellectual disabilities, but, really, she can't speak.

It's very simple that our system has so many things built into it, as I say. The CRA says they can only deal with.... I have this issue myself. They could only deal with a phone call, and the wait time was so long, and I have severe fatigue. Then it went into the time in the day when I go to sleep.

I think, with the DTC and this example, that it sounds like the CRA is in my headlights, which they certainly are, but these attitudes are fundamental to how we approach all barrier removal. I think that the invisible barriers in our society are the most insidious, because people say that they—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hewitt.

Ms. Michelle Hewitt: —don't believe you because there isn't a test.

I'm also diabetic, and for a long time I said that my MS.... There's no test that can prove my invisible disabilities, which I believe are—I'm struggling for words now, which is one of my disabilities—worse than my mobility disabilities. I am also diabetic, and I can take a blood test every day and tell you exactly how my diabetes is.

I think that what we have is an attitudinal problem. That also comes with that lack of belief and also that sense that, like that quote from 58 years ago from Paul Hunt, disabled people are thought of in isolation, and we're not thought of as part of society.

A blind friend said to me that our streets are full of these accessible devices for everybody, such as street lights, and she doesn't need them. If we flip it the other way around—

The Chair: Ms. Hewitt, I do have to move on.

Ms. Michelle Hewitt: I'm sorry. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

To conclude this round, Mr. Long, you have five minutes.

• (1205)

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

Good afternoon to my colleagues.

Thank you to our witnesses. Again, it was very compelling testimony.

Mr. Lepofsky, my name is Wayne Long. I'm a Liberal member of Parliament, the member for Saint John—Rothesay. I have a blue blazer, a popping pink shirt and messy brown and grey hair today.

Mr. Lepofsky, you have my respect. With MP Falk and MP Chabot, I was a part of this committee in 2019 when it passed the accessibility act. We're very proud of that.

One thing I'll say about you, Mr. Lepofsky, is that you always told it like it was, the good and the bad, so you have my respect.

Ms. Hewitt, I do think that the Leafs will win the Stanley Cup this year.

Also, Mr. Mills, you came through New Brunswick. You were north of Saint John, I believe, and I don't believe I've met you, but you have my respect for what you did.

I hearken back to 10 or 11 years ago and one of our good friends. His name is Andy Bell, and this is a side note. His father's name was Tom Bell, and Tom Bell was a Conservative member of Parliament in Saint John—Rothesay for almost 25 years. Andy is disabled; he's in a wheelchair. Again, this was 10 or 11 years ago.

I remember a group of us saying, "Listen, Abber," as we called him, "let's go out for dinner." We decided that we were going to go out and we picked him up, but it became very apparent how few restaurants we could get into. You know, again, we never really thought about it, but I would say that out of the 10 we had selected, there were only two of those restaurants that we could get a wheelchair into.

I also think back to my time. I've been a member of Parliament since 2015, but I think back to how many events I've attended in my riding that really weren't accessible to people with disabilities.

I have a question for you, Ms. Hewitt and Mr. Mills. We have moved forward, and people do mean well, as you said, but that doesn't get us to where we need to get.

We'll start with you, Ms. Hewitt. What specific recommendations would you suggest to the committee that we include in the report to ensure meaningful progress towards a barrier-free Canada? What more would you recommend that we put in this report?

Ms. Michelle Hewitt: First of all, you have to make the strongest statement possible that this situation is not acceptable. Sixteen more years is not acceptable. We would like to hear that echoed by all party leaders. David speaks long and hard about all the pieces of legislation and all the teeth, or the lack of teeth; at some point, somebody has to say, "Enough."

I will pass my time on to somebody else, but I strongly believe that as disabled people, we need allies. Our voices alone are not enough, even though we are 27% of the population. We need your voices to say, "Enough. No more. No more messing around with this." As David says, "Not another dollar spent."

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Mills.

Mr. Kevin Mills: I'm speaking specifically about the bike route and about disabled travel in general.

When I talk about a bike route, I'm thinking about something that, when it's made, considers a wheelchair, meaning things like width, being signed, and being easy to follow. The surface has to be paved; it can't be gravel.

