



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 135

Thursday, November 7, 2024



Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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

Thursday, November 7, 2024

• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Welcome, committee members. The clerk has advised me that we do have a quorum.

There is one member appearing virtually. Monsieur Cormier is joining us this morning virtually, and our witnesses are virtual as well.

I'll call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 135 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, according to House of Commons procedure.

I would review a couple of points.

All participants can participate in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available. In the room, make sure you're on the correct channel to get the translation of your choice. For those appearing virtually, click on the globe icon at the bottom of your Surface and choose the official language of your choice.

If there is a disruption in translation services, please get my attention by raising your hand. We'll suspend while that is corrected.

I would also like to remind members to please address all questions through me, the chair. Wait until I recognize you by name. For those appearing by Zoom, use the "raise hand" icon to get my attention.

As well, I will remind you again to make sure that all alarms are turned off on the devices you have with you today, and please refrain from touching the boom on the microphone, because it can cause issues for the translators.

Before I welcome the witnesses, I will advise that we are having sound issues with one witness.

At the last meeting, Ms. Falk raised a valid point. It was on the quality of the sound of the interpretation regarding her experience in using the English interpretation channel. She noted that she could hear the original floor audio when the interpreter was silent. As communicated by the House of Commons to members on October 21, 2024, the latest version of Zoom introduced changes to the audio experience for remote participants in chamber settings and in committee meetings, including those using remote interpretation, and in other events where simultaneous interpretation is provided.

In the updated Zoom version, the interpreter's voice is now played over the original floor audio, whereas previous versions of Zoom muted the floor audio on the interpretation channels. I wish to assure the committee that Ms. Falk's concerns have been conveyed to the committees and legislative services directorate and to the appropriate team within the digital services and real property directorate. A solution is being identified and tested, and more information will be communicated with all parties and members as soon as it is available.

I would advise as well that I met with the technical people responsible, and they expect to have it corrected when we return following constituency week. I had the benefit of sitting at a committee yesterday where it was experienced. The technical people were there at the time and were testing out a new procedure, and it did work in that committee.

Go ahead, Ms. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): I want to genuinely thank you for taking seriously my concerns and the difficulties I was having in being able to hear, and for taking the appropriate action. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for raising it, because it's important that members have the ability to participate and to fully understand. I was comfortable with the progress that was made. As I said, yesterday I did experience the problem and the corrective action that was taken. We will review that when the committee resumes after break week.

That was on Mrs. Falk's point of order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 8, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of workers in the seasonal industry and the employment insurance program.

Two witnesses we have today are Ms. Mandy Symonds, president, Southern Nova Scotia Seasonal Workers Alliance, and Ms. Beth Potter, president and chief executive officer, Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

As you know, we had a fifth witness, but they cancelled at the last moment.

We will begin with Ms. Potter.

Ms. Potter, you have five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Beth Potter (President and Chief Executive Officer, Tourism Industry Association of Canada): Good morning.

[English]

Thank you, Mr. Chair and the committee, for this opportunity to speak to you today on behalf of Canada's tourism sector.

The Tourism Industry Association of Canada proudly represents more than 240 tourism businesses, both big and small, that operate in each region and every riding across the country.

Last year, tourism spending in Canada reached over \$113 billion, and our sector accounted for 1.6% of Canada's GDP. Travel and tourism generate not only significant economic impacts for the Canadian economy, but also promote cultural exchange and foster community pride.

The sector supports approximately two million jobs each year. In recent years, permanent workers account for nearly 70% of the workforce, while 12% are seasonal or temporary and 6% are casual. Of the five tourism industry groups, the recreation and entertainment industry has the highest percentage of seasonal workers at 24%, followed by accommodation at 15% and food and beverage services at 7%.

[Translation]

For many workers in the tourism sector, employment insurance is a lifeline during the off-season or in times when employment is uncertain.

[English]

The cyclical nature of many tourism ventures means that employment insurance can be a stabilizing factor for workers. When tourism is in full swing, the industry hires a wide array of seasonal roles. Think of ski instructors in winter or tour guides in summer. When peak seasons end, EI becomes essential for many of these workers. EI allows individuals to bridge the gap between seasonal employment, providing financial stability and helping to keep local economies afloat.

Canada's tourism sector is particularly vulnerable to external factors such as economic downturns, global events and natural disasters. Travel restrictions and public health measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in nearly 800,000 workers leaving our labour force.

Additionally, severe weather disruptions have impacted a wide number of Canadian destinations and tourism operators in the past years. For tourism-driven communities that have been impacted by wildfires, EI has proven to be an essential measure for workers who would otherwise be displaced without a safety net.

A robust employment insurance program can contribute to a more resilient tourism workforce. EI ensures that employers have access to workers year-round, and it bolsters the sector's ability to attract and retain specialized talent. This is especially heightened in our remote and rural tourism hubs, where the local community depends heavily on the visitor economy.

• (1110)

[Translation]

Equally, when workers feel secure, they are more likely to invest in training and skills development. This leads to a more capable and adaptable workforce, ultimately enhancing the visitor experience. Well-trained employees can elevate the quality of service, leading to repeat visitors and positive word of mouth, which is vital for long-term success in tourism.

[English]

Some may argue that EI benefits discourage workers from seeking employment during shoulder seasons. However, federal initiatives like the tourism growth program are already helping to boost tourism activity beyond the peak season, enabling operators to scale up and expand their workforce.

Like the goals of the tourism growth program, the EI system needs to be designed in a way that encourages active job seeking while still providing necessary support for seasonal operators and employment. Offering incentives for those who take on temporary positions during low-demand periods could strike the right balance.

It's crucial for the committee to address the needs of tourism sector employees during this prolonged economic recovery. A recent report from Restaurants Canada highlights that small business owners are facing an affordability crisis, with rising costs, increased EI premiums and ongoing bankruptcies. To ease these financial pressures, the federal government must urgently reduce the EI premium rate from 1.66% back to 1.58%. This would provide relief for small businesses and their employees, many of whom are young workers and newcomers in accommodation and food services, who rely on this income to support their education.

In closing, I would stress that effective economic policy empowers both our tourism sector and the workers who make it thrive. Strengthening EI in relation to seasonal employment can enhance the resilience of the tourism workforce, allowing Canada to maintain its status as a top travel destination while ensuring that workers are supported in times of need.