We were cycling by a trail that goes across Canada, and honestly, it looked beautiful, but it was more for ATVs. It's not something I could access. It has to be a specific marked route.

Along the way, we should be able to find hotels, or campsites that are truly accessible and meet that standard for a shower, so that it's not just grab bars in a bath tub. It's a specific standard for travel.

Finally, flying home was so difficult. That was probably one of the hardest parts of the trip. There has to be legislation to allow someone to sit in a wheelchair on a flight. That would have made the flight home much easier for me.

I think a trail across Canada would be pretty amazing.

Thank you.

• (1210)

The Chair: Mr. Lepofsky, I'll ask you for a short closing comment.

Mr. David Lepofsky: Everything you need is in the nine-page brief we've submitted. It's been emailed to every one of your offices. The government will post it on your website. It's at aodaalliance.org/Canada, probably at the second link. We suggest the findings you should make and the recommendations you should make.

Ask those questions. Are we 25% of the way? No. Have we removed a significant number of barriers due to this act in five years? No. Therefore, the law needs to be strengthened, and we've given you 10 ways to do it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

Mr. Lepofsky, thank you for appearing again. Mr. Mills, Monsieur Lupien, Ms. Hewitt, and Mr. Salgado, thank you, as well.

This concludes the first hour. We'll suspend for a few minutes while we transition to the second panel.

• (1210) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

The Chair: Committee members, welcome back to the second and final panel for today.

Again, I would remind all the witnesses to speak slowly for the benefit of the interpreters.

We have, appearing in the room, from the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence, James Janeiro, policy and government relations, and Christina Bisanz, chief executive officer, Community and Home Assistance to Seniors.

We had scheduled Mr. Bill Adair, but he is not reachable at the moment.

We will begin with Mr. Janeiro for five minutes.

Mr. Janeiro, you have the floor.

Mr. James Janeiro (Director, Policy and Government Relations, Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you again today. A special thanks go to MP Tracy Gray for helping make it possible to come back and speak to you.

My name is James Janeiro, and I'm with the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence.

Our mandate includes caregivers, care providers and care recipients of all sorts. As such, disability is central to our mission and informs all of our funding priorities and convening opportunities, as well as our policy and advocacy work.

One in four Canadians is a caregiver today, and half of all Canadians will be a caregiver at some point in their lives. Half of all Canadian women already today are caregivers in 2024. Our recent survey report, called "Caring in Canada", from May of this year, showed that about one-fifth of all caregivers support someone with a physical or intellectual disability, including parents and loved ones supporting children and adults with lifelong disabilities.

The passage of the Accessible Canada Act was a watershed moment for disability inclusion in Canada. In the months since, Canadians with disabilities have seen movement on implementation and standards development. Some excellent progress has been made. We now have a chief accessibility officer and an accessibility commissioner, millions of dollars have been allocated towards coverage of medical costs for the disability tax credit, and the employment strategy is well under way.

Perhaps most importantly, the federal government has allocated millions of dollars to the Canada disability benefit, with the promise of more to come. This is farther than we were, but not as far as we could or should be.

Millions of people with disabilities and the caregivers involved in their lives are crying out for help paying the bills—plain and simple. In 2021, Disability Without Poverty published a report card showing that 16.5% of people with disabilities live in poverty—more than 1.5 million people. In contrast, 8.5% of people without disabilities across the country live in poverty. Inclusion Canada reports that the problem is particularly acute for people with intellectual disabilities, who face a poverty rate of some 75%.

What does this have to do with caregivers? One-fifth of the caregivers in our survey reported supporting someone financially. Much of this can be traced to caregivers providing financial support to their loved ones with disabilities due to pervasive and deep poverty rates. Every dollar spent supporting someone they love means fewer dollars to pay the rent or purchase groceries for their families. One in five caregivers earns less than \$20,000 a year. For caregivers who earn around or less than the median household income of \$68,000 a year, nearly half report experiencing financial distress as a result of their care responsibilities.

Much needs to be done to get more financial supports into the pockets of people with disabilities and their caregivers. A Canada disability benefit is the future, and one that I hope will become a reality very soon.