Thank you very much, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Potter.

I'm now going to suspend for a moment while we do a sound test for Ms. Symonds, because it was not clear.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1110) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1110)

The Chair: The meeting is back in order.

Before I get to Mrs. Gray, the translation services have advised me that the quality of the sound is not adequate to translate, so with that, we cannot hear verbal testimony from Ms. Symonds.

I have a point of order from Mrs. Gray before I get back to Ms. Symonds.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Could we just have clarification of whether that particular witness had undergone a sound check previous to this meeting starting? Usually sound checks are done earlier or the day before.

• (1115)

The Chair: She did, and she passed, and today it's not working.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, we've seen this before, where witnesses have gone through sound checks and they have passed, and then a meeting starts and, for some reason, all of a sudden their sound isn't acceptable. Can we please, through you, Mr. Chair, go back to IT or House administration to see how this can be happening? We're seeing this quite often with witnesses, and it's not acceptable, because now the witness may or may not be able to come back, depending on the study. It's an ongoing problem.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

I can proceed only according to the procedures that are given to me, and translation makes the final decision. Ms. Symonds' sound test was approved, and she did clear in the pretest, but unfortunately at the moment it is not adequate.

Ms. Symonds, you can continue to listen in, and we'll make a decision on how we'll get back to you at a later time. If you want to stay online and follow the discussion, that would be fine.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I have a question of clarification, if that's okay.

Are you able to commit to looking into this? This is, as Mrs. Gray pointed out, a reoccurring problem. It really is a problem, because we, as committee members, need to be able to have our witnesses be heard as well. The fact that this has happened more than once, and the fact that it was a pass and now is a fail, is just inefficient and ineffective.

I'm just wondering if you can commit to doing some digging on that, to see if we can have a resolution. Thanks.

The Chair: Thanks, Mrs. Falk.

Madame Chabot, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): I won't put it the same way Ms. Gray did, but I agree with her.

In many cases, the meeting is supposed to start at 11 o'clock, but the sound tests are still being done. I don't know when the witness's sound test was done. Originally, three witnesses were supposed to appear at today's meeting, and now we have just two—which will probably turn into one. The agenda for today's meeting was known to everyone.

How can we fix this?

Sound testing should be done before the meeting starts, so we can start on time. It should not be done the day before. I, too, fail to understand why the sound was fine before the meeting and then wasn't once the meeting started.

Is there some solution we can suggest to Ms. Symonds? Is something wrong with the sound coming from her microphone? I have no idea. It's true that this problem comes up regularly.

Mr. Chair, you gave the committee options for new ways of operating going forward, which we will be debating. Our calendar is already up in the air, and when these kinds of issues arise, we miss out on precious time for all our studies.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Yes, I can get as frustrated as you, but the proper procedure was followed. Ms. Symonds' sound was tested yesterday afternoon, and it was fine; I do not know what changed, but the translation will not proceed with the quality of her sound at the moment.

With that, we will look into it to see what may have changed.

On the other part, I have no control over witnesses advising the chair at the last moment that they are not available to appear. That's simply the nature of this, whether it's in person or virtual, and that does happen.

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

I'll be brief, because I know we have a witness here.

Could we hear about when witnesses are being instructed to be online on the day of the meeting, in order for us to do the sound checks that day? During the pandemic, for example, all of us were online, pretty much. We all had to be online half an hour beforehand. The sound checks were done. There was a lot of back-and-forth, so the meetings could start on time. It seems we're doing a lot of sound checks right when the meetings should be starting.

I'm wondering, through you, Mr. Chair, whether the clerk can advise us on how soon witnesses are being told to be online in order for us to do the sound check before meetings.

• (1120)

The Chair: They are advised to be online 30 minutes beforehand. All of that is occurring. From time to time, because of some situations, the interpretation will not proceed.

With that, we'll go to questioning. We have the witness Ms. Potter.

Mr. Aitchison, I believe it's you for six minutes.

Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If Ms. Symonds is still on, I want to express, again, how sorry I am that this isn't working. We'll try to reach out to her and talk to her a bit more, maybe outside of the meeting.

I will ask questions of Ms. Potter.

I represent an area called Parry Sound—Muskoka. You may have heard of it before. It has a fairly significant tourism industry. The cyclical nature of the industry is something I've known all my life. It's something you grow up with in that region. Your comments about it ring true.

You talked a lot about the EI program, which I know this is largely about. However, I'm wondering if you could speak about the struggles that folks in the tourism industry are dealing with in relation to the general cost of living right now—the cost of food and the affordability crisis we're seeing across the country.

Can you speak about the industry, and the impacts this has on workers in the industry?

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Aitchison. I have been advised that Ms. Potter is no longer in the meeting virtually.

With that, I will suspend until it's corrected.

• (1120)

(Pause)

• (1125)

The Chair: Members, the committee is back in session. The technical issue has been resolved.

I'm going to ask Mr. Aitchison to begin again.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Oh, I get to try it again.

The Chair: Give your question to Ms. Potter, Mr. Aitchison, because I'm not sure if she heard it all. You have six minutes.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Potter, are you there? Can you hear me?

Ms. Beth Potter: I can hear you.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Wonderful.

We were just talking about the eloquent preamble to my question, so I'm going to try that again here.

I represent an area called Parry Sound—Muskoka. You've probably heard of it. I grew up there. The seasonal nature of the tourism industry in our area and its cycles are a regular part of life in our region. Your comments about that—you mentioned ski hills, summer tours and that kind of thing—are very much a reality in our

community. This is an issue I used to deal with as a local municipal councillor.

I wonder if you could speak specifically about the tourism sector and the challenges people in the industry are facing as a result of the cost of living and the affordability crisis we see. I'm sure people in seasonal, cyclical types of industries are feeling that a lot, maybe more acutely than others.

Ms. Beth Potter: Certainly, Canadians writ large are feeling the pressures of the cost of living.

In the tourism industry, what we've seen over the last number of years is a significant increase in the number of full-time, full-year jobs, which is certainly helping in places like Parry Sound—Muskoka.

That is why, for those 12% who are still in the seasonal or temporary category, it's very important that we have a really good employment insurance program to help those individuals bridge the gap between seasons.

One of the things we have found as an industry is that when we have great people working for us, who help us deliver outstanding experiences for our visitors, it helps put places like Parry Sound—Muskoka on the map for international guests.

What we need to make sure of, though, is that we are providing the appropriate supports for those workers when they are off on leave. As an industry, we are constantly looking at ways we can improve access to programming and access to supports for those workers, but if there's no money coming in the door for a business, they can't continue to pay that worker. That's why programs like employment insurance are incredibly important.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thanks for that.

There is another issue we used to deal with in the industry, in my community of Huntsville. I used to always meet with Deerhurst, and one of the challenges they always faced was a housing situation for seasonal workers. They needed lots of space for several months of the year, and then they didn't need the space. It was a constant struggle.

I'm wondering if you could speak to your members' challenges in that regard. Is the housing situation getting better, or is it getting worse?

Ms. Beth Potter: The housing situation has become an area of focus for our industry over the last, I would say, decade. We have taken examples like those in the Banff and Lake Louise area, where employers and the town are subsidizing housing for their seasonal workers. We've seen that kind of example roll out in other areas across the country, where resort communities are working together to build not only appropriate housing for seasonal workers, but also transportation systems that help to move those workers from where they're living to where they're working.

We firmly believe that you should be able to live where you work and work where you live. This is a conversation that the industries continue to have with local municipal councillors as they are evolving and determining what their plans are for their local communities. We see tourism as a valuable part of those communities.

• (1130)

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you for that.

We're rapidly running out of time, but I'd like to dig in a little more on that housing piece. You mentioned locations like Banff, for example, where you said that the municipality is partnering with industry.

We might not have time to do it here, so I'm wondering if you could send me some information. Are there examples of where local municipalities and industry are partnering and their partnerships include things like reducing the large fees that are often charged by municipalities for the construction of new homes, for example?

Ms. Beth Potter: I would have to get back to you on that to make sure I'm giving you the correct facts. Let me take that away, and I'll commit to getting that back to you.

I would like to highlight, though, that neighbours of yours, the towns of The Blue Mountains and Collingwood, came together to ensure there was a transportation system to help workers, employees, get from where they're living, whether it's within those two communities or in surrounding communities, to the resort of Blue Mountain, to ensure there was, collectively, the ability for workers to get to work.

There are some really innovative things happening. We're seeing in places like Whistler the same kinds of initiatives coming up.

Let me get back to you with the proper data that speaks to any kind of incentive for building.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thanks very much. I'm out of time now, but I appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aitchison.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Cormier. You have six minutes.

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Potter, thank you for being here. By the way, your French is very good. Kudos to you. Nevertheless, you can answer in the language of your choice. It's up to you.

Before I ask you my question, I'm going to give you some context. My riding, Acadie—Bathurst, is home to two major tourist attractions and hundreds of other businesses that depend on the tourism industry. We also have 14 fish and seafood processing plants. In addition, we have sectors focused on peat production, agriculture, construction, and arts and culture. I think you're realizing that my region has a tremendous number of workers in seasonal industries.

Is the current iteration of the employment insurance, or EI, program an advantage or disadvantage to workers in tourism, the sector you represent, and other seasonal sectors?

You can answer with a yes or no, or feel free to elaborate, if you like.

[*English*]

Ms. Beth Potter: I would say that the employment insurance program is an advantage to seasonal workers. However, as I mentioned in my presentation, we certainly see recommendations from across the different sectors that make up the tourism industry that a reduction in the EI premium rate would help small businesses and their employees.

The recommendation on record is to reduce the EI premium rate from 1.66% to 1.58%. This would allow us to put money back in the pockets of both employees and employers.

When we speak to the restaurant industry in particular, we talk about it being the fourth-largest private employer, and, as I said, lower EI premiums would channel more funds into the hands of a significant number of young workers, particularly in the accommodation and food services sector.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier: I understand what you're saying.

However, will increasing or reducing premiums really help tourism businesses keep skilled workers for the tourist season? As we know, it's quite short in some regions.

Shouldn't we change some of the eligibility criteria, like the number of hours worked, so that employers, our businesses, can hold on to those workers year after year?

• (1135)

[*English*]

Ms. Beth Potter: In 2023, the federal government promised to top up EI. It was about \$12.5 million through pilot project number 22. This would have been made available to about 42,000 eligible seasonal workers in Quebec and Atlantic Canada. They would basically have received up to four additional weeks of EI regular benefits. This would really help to close the income gap for those claimants when they've exhausted their EI benefits before seasonal work resumes.

Programs like that would certainly help, especially in areas where the seasons can be quite short and where there's a wide variety of different businesses that are making up those seasonal workers.

Mr. Serge Cormier: You represent the tourism industry. Is that right? You're the president of the tourism industry.

Ms. Beth Potter: That's correct.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I totally understand that the government put the five additional weeks plus the four additional weeks, but are you aware that some of the people in my region and across Canada cannot qualify? They cannot get enough hours to qualify and receive an EI benefit, because, in some regions, the unemployment rate is so low that it takes many more hours to qualify. Your sector in particular will be impacted by that.

Are you aware that some people cannot qualify? Because of that, what happened and what we see here in my region is that people are leaving the region to find work someplace else, in bigger centres, and we're emptying our rural region and losing some of the workforce. Are you aware of that?

Ms. Beth Potter: Yes, absolutely. For workers who can't get that number of hours, you're absolutely correct that they are looking for other industries and other locations that they can move to in order to get employment. This is really going to have a massive impact on our industry. When tourism workers were forced to leave their occupations in our industry during the pandemic, it resulted in massive destitution for our industry. We need the people, the local people, to work those jobs, because they know the land; they know the culture; they can tell the stories, and that adds to the experience.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I don't want to cut you off, but I have limited time. Do you think we can lower the number of hours for those working in some of those sectors, such as fish plants, tourism and so on, and have them qualify, so that they can at least get their EI and get back to their regular work in the next year? Keeping in mind that some businesses need some workforce also, maybe there's something we can do to modify the system so that it will be an advantage for employees but also for employers.