In the meantime, the immediate next logical step within the context of this report is to focus on making existing programs and services properly accessible. Too many people with disabilities and too many caregivers are still unaware of the benefits to which they may be entitled and how to apply for them. Only 12% of caregivers said the person they support receives financial supports, and a mere 8% of caregivers receive the Canada caregiver credit. Those who have tried almost universally report finding the process arbitrary, opaque and even Kafkaesque.

I hope that the Accessibility Standards Canada technical committee that is developing standards in this regard will consider the views of people with disabilities and their caregivers and strive very hard to make the Canada disability benefit, Canada caregiver credit and of course the Canada disability benefit as accessible as possible. In the meantime, let's take a massive hammer to the disability tax credit and make it as simple as possible to access for everyone.

People with disabilities and caregivers need help today. The framework and early steps under the Accessible Canada Act set the stage for making present and future support more accessible for all Canadians.

Thank you for the opportunity, and I look forward to your questions.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Janeiro.

Committee members, I have to suspend for a couple of moments. We are having technical issues connecting with the people appearing virtually.

I will suspend for two moments.

• (1220)

(Pause)

• (1220)

The Chair: The committee will resume. The technical issues have been resolved.

We will now turn to Ms. Bisanz. Ms. Bisanz, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Christina Bisanz (Chief Executive Officer, Community and Home Assistance to Seniors): Thank you so much for this opportunity to be here to address all of you.

My name is Christina Bisanz. I'm the CEO of CHATS, Community and Home Assistance to Seniors.

We're one of the largest multicultural, non-profit seniors organizations in Ontario, serving some 8,000 older adults and their caregivers in York Region and south Simcoe. Our mandate is to advocate and deliver high-quality, person-centred home and community services to older adults and their family caregivers, providing dignity and choice for aging at home.

I'd like to thank MP Tony Van Bynen for inviting us to present to you today.

CHATS is pleased that this committee is undertaking this study to consider progress towards the goal of building a barrier-free Canada by 2040. All around us, we do see evidence that many municipalities, communities and organizations are addressing elements of this goal.

As of the latest data, over 560 communities in Canada have committed to becoming age-friendly by making changes to policies, services and structures to better support and enable older adults to age actively.

Senior-friendly standards offer numerous benefits to older adults, enhancing their quality of life in several key ways: meeting basic needs, promoting mobility, encouraging social connections and enhancing safety through design elements like non-slip flooring and better lighting to reduce the risk of falls and injuries.

While it's important that communities are looking to implement age-friendly standards, I'd also like to emphasize that this committee consider the importance of universal design standards to support older adults to live independently and safely in their own homes.

The aim of universal design standards for housing is to create living spaces that are accessible and usable by everyone, regardless of age, disability or other factors. Consider that by 2050, 10 years after the time frame of this study, the number of seniors over 65 will be double what it is today. As our population ages, it becomes increasingly crucial to adopt universal design principles that cater to their diverse needs in the near term.

Currently, Canada faces a significant shortage of housing, especially housing that is more affordable. This is compounded by the reality that builders are not constructing enough accessible housing.

We understand that several factors have impeded the housing industry's progress towards adopting universal design standards. They include higher costs and a lack of incentive. Changing building codes and regulations can be slow, thereby impacting accessibility requirements to new developments.

Some builders may also underestimate the demand for accessible housing by assuming it's just a niche market, but at CHATS, we see a growing need for accessible homes, especially when family members are looking to support their older loved ones by living together.

Unfortunately, modifying existing homes, despite various tax credits that have been made available, is often more expensive and complicated than building accessible homes from the start.

With over 93% of older adults preferring to age in the right place for them, it's clear there's a strong desire for homes that can adapt to changing needs. Universal design principles can help create homes that are safe and comfortable for aging in place.

These principles are not just about making spaces accessible but also about creating environments that are usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

The fact that 38% of adults aged 65 and older have a disability underscores the necessity of homes that accommodate various physical needs. As well, the high percentage of older adult renters, at 32.8%, indicates a significant demand for accessible rental housing.

Norway is often considered a leader in universal design, particularly in the context of housing and public infrastructure. They've integrated universal design into national policies and legislation. Accessibility is a legal requirement.

This approach is also supported by comprehensive planning: Municipalities are required to consider universal design in all planning and building activities, essentially making accessibility a fundamental aspect of urban development.

To be successful, integrating housing with essential services is a key aspect of creating supportive environments for older adults. This includes proximity to health care, transportation and community services. These social connections, which are crucial for healthy aging and reducing the negative impact of loneliness and isolation on mental health and well-being, add considerable costs to our health and social care system.

Investing in universal design is not just a matter of convenience; it's a matter of necessity. As we look to the future, we must recognize that the demand for accessible housing and communities will only grow.

● (1225)

At CHATS, we're committed to advocating these changes.

We work tirelessly to support older adults through our programs and services, but we cannot do it alone. We need the support of policy-makers, developers, architects and the community at large. Together, we can create environments where older adults can thrive, live independently and enjoy the quality of life they deserve.

In closing, I urge all of you to consider the options to promote and expand the importance of universal design in our communities. Let's build a future by 2040 in which all citizens, regardless of their ability, can live with dignity, safety and independence.

Thank you for your attention and commitment to this vital cause.

I look forward to your questions and comments.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Bisanz.

We're going to go to Mr. Adair, who I understand is now in the virtual room.

We're going to begin with you, Mr. Adair. The translators will tell me if the sound is okay.

You can begin when you're ready, Mr. Adair.

Mr. Bill Adair (Executive Director, Spinal Cord Injury Canada): Thank you.

I am Bill Adair, executive director of Spinal Cord Injury Canada, a board member of Accessibility Standards Canada, a member of Minister Khara's disability advisory group and a Canadian citizen who has a disability. Spinal Cord Injury Canada is also a member of the Canadian Transportation Agency's accessibility advisory committee.

Believe me when I say that I have been paying close attention to the progress of the Accessible Canada Act. In October 2018, I presented to this committee as part of the Federal Accessibility Legislation Alliance. At that time, we made 12 recommendations. I have included these in my written report, but I will comment on some of them now.

The very first recommendation was to create a culture of inclusion and equity. We recommended that all people employed by the federal public sector engage in an intensive awareness and education program about disability, access and inclusion. Legislation alone is not enough to develop inclusive attitudes and equitable practices.

This recommendation was not included in the act. In the last five years, we have witnessed how Canadian culture and our federal government have not shifted to be inclusive of people with disabilities in Canada. For example, low COVID payments, the introduction of MAID for people with disabilities during COVID and a lacklustre Canada disability benefit all demonstrate this fact. Oh, ableism is strong and present.

Another recommendation back in 2018 was to ensure that people with disabilities are compensated for their expertise. We said that funding will make or break this legislation, so make it available to people with disabilities and organizations. Time after time, federally regulated entities approached people with disabilities and organizations, asking for advice on their accessibility plans or progress reports but offering no compensation. They can tick the box for reaching out to us, but entities that must comply with the act should have a yearly budget line to do the expected work.

On another point, we recommended expanding compliance. We felt that entities that receive funding from the Government of Canada should also comply with the act. New standards and regula-

tions could clarify expectations. However, this point is moot as, sadly, only one standard from Accessibility Standards Canada has been released in five years. There has been no follow-up with a regulation. There is so much work to do.

Ironically, another one of our recommendations was not to delay and that all standards and regulations be implemented within five years.

We also recommended that people with disabilities be included in the fabric of the act. Inclusion honours the principle of "nothing about us without us" and provides employment opportunities. Generally, I think Accessibility Standards Canada has incorporated this principle. However, I am concerned that we not lose momentum with the turnover of the CEO, the chair of the board and several board directors all at the same time. These changes could reduce the board's effectiveness in providing governance and oversight. The board needs to be supported to fulfill this role, while the staff focuses on operations. Otherwise, a large part of the disability leadership of the act is lost.

Speaking of disability leadership, it is also fair to say that progress stalled because of the delay in hiring the accessibility commissioner and the chief accessibility officer. The government did not appoint them until the spring of 2022.