Ms. Beth Potter: I'm in favour of anything that enables us to improve the working conditions and keep people working in our industry. I would be very happy to continue to explore changes to a program like EI and how they could benefit seasonal workers in our industry, which would then benefit Canada as a whole.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Hopefully, we can continue the discussion later. Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We now go to Ms. Chabot for six minutes.

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

Thank you for being here, Ms. Potter.

Ms. Symonds, since you represent workers in seasonal industries, I'm sure you have a lot to say on the subject.

I'm going to continue along the same lines as Mr. Cormier.

Ms. Potter, welcome. I want to draw a distinction between two things. There are temporary foreign workers, who come here for a season. Then there are workers in seasonal industries. The workers aren't seasonal; the industries are.

Canada's tourism industry is made up of year-round sectors and, in some places, seasonal sectors. Some regions of Quebec, Gaspé and Charlevoix, for instance, have many tourism sectors with good jobs. However, some sectors don't operate year-round. Inns close in

the off-season, and you can't go whale watching in January. That shows how important the EI system is for holding on to skilled workers and giving them some stability. As a result, the quality of service they provide is elevated.

How can we improve the EI system? We know that these workers struggle to qualify for EI because of the number of hours worked requirement. There's a seasonal gap between when the work season ends and the next begins. How can EI support those workers?

Do we need to increase the number of weeks of benefits to ensure that there is no seasonal gap?

• (1140)

[English]

Ms. Beth Potter: I will just say that, like most things, when you design a program, it's very difficult to design one that is one-size-fits-all. The tourism industry, in and of itself, is very different from region to region and experience to experience. If you have somebody in northern Quebec operating a whale-watching operation, that season may be very short, whereas whale-watching operations on the coast of British Columbia may be much longer. The fact of the matter is that you still need somebody with the right skills to operate the boats. You need somebody with the right knowledge to provide the information to the visitor about what they're seeing. You need people with certain skills. You can't just put anybody in that job. It's important to the operator to keep people who have the right skills and the right experiences.

Looking at how we—

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Ms. Potter, my apologies for interrupting, but I don't have a lot of time.

I appreciate that knowledge and skills are important. It's true that the tourism sector is different from region to region.

Nevertheless, I am trying to highlight the fact that some sectors in the tourism industry are really seasonal. There is a skilled workforce the industry relies on, and when the season ends, employers want to make sure they can hold on to those skilled workers for the beginning of the next season.

How can we support workers in seasonal industries between seasons?

[English]

Ms. Beth Potter: As I was saying, I think allowing for some flexibility within the EI system by looking at the seasonality of the business and understanding the nature of the business, allowing for workers to apply for EI when their season ends and giving them enough weeks by adding weeks to their program so that they can be supported between seasons would be great.

The industry is also always looking at other opportunities. In some places, it's reasonable to expect that if we help workers re-train, they could maybe do a different job in their off-season, but that's not always the case in every part of Canada.

Adding more flexibility to the EI program would certainly allow those seasonal workers to be supported in the off season that is particular to their employment.

[Translation]

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

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

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

We will now go to Madam Zarrillo.

Are you ready? You have six minutes, please.

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

I might have missed it, but I know you recognized MP Cormier as being online. I don't think you noted that I'm also online today. I wanted witness Potter to know that I am online today.

Witness Potter, I really appreciate your introduction of the need for stability for these workers in what can be a very unstable environment.

There are two areas of modernizing EI that I'm particularly interested in. One is stabilization in natural disasters—you were talking about how natural disasters and global events can affect your industry. Second is the opportunity to modernize EI for women—women in seasonal work, maternity leave, care for family and these sorts of things.

I wonder if you wouldn't mind sharing some of the opportunities to modernize that you've seen in EI, with the changing climate and with the global unrest.

Perhaps you could also share a bit about what women who speak to you have experienced as seasonal workers in Canada.

Ms. Beth Potter: I think it's incredibly appropriate that I'm talking to you today from Iqaluit, where seasonal work is very prevalent.

The ability for Canadians to access extended EI benefits to support themselves and their families is something that is often spoken about to me. They're looking for additional supports as well, whether it's in subsidized housing or child care. Those are the two big things that I hear about specifically from women.

Subsidized housing and child care would certainly be welcomed by women in our industry. We've seen in some parts of the country that those kinds of programs have augmented the number of women.

Primarily, we're a people-facing industry. We employ a lot of women. We are one of the number one employers of women, because we look after people. We provide them with great experiences. That fits in well with the nature of most women.

Providing additional supports through programs such as EI would be incredibly helpful.

I have not had anyone speak to me specifically about extending maternity leave. I do know that the extension.... Being able to take the full year and being able to share part of that time with a spouse is incredibly welcomed and supported.

As I said, it's having EI programs that are specifically addressing seasonal workers to make sure there is flexibility and accountability for the fact that seasonal work doesn't look the same in every part of our country.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

You said you're in Iqaluit. I think it's Nunavut day today.

Ms. Beth Potter: It is.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Could you explore or expand a little on what you have seen in regard to climate change and how it has affected seasonal work up north?

Ms. Beth Potter: I was just in a meeting this morning where they were talking about what the opportunities are to adjust businesses, target new markets and explore new opportunities because of climate change and because the earth is warmer now. What it very much comes back to all the time is this: How do we protect the land, protect the people, and protect the arts, culture and heritage of Canadians while still...?

The link to tourism is incredibly important in that, but by sharing the stories and by sharing the values, cultural heritage and practices around the land, this is what people in northern Canada see as a way of protecting their history. It's a way of proudly sharing what Canada is all about. It is very much top of mind.

When we look at what happened in Jasper this year and the wild-fires, some conversations are now very much top of mind. How do we make sure we are prepared? What steps and actions can we take now to protect not only our town but also our people, in case something like Jasper should happen in Banff, as an example? These conversations are happening more and more now. It's a change that I've seen in recent years. These conversations have risen to the top of the priority list. We'll be hosting our tourism congress in Vancouver in the first week of December. Emergency preparedness is a very large topic. It's about making sure we look after not only the guests but our people as well.

● (1150)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: On that, talking about—

The Chair: You're at six seconds, Madam Zarrillo.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Okay.

The Chair: You've concluded? Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Gray, you have five minutes, please.