With regard to employment opportunities, the federal public service was to hire 5,000 people with disabilities. I don't know how close we are to this number. I do know that some people have been hired on contract, which is great. However, I know of several who do not have access to a pension because they are not full-time employees.

Currently, the public service is on track with its accessibility plans and progress reports, but large private sector organizations are only at 52%. Small entities are only at 12%. The disability community fought hard to ensure that the act had a mechanism to enforce compliance through fines of up to \$250,000 per day. Why haven't the fines been used? What are we waiting for?

Ultimately, a significant barrier to our progress is the lack of coordination and collaboration among the act's primary roles. The Government of Canada should identify one role responsible for coordination, collaboration and communication among the major players responsible for implementing different areas of the act.

• (1230)

The person in this role should be ready to take charge. They should keep track of progress and report on it. They should ensure that when we reach 2040, we can look back and be proud of our success and our barrier-free Canada. If we keep going the way we have for the last five years, we will all look back with disappointment.

Thank you.

• (1235)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Adair.

I want to advise the committee that we'll have one six-minute round and then we'll suspend to conclude with committee business.

Ms. Gray, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

My first questions are for Mr. Janeiro.

Many caregivers are family members, are they not?

Mr. James Janeiro: They are indeed.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Do you believe Canadians living with disabilities are in a cost of living crisis? Have families who are caring for family members living with disabilities been disproportionately affected by a cost-of-living crisis, in your perspective?

Mr. James Janeiro: The simple answer is yes. The slightly more complicated answer is yes, definitely.

About one in five caregivers in Canada is out of pocket to the tune of about \$1,000 a month, just based on their care responsibilities alone.

About the same number—one in five Canadian caregivers—earn less than \$20,000 a year, so trying to find \$1,000 a month for extra costs when you're already living on a fairly limited income is a pretty tough job to do. When costs keep going up at the grocery store, on the hydro bill and at the pump, you feel that pinch more and more every day.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

What are some examples of some of the ongoing hidden costs you hear about, whether it's home renovations, medical supplies, medical equipment or others?

Have those items gone up proportionately higher than the inflation rate?

Mr. James Janeiro: That's a very good question.

The problem is not so much that they're hidden. They're in plain sight. You know you're going to need to do a home modification. You know you're going to need to purchase a certain number of packages of a dietary supplement—Ensure, for example, or incontinence aids and stuff like that. They're not hidden costs because you know they're coming, but the part that's hidden is how high those prices will go every time you go to the grocery store.

We have seen less of it, but we're now seeing across Canada shortages of Ensure, this critical dietary supplement. In some places

there were shortages and in other places the prices were skyrocketing pretty quickly, over and above the increases in the cost of living that we were living with, particularly in those periods of higher inflation.

We've started to see some of those prices stabilize and the supply chains have stabilized as well, but the base price for a lot of those aids that people with disabilities desperately need remains high.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Based on your experience, would caregivers often be the ones who take care of things like scheduling or managing appointments and health care needs, as well as helping fill out any government paperwork for benefits, as an example?

Mr. James Janeiro: Absolutely, yes, and I can say that both professionally and personally, as a caregiver myself.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Have you heard if the Liberal government policies of the Canada disability benefit are fraught with redundant bureaucracy and red tape for persons with disabilities and those who support them?

Mr. James Janeiro: I think there is a big opportunity for improvement here.

The suggestion is that the disability tax credit will be one of the ways through into the Canada disability benefit. Our position is that it is fine as one avenue into the disability benefit. We stand with our allies who say that the eligibility for provincial disability supports should also be considered automatic acceptance into the Canada disability benefit.

However, for the disability tax credit, this is why I threw in that line about taking a massive hammer to the disability tax credit. It is Kafkaesque, bureaucratic and very difficult to access. It can be good and it can make a difference in the lives of a lot of people, but if the barriers are sky-high to get in the door in the first place, it shouldn't really be considered as the open door to the next bit of support from the government.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: On a different topic, have you heard of specific barriers for persons with mobility assistance needs being created by different or conflicting rules from different levels of government, such as in building construction or road infrastructure or with various types of transportation?