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

Thank you for being here today, Ms. Potter.

Tourism HR Canada commissioned a survey on the perception of tourism as a place of employment in Canada. They found that people currently working in the tourism sector are more likely to be under 30 or to be students. We also know that youth unemployment in Canada continues to rise. Young Canadians struggle to find their first job even in a region like mine, the Okanagan, where tourism has historically represented many young Canadians' first job.

Are you hearing about cost challenges that tourism operators might be facing that might limit their ability to hire and train young Canadians—things like inflationary cost increases, carbon tax increases that increase the cost of transportation and fuel costs, or federal tax increases like excise tax increases? Are those some of the things you're hearing about? Are there any other cost increases you're hearing about that might create challenges for tourism operators?

Ms. Beth Potter: Certainly, the increased cost of doing business is challenging all tourism operators right now. It includes everything from the supply chain to the additional taxes and fees they're required to pay at different levels of government.

Tourism represents a diverse workforce. Young people make up one-third of our workforce. We're quite proud of that. We're quite proud that we are the number one employer of youth in our country. We provide that all-important first job and the first on-the-job training and exposure to those soft skills that are transferable to really any job you can go to as you progress in your life.

The bigger challenge we're having is helping Canadians understand that we have jobs, but we also have careers. Transitioning from a job as a young person who's maybe working their way through school to a career—that is what we're really focused on as an industry.

I believe you'll be hearing from Phil Mondor from Tourism HR Canada at one of your upcoming meetings. He will support that we need to wholeheartedly change the concept, change the mindset and

bust some of the myths that the only kinds of jobs in the industry are seasonal, temporary and low-paying, and that they don't lead anywhere. That is not the case. In our industry, 70% of our workforce is permanent and full time. They are making above-average wages year round and are being well supported through benefit programs, professional development and increased skill training.

The challenges of hiring youth are not related just to cost but to many factors.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you so much.

We've heard from a number of industry organizations about the increasing debt load of businesses—small businesses, tourism and tourism-related businesses. Just one quote that I'll give you here is from a representative of Maple Leaf Adventures in Vancouver, who was quoted as saying, "Although the tourism industry...is recovering, the businesses are really hurting." She went on, "I think all of us are carrying the highest debt loads we've ever had." Of course, if a business is trying to make debt service payments, they have less money for hiring more employees.

Have you heard from some of the tourism operators you speak with? Are they carrying higher debt loads, and is this a concern?

● (1155)

Ms. Beth Potter: Yes. In fact, we have done some survey work around this over the last couple of years to understand what that debt load looks like. Certainly, coming out of the pandemic, when business operators from coast to coast to coast dove in, they used up any reserve funds they had. They used up their savings before they accessed any kind of government programming that would help get them through the pandemic. They used those dollars, and then they got additional loans to continue support.

In most cases, it was to ensure two things. One was that they still had a business to come back to, and the second was that they still had access to the people who helped them run that business.

It is absolutely a challenge for them. You add on top of that the higher cost of money right now, and that certainly does have an impact. What we've seen is many business owners getting back into the operations and doing some more of the frontline work, some of the back-of-house work that they would not have done prior to the pandemic because they had other staff in place to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gray.

We'll now conclude with Mr. Kusmierczyk for five minutes.

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

Thank you so much, Ms. Potter, for your excellent testimony here today.

Tourism is such an important part of the economy in my community of Windsor Essex, and I am pleased to hear that tourism is making a huge comeback. We're about 100% back to normal, prepandemic levels. There are six million visitors in Windsor Essex, and this supports about 11,000 jobs across my region, so tourism is incredibly important.

I'm so glad to hear you provide your testimony here today, and I just want to give a huge shout-out to our partners at Tourism Windsor-Essex Pelee Island for the tremendous work they do in promoting tourism to our community.

We're seeing the economy bouncing back as well in a big way. We see, for example, that, in September, 47,000 new jobs were created in Canada, and 33,000 of those jobs are filled by young people ages 15 to 24. We continue to support young people, for example, by permanently removing interest on their student loans to make sure that they're not carrying debt after they graduate from school. We also doubled the student grants and loans that are available for young people, to make sure they don't come out of school with debt when they look for that first work experience.

It's unfortunate that our Conservative colleagues have voted against all measures of relief for young people, which we know are so incredibly vital and important for them.

On the issue of seasonal workers, almost 40% of claimants for EI for seasonal benefits are folks who are 55 and older. I want to ask if you can perhaps provide us some context. What are some of the differences in experiences of seasonal work for young people versus folks who are in that 55 and older range? What should we be paying attention to in terms of how young people experience seasonal work differently?

Ms. Beth Potter: Thank you for that.

I agree with you 100% that Gordon Orr and his team do a magnificent job down in Windsor-Essex Pelee Island.

One of the differences for young people in seasonal work is that they're constrained by their school year. They come out of school in the April or May time frame and join us. We have a growing shoulder season in the spring and particularly in the fall. We lose a lot of our younger workers in that last half of August, because they're getting ready to go back to school. They're cutting their season a little short because of their commitment to continuing their education. Older seasonal workers don't have that constraint. They can stay with us through the fall.

However, if we look at why a young worker versus an older worker might access EI, the younger worker is back in school and in an environment where they are housed and fed. Once the season is over, the older worker still has to figure out how to cover those costs. It's not surprising that you see that difference. My own kids went through this when they were in post-secondary school. They finished their work and went back to school. It didn't even enter their minds to apply for EI. Somebody older and out of school needs to continue to see income coming in once that job is finished.

• (1200)

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I appreciate that excellent answer.

I want to turn the question back to climate change.

One of the things seasonal workers deal with is unpredictability—the fluctuations in the climate we're seeing, such as floods and fires—you name it. There's no better example recently, in my opinion, than the decline in northern shrimp in the Atlantic, which has been devastating for communities in the Gaspé area. The oceans are warming up. It's having an impact on shrimp stocks.

How has climate change impacted seasonal workers? How should EI respond to those devastating natural disasters and events linked to climate change, which, again, unfortunately, my Conservative colleagues bury their heads in the sand over and have no credible plan to address?

Ms. Beth Potter: Right now, the biggest impact we're seeing is on our winter activities. Climate change is having an impact on our ability to open or keep open, for as long as we can, ski hills, snowmobiling and other winter sports.... We're seeing those sectors in our industry get more vocal about what we need to do about climate change. You may or may not be familiar with a group called Protect Our Winters. It's a global group, but we now have a Canadian chapter. They're pretty active.

This is an important part. Canada is known globally, rightly or wrongly, as an amazing winter destination. Some people think we're a year-round winter destination. We all know that's not true, but the fact is that we are a winter destination.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Potter.

Thank you, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Before we conclude, as chair of your committee, I advised the clerk that I'm going to set aside one hour in Tuesday's meeting, the last hour, to cover the witnesses who were unable to be heard today. As chair, I set the schedule. This is an important study, so we will schedule an additional hour and include it in the last hour on Tuesday, November 19.

With that, we're going to suspend while we transition to the next hour.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1210)

The Chair: Committee members, we are resuming for the second hour of the HUMA meeting today.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 8, 2024, the committee resumes its study of Canada without barriers by 2040.

I would like to welcome to the room with us our only witness for this hour, Ms. Diane Bergeron, president, CNIB guide dogs.

Madam Bergeron, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Diane Bergeron (President, CNIB Guide Dogs, Canadian National Institute for the Blind): Thank very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to start by just thanking my colleague Thomas Simpson for being here to support me during my presentation, and I ask you to please be patient with me, as I am listening to my voice synthesizer while reading it out loud. Hopefully, this will work.

Good morning, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of CNIB, an organization that has been advocating for Canadians who are blind or who have low vision for over a century. My name is Diane Bergeron, and I'm president of CNIB guide dogs. At CNIB, we are committed to making Canada a place where everyone can participate fully, without any barriers.

Today I'd like to highlight some of the areas where we believe the government can take action to achieve a barrier-free Canada by 2040, as outlined in the Accessible Canada Act.

Attitudes continue to be the largest barrier to inclusion for people living with a disability. In Canada, the unconscious stigmas and biases put on people with disabilities by society limit our ability to thrive. I'm a mother, an executive leader and an athlete, yet most people will automatically look to my guide dog and make assumptions about what I can or cannot do.

Culture change is not easy work. It takes time, energy and buy-in.

CNIB's first recommendation is for the Government of Canada to focus its energy and intentions on changing society's attitudes towards people with disabilities. We must increase understanding and dispel myths and conceptions. Simply, society does not understand disability.

When CNIB engaged in its largest consultation to build a new strategic plan, we heard time and time again the realities of living with sight loss. People with sight loss, like me, are ignored in conversations when staff talk past us or to our family members or friends. People with sight loss are stopped in their tracks when they're trying to cross the street, because well-intentioned people don't believe that we can navigate our cities by ourselves. Also, unfortunately, for those of us who work with a guide dog, we are constantly fighting for our rights to enter into public spaces, because people don't understand that guide dogs are allowed everywhere.

By focusing on social inclusion and positive representation, you'll be able to collectively move much more quickly towards the goal of an accessible Canada by 2040. We must remove unconscious stigmas and assumptions. Attitudinal barriers prevent people who are blind or have low vision from obtaining meaningful employment, and Canadians who are blind or have low vision continually face significant barriers, including inaccessible workplaces and a lack of accommodations.

Discriminatory hiring practices are also far too common. The unemployment rate for this group is three times higher than the na-

tional average, but we know that employment is the best indicator of positive attitudes among people living with a disability. When CNIB has commissioned public attitude surveys regarding people who are blind or partially sighted, it is those attitudes of their colleagues that are the most positive. This makes sense. When you work with someone you see, you can see how they adapt to everyday problems they face. People with sight loss face problems every day. We are well prepared for problem-solving in the workplace.

CNIB has made strides in supporting individuals in finding meaningful employment, but we need stronger federal backing to expand these initiatives. We also need to ensure that employers understand the benefits of inclusive hiring.

As a result, income security is another pressing issue. Many people with sight loss struggle with inadequate income support compounded by additional costs related to assistive devices and health care. While programs like the Canada disability benefit are promising, they must be designed to address the unique financial realities of people with disabilities.

Additionally, we believe that administrative barriers associated with existing benefit programs must be eliminated, especially during the implementation of the Canada disability benefit. These include repeated clarifications in order to prove disability, inaccessible document formats, and staff who are not trained in supporting applicants with a disability.

● (1215)

We are calling on the committee to ensure that these income supports factor in the increased costs of living, particularly the costs of assistive technology. We also believe that these benefits should be paired with robust employment strategies to ensure that those who want to work can do so. The Accessible Canada Act laid the spirit of a strong foundation, but there are still gaps in the enforcement of accessibility standards. These standards are not being applied consistently across the country, and more must be done to ensure compliance. We're calling for enhanced oversight, including regular audits and meaningful penalties for non-compliance. This will help to ensure that organizations meet their obligations to provide accessible services and spaces. For far too long we have given carrots when sometimes sticks ought to be applied.

Lastly, CNIB believes that part of the road towards a barrier-free Canada is the impact of attitudinal barriers from well-meaning people towards Canadians with disabilities. I know this committee has had many conversations around the importance of mandatory training for federally regulated employees, but I want to once again stress the importance of enforcement of mandatory training for this federal staff.

Static training is not enough. It must be done in consultation with people with the lived experience. Achieving a barrier-free Canada by 2040 is ambitious, but with the right collaborations and commitment, it is possible. CNIB is ready to work alongside governments, businesses and communities to break down the barriers that people with sight loss face every day.

Thank you again for your time, and I'm happy to answer any questions that you have.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bergeron. We'll now open with Ms. Falk for six minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Ms. Bergeron, for being here.

My name is Rosemarie Falk, and I am a 36-year-old female. I'm wearing a floral blouse today with a scarf, because I feel like it's cold in here, and I have brown hair.

When this committee was studying Bill C-81, CNIB raised concerns that without clear timelines in the bill, the act would be less impactful and would result in a slow pace of change. From CNIB's perspective, what impact has the lack of timelines had on our progress towards a barrier-free Canada by 2040?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I'm trying to remember the name of the leadership professional who once said that if it's not measured and with set timelines, nothing gets done.