Mr. James Janeiro: Not specifically, but if you will indulge me with an example around the disability tax credit, I was born missing an arm. I have worn a prosthetic my whole life. I have claimed a disability tax credit myself and have for a long time. I know of people in a similar situation, missing another limb—a leg or another arm.

I have never had to reapply for the disability tax credit, but there are people I know with the same condition, from birth missing a limb, who every few years have to prove once again that they are still missing their limb. That, to me, is an example of an improvement that could be made probably tomorrow with some really good, dedicated work on the part of the Canada Revenue Agency to make all of this easier to access for people with disabilities.

• (1240)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I'm sorry. Did you say that they have to keep proving—

Mr. James Janeiro: Periodically, yes—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: —that they still don't have a limb, as an example?

Mr. James Janeiro: It's not exclusive to missing a limb. It's true of mental health and other disabilities as well. I used that as an example because I know it a little better.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Wow. Thank you for that.

We heard comments from a previous witness, Paul Clark, who was here telling us about mobility devices. They can go further and faster, but accessible infrastructure is often designed for the mobility devices of 50 years ago.

Have you heard any comments from the caregivers you work with who may have challenges with infrastructure not keeping up with the technology of today?

Mr. James Janeiro: I certainly have, particularly in the context of power wheelchairs. You're right to say that many of the standards—both provincially and from the Canadian Standards Association—are based on the post-Vietnam War manually operated wheelchair that is ubiquitous all over the world.

However, more and more people are using power wheelchairs, which are life-saving and mobility-saving aids that make it possible, as you said, to go further and faster and to live your life in a more liberated, independent way. Things like doors and the like are not built wide enough for those.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

Mr. Van Bynen, go ahead for six minutes.

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

My questions will be directed towards Christina Bisanz.

Christina, you covered a lot of ground in your comments, and I'd like to unpack a bit of that.

Based on your many years of experience supporting seniors through the CHATS organization across York Region and Simcoe County, as well as on your role as a municipal councillor, can you share some of the barriers the federal government can help better address?

Ms. Christina Bisanz: Thank you, MP Van Bynen, for that question. It's a great question.

I think this study has an opportunity to look into some of these issues. There are opportunities that may be available to individuals so they can better access services and so forth. If you don't have the basic ability to enter a house or home, wherever that may be, be-

cause of a wheelchair or what have you, it adds yet another layer of challenge and inaccessibility to those who could otherwise live quite independently in their own homes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Would you suggest the federal government include some of those standards in the building code that applies nationally?

Ms. Christina Bisanz: I think we have the universal design standards available to us. Canada has actually been lauded for those universal design standards. The challenge is getting them implemented.

As I indicated, there are a number of reasons that developers and the building industry have not necessarily responded, and why building codes have taken a long time to make changes and recognize that those design standards should be part of those codes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Given that federal, provincial and municipal governments have different jurisdictions and responsibilities, how would you envisage them working together for the benefit of persons with disabilities?

Ms. Christina Bisanz: Well, I think there is an opportunity, for example, to offer training programs to architects, builders and developers on universal design principles through partnerships with educational institutions and professional organizations at all levels. Also, perhaps look at ways to provide financial incentives, such as through tax credits or grants, to developers who incorporate those universal design principles in their projects.

Finally, engage with groups like CHATS, disability advocacy groups and other stakeholders to gather input in order to ensure standards meet the needs of all users. We've heard from other presenters today. I think we're all sharing common thoughts and recommendations on what needs to change and what can be changed to alleviate some of these barriers to and challenges for accessibility.

• (1245)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: We've had a lot discussion about the hard infrastructure that needs some attention. I'd like to spend a few minutes on social infrastructure.

I'm going to give you an opportunity to explain what NORCs are and how they may be a part of the solution toward providing service and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Ms. Christina Bisanz: NORCs are naturally occurring retirement communities that typically have more than 30% of the residents within the NORC area. That could be a building, a cluster of buildings or a building within a neighbourhood where a significant number of older adults are living. It brings together services and supports within the NORC to enable seniors to have access to information and social programs. In some instances, NORCs will offer primary care support. They may have a nurse practitioner who comes in once a week to speak with the residents or tenants, in some cases.