I think that because the timelines were not set specifically, there are many federally regulated organizations that are stalling and that are facing an attitude of being pressure prompted, saying, "When the time comes, I'll deal with it," as opposed to having a look in advance.

Often, when we do stuff like that and we sit back and wait, then it becomes, "Now we have to do it in a rush," and then we don't consult the people, the very people all of this is going to affect, people with the lived experience, and we reduce the ability to get that consultation. Not having timelines is delaying the process, because people aren't making it a focus, and when it does come up, they're scrambling and they're not able to get the right consultation.

• (1220)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you for that.

I had the opportunity of being on this committee at that time, and I know that we fought, and even brought forward amendments, to make sure that there were timelines involved, so that there could be a level of accountability, so that we could make sure that we could measure the success. That was one of our arguments for making sure we had those timelines.

CNIB also raised concerns about the enforcement and the implementation of the bill being split across several different agencies.

Has the shared responsibility created confusion or made it more difficult for persons with disabilities to navigate?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I would say, specifically for those of us who work within organizations, that the average person with a disability is just trying to get through their day. It's the effect of the legislation that they feel. However, for those of us who are working in the field, who come in here and speak to folks, it's very difficult sometimes to know who to talk to about what, so it does become very confusing.

I think that often people will call us and say, I need you to fix this, and then we have to go figure out where that particular jurisdiction is, so, yes, there is confusion. I also firmly believe that although there is confusion, there needs to be enforcement in one area. However, responsibility for the standards is not just in one department. It's right through the entire government, and I would say actually right through the entire country, and we all need to be responsible. There definitely needs to be an enforcement mechanism that's easy to navigate.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That somewhat leads to my next question.

Again with Bill C-81, CNIB previously suggested that the accessibility commissioner should carry out all enforcement and implementation.

Would that still be the recommendation CNIB would make today?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I think so, yes. It needs to be done. The person who's enforcing this needs to be the person who has the power to wield the stick, if you put it that way. We need to make sure that the person knows all of what's going on, that they have the cross-perspective and they know all of the different pieces of the puzzle. If we separate it out, it's going to be very complicated.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I am definitely a big advocate for simplicity. That's why I think less red tape is better, as is plain language. It doesn't matter what government department it is, it's so imperative that plain language be used, so that things are easily understood and easily applied.

We are discussing a barrier-free Canada, and we have heard, not just in this study but in other studies that we have done as well, about where barriers were in place for people who had disabilities. It just made things difficult to access. I'm wondering, from your personal experience, what some of the barriers are that you have faced in accessibility.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: We have only five minutes.

There are inaccessible websites. There is documentation that needs to be filled in or is provided to me in an inaccessible format.

The best way I could explain it is to imagine that you have to get a document from a professional, which you have to provide to government to ensure that you have access to supports and services. The doctor hands you a document in Braille and says it is everything that you're going to need. Then you have to provide that to a government agency, which provides a document back to you in Braille and asks you to please fill it in.

That is what we face every single day. Despite the fact that we say all of that needs to be made accessible for people, there are still barriers constantly, whether it's with government or out in the community. It happens all the time.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Can I ask one quick follow-up?

I know our time is short, but I just wanted to say that if there are other things that come to your mind after this meeting, could you please send those into the committee? It's imperative that we take seriously the barriers that Canadians like you are facing. It matters, and it's important that we hear that.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk,

We'll go to Mr. Fragiskatos for six minutes.

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

I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Collins.

Ms. Bergeron, thank you very much for being here today, and for your excellent testimony as well.

I'm a member of Parliament from London, Ontario. I have black hair, and I'm wearing a navy jacket with a blue tie.

I have a question for you, which I think will help us understand a bit more about where we are right now. Certainly there's much more to do, but one of the criticisms that's come up in the past, even before I was elected, in fact, is that previous governments of different partisan stripes were more hands-off when it came to the issue of accessibility. Since the introduction of the accessibility act in 2019 for the country, we've seen more of an approach taken that seeks to reverse that. Where have we come from, and where should we continue to go?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I can't speak about it from the political aspect, but I can tell you from my personal experience. I've been around a while, and I can tell you, particularly, just as a matter of noting timelines, that on October 24, I celebrated my 40th anniversary of having guide dogs. I'd like to tell you I was two when I got my first one, but I was not. I've been around the disability world for a long time.

We have come a long way. Technology, regulations and legislation like the Accessible Canada Act have made a big difference, but

I will tell you that since COVID, I have noticed a significant reduction in understanding, awareness and, I would say, access for people who have sight loss in the community. That's even with government. I don't know why, but we came a long way, and then we went backward.

The Accessible Canada Act enforcement will bring us back to where we need to be, hopefully by 2040. That's the only thing I can see that's going to help me become more independent and have the barriers removed in my life.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Canada disability benefit was the largest line item in the previous budget, at \$6 billion. I know advocates have called for more, and personally I'm sympathetic to that.

With the focus of some parties on austerity and making cuts, do you worry that this particular support could be cut?

What would be the ramifications if it was taken away altogether?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: The \$200 a month is dragging nobody out of poverty. However, when you're making only \$1,000 a month, \$200 is significant.

I do worry that it will be taken away. It needs to be increased, not removed. Certainly, any other supports that go along with it to help people with disabilities get through their day and have the barriers removed....

It's a big concern to me as I'm aging. Things are going to happen in my life that are going to add to my disability. I'm worried about where it's going to leave me in the future if I can't have access to services. If that's all taken away, that's going to be a problem.

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

I'll give my time to Mr. Collins.

The Chair: You have two and a half minutes.

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

Ms. Bergeron, welcome to the committee. My name is Chad Collins. I'm the MP for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek. I have brown hair and I am wearing a brown plaid jacket today.

I came from the municipal sector before arriving here in Ottawa. When I look at the act and its aspirational goals of a barrier-free Canada by 2040, it means that it involves other levels of government and certainly the private sector.

I know that if I had members from Hamilton who sit on the advisory committee for persons with disabilities sitting beside me here today, they would say that for the City of Hamilton, as a municipal partner, to achieve its barrier-free goals, they require resources, whether that's for transportation, to access public information—I think you referenced that earlier—or to safely travel through our city streets or across the street. There are all kinds of infrastructure that need to be upgraded, including bricks-and-mortar improvements to buildings, in order to make my city a barrier-free place to live, work and do other things.