Essentially, it brings services, social engagement and activity to where the seniors live, as opposed to expecting that seniors will go out somewhere else and will have to travel to receive those services and social opportunities.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

I have one last question. We have about a minute.

What specific recommendations would you suggest the committee include in its report to ensure more meaningful progress toward a barrier-free Canada?

Ms. Christina Bisanz: Following up on your question regarding the NORCs and universal design standards, to really be successful we have to look at integrating housing with essential services in order to create those supportive environments for older adults. That includes proximity to health care, transportation and community services.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Ms. Chabot. You have six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

Mr. Adair, you represent people with spinal cord injuries and other physical disabilities. Would you say that the Accessible Canada Act is adequate in its current form to achieve the goal of eliminating barriers? If not, what changes are needed?

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Adair: Thank you for the question.

The act has some very strong components that are not being implemented with the kind of speed that's required to drive changes more quickly.

For example, there are the regulations that are required, and it should be mandatory that federally regulated entities would be required to comply with them. We have one standard, but it hasn't been turned into a regulation. How quickly will it be turned into a regulation? Accelerating the speed of that has to happen.

I think there is low-hanging fruit available. Over 400 large federally regulated entities are ignoring the requirement of creating an accessibility plan and posting annual updates. No fines have been issued. I don't know anything about what kind of pressure is being put on these organizations, but to me, it's a matter of exercising the enforcement that is in the act that could actually have an impact on change to remove barriers and prevent new barriers.

I think the act has a lot of tools that are effective, so there's a lot there, but I think there's much more that could be brought in. I pointed out paying attention to and pouring resources into shifting the culture and the attitudes of people in Canada towards those of us with disabilities. That's over six million people. It's the attitudes that need to shift, and then the changes will come much more quickly, because people will embrace the changes, as opposed to seeing it as just a box to tick.

• (1250)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I imagine the obstacles are numerous, but are there any especially challenging areas the government should prioritize? Inclusion in the workplace and the transportation sector are two that come to mind. Some witnesses have brought up housing as well.

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Adair: I know that the barriers that exist in Canada for people with disabilities have been well documented, and we know what they are. Speedier action on implementing changes would produce results in terms of removing barriers.

You just mentioned housing. There is a principle or a concept called "accessible-ready housing" that is being implemented in B.C. When new housing starts are being funded, the Government of B.C. requires them to comply with the requirements to build accessible-ready housing. It's not fully accessible, but it can be made accessible for a minimal cost.

This allows people to age in place, and it allows people with disabilities to purchase a house that's new or a home that's new or an apartment that somebody has moved out of. It reduces the cost and it opens opportunities for people with disabilities. Accessible, affordable housing for people with disabilities is a major crisis, and this would take us a good step forward to addressing that issue.

I know that Accessibility Standards Canada has released guidelines on accessible-ready housing and is fast-tracking a standard on accessible-ready housing, but will that standard be turned into a regulation that is enforceable?

A standard is voluntary. Will the Minister of Housing, with the Government of Canada, take the position that they will provide financial assistance to provinces and territories for housing, but that they must comply with the standard and the regulations that are being created by Accessibility Standards Canada? We're asking the minister to make that commitment, but we have no reply yet.

That's a very clear example of a step that could be taken, right now, to increase accessible and affordable housing for more people with disabilities in the future.

[*Translation*]

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

We would welcome any other recommendations you have for strengthening the act.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Madame Zarrillo, go ahead for six minutes to conclude today's witness testimony.

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

I am going to start by asking witness Adair a question, but if I have time, I have some questions for witness Janeiro about recommendations in the report for other tax entitlements, or lack thereof, that might need a review or updating. We know that it is witness testimony that drives recommendations in these reports, and we would certainly love to have that.

Witness Adair, you mentioned the creation of a culture of inclusive attitudes. There are two things I want to ask you.

One, could you table for us, or could you supply this to committee to be tabled, the 400 organizations that are in contravention of the act at this point in time?

Two—and I raised this point at the last meeting—could you give us the seven priority areas of the Accessible Canada Act that do not include a change in culture? Could you give us a recommendation of what could be placed into the Accessible Canada Act to address this need for culture change?

Mr. Bill Adair: Thank you for the questions.

To answer the question about the large private sector companies, 410 are not in compliance with the act. This is under the jurisdiction of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. I have asked the commission for that information. It's not available. I would love to reach out to those 410 organizations and offer to help educate them about their responsibilities for compliance and to help assist them with creating the plans.

Likewise, of the small private sector companies, which include organizations with 10 to 99 employees, 644 are not in compliance. It's a much larger number.

The answer to your question is no, I can't tell you exactly what those organizations are, but I would like to know, because we would like to be part of the solution and help them come into compliance.

In terms of the culture shift, that is something that could be built into the act at this point, or there could be funding put in place within the government that encourages and supports the interventions that are going to change the attitudes of people in Canada toward those of us with disabilities. The Government of Canada has introduced and required GBA+ training to ensure that people are aware of unconscious biases; hopefully, those biases will be removed, and as a result, people in this community will be accepted and included, and we could have something—

• (1255)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm sorry, witness Adair. I don't have much time.

Would you recommend that all public servants take some mandatory training on disability?

Mr. Bill Adair: Yes, I would, and I would require those involved in doing the training and the educating to be people with disabilities.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

I'm going to move to witness Janeiro.

Could you give us your thoughts on the tax entitlements, which might need review and additions?

Mr. James Janeiro: Certainly.

If I may, I'll give you four categories. These are the Canada caregiver credit, the disability tax credit, the two EI caregiving benefits that exist today and the broad umbrella of medical expenses that are allowed to be deducted from your income taxes at the end of the year. I would suggest that all four of those categories need to be dramatically reviewed and dramatically altered within the scope and the context of this legislation to make them as accessible and easy to access as possible.

Err on the side of putting some more support into the hands of people with disabilities, as well as a timely response.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Wonderful.

I still have two minutes, so I want to talk a bit about your organization, which recently released a report. Could you speak a bit to that report? I would also like to have the report tabled for this study.

Mr. James Janeiro: It would be my pleasure to provide that to the chair. I'll defer to the clerk on how best to do that—we have it available in English and French—at your convenience, of course.

One of the key findings of this “state of” report, which I also mentioned in my comments, is that one in five caregivers in Canada providing care to somebody else right now is a senior. Once you get to the age of 65, you are more likely to be one diagnosis or one accident away from needing care yourself. If you're already in a situation of providing care to somebody and, all of a sudden, you receive that diagnosis or you slip on a patch of ice, what was a difficult situation of care quickly turns into a crisis of care.

The absolute reality for many of these folks is there isn't a lot of help out there for them if they find themselves in that situation. That's one finding.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Very quickly on that, OAS was not increased for those aged 65 to 74. We debated that in the House today. It is impacting caregivers of that age.

Can you let me what an additional \$73 a month could do to help a caregiver?

Mr. James Janeiro: It could do so much. I believe the last time I was before this committee, I spoke in favour of that particular bill coming from our friends in the Bloc. We support that wholeheartedly. The more support we can get into the hands of seniors and caregivers, the better. We see the economic impact of a cost of living crisis and pensions being squeezed every week and every month.

The more we can do to help this population, the better, so we're certainly behind it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have eight seconds left. If you're going to generously cede them, Madame Zarrillo, we will conclude, because we have 15 minutes of committee business.

I want to thank all the witnesses who appeared today for giving the testimony they did. Thank you all for taking your time to appear before this committee on this important study.

I'll suspend for two minutes while we transition to an in camera meeting. Those not on the committee will have to leave the room.

We'll suspend for two—

• (1300)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Just before you do, can we ensure that we are going to get that report to this committee for the analysts?

The Chair: Yes. You requested it, and Mr. Janeiro indicated that he would send it.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: That's perfect. Thank you.

The Chair: You can provide whatever written material to the committee you choose in support of your testimony.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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