My question is in terms of providing support for municipalities and even our provincial partners. Can you comment on why it's important that the federal government do a bit more in terms of providing additional resources to make those things happen?

• (1230)

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I think, definitely, there's a cost. There's a cost to making places accessible. Quite honestly, if we built it in an accessible manner to start with, it wouldn't cost that much. I think the federal government does need to help municipalities to get up to speed.

As I mentioned in my presentation, the biggest issue is attitudes, because people who are building spaces are building them and then stopping and going, “Oh, wow. We should have done this.” They're not consulting with people with disabilities who have the lived experience in order to make sure it's made accessible in the first place.

I often say that we have stairs to accommodate ambulatory people. A ramp will accommodate everybody, but we consider the ramp an accommodation when actually the stairs are the accommodation. We don't deal with that stuff when we're building it in the first place. We need to do it right in the first place, and changing the attitudes is going to make a change in the barrier-free access.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Collins.

[Translation]

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

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

Ms. Bergeron, it's a real pleasure to have you. My name is Louise Chabot, and I am the member for the riding of Thérèse-De Blainville, in Quebec. I won't tell you how old I am, but I am a woman with a good bit of lived experience. I have brown curly hair, and today, I'm wearing red glasses. I commend you for your commitment, despite the barriers that stood in your way over the years.

Before I get to the Accessible Canada Act.... We know governments can have the best laws sometimes, but there is a gap between equal rights and equality in fact. It struck me when you said in your opening remarks that society doesn't understand disability. It's a matter of culture. Culture change can take a long time, but it should not take forever.

What can we do to change people's attitudes and societal culture so that all citizens are equal, whether or not they have a disability?

[English]

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Changing attitudes is easiest when we are in a situation where we are close to a topic and close to a situation. I like to tell people on a regular basis that the disability community, if we want to call it a community, is the only one that you get to grow into as you get older. One day, everybody in this room is going to be a person with a disability, or they are going to be supporting somebody with a disability. The decisions that are made today in rooms like this are going to affect you in the next 15 or 20 years. Be wise and careful with the decisions that you make. It's the same in society; if we talk to people and make them understand that this will affect everybody at some point in time, attitudes will change.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I'm going to refer to your opening remarks again. As far as supports go, how can the federal government do more through its programs and measures? You said that with the cost of living, more support was needed for assistive technologies.

There are guide dogs, but when you talk about assistive technologies, what tools are you referring to exactly? How can we do a better job of supporting people financially? What would that look like?

• (1235)

[English]

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Adaptive technologies can be anything from a piece of tape you put somewhere to help with orientation for someone who is blind or partially sighted all the way up to a \$10,000 piece of equipment, and more, depending on what the disability type and need is.

There are still many employers that will not hire somebody with a disability because they are afraid of the extra costs it would take to hire somebody and make the workplace accessible. On average, it's usually about \$500 to accommodate a person with a disability in the workplace.

From a personal standpoint, in the home and in life in general, a national program would provide adaptive and accessible equipment to people with disabilities. There are a few provinces that have those in place, but unless you live in one of those provinces, you have to buy them yourself. A Braille display, which is a refreshable device to assist people who are blind to read Braille and books, sits in the area of about \$7,000 to \$9,000. The average person on assistance is not going to be able to afford that, so a national program to provide accommodating devices or accessible devices and to help employers would be very beneficial.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: The committee spent a long time studying the Canada disability benefit. The legislation was passed, but the money won't start flowing until 2025, let's not forget. The benefit needs to actually exist before there's any talk of cutting it.

We are still waiting for the regulations. Was your organization consulted on the criteria or requirements for the new benefit?

[English]

Ms. Diane Bergeron: CNIB had an opportunity to respond, just like all other organizations of and for people with disabilities. Every moment that it is delayed is causing people with disabilities to drop deeper and deeper into poverty. The delay is definitely a problem, but the sooner we can get it in, the better. We also understand that government takes time, but it's definitely an issue.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Ms. Zarrillo, you have six minutes.

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

Welcome, Ms. Bergeron.

I'm joining virtually today from British Columbia. I'm a middle-aged white woman.

I really appreciated your testimony today about the need for culture change. In this committee, we had the CEO of Air Canada come just to talk about transportation. You mentioned even websites not being accessible. Transportation can be a real barrier; I want to talk about that a bit later on. The CEO of Air Canada thought, "Well, as long as we've got this program with the sunflowers, we're good."

I tried to mention to him that it's really a culture change that is needed. I look at the road map and the pillars for 2040, and there are seven, but not one of them addresses culture change or attitudinal barriers.

Do you think that's something that should be edited in the road map to 2040? Should there be a pillar about attitudinal barriers?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Absolutely.

I am a frequent traveller, since I do international affairs, as well, for CNIB. I just got home from Peru on Friday. There wasn't enough passenger assistance, so they handed me over to a perfect stranger—another passenger. They didn't ask my permission. They said to the person, "Go and help her." I was grabbed and marched through the Toronto airport by some stranger.

That is the type of experience that happens with programs such as the sunflower program. I believe my guide dog identifies me as a person with a disability. I don't need a sign telling people I have a disability. I think it's important to have it in order to help other people.

Attitude is the only thing that's going to change this world. There's no other way. We need finances, resources, support and leg-

islation, but all of that comes, originally, from positive attitudes and the right attitude. If that's not there, it's not going to change.

• (1240)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

I want to talk to you a bit about elections.

However, before we get into that, I will say that the NDP wanted the Canada disability benefit to be adequate. We fought for that. I talked to the minister about it many times. They needed royal recommendation, which was an absolute clue to the fact that the Liberal government wasn't planning on it being an adequate income for persons with disabilities. They already underfunded it before it was even law. As the NDP, we're disappointed that it's not adequate. Certainly, there's no reason the government can't release it immediately.

I will just let the government know in this committee that it's time for it to release the Canada disability benefit. Even though it's woefully inadequate, let's get it started in people's bank accounts in 2024.

Who's in government is important. Culture flows down, so I'm very interested in elections. Right now, there is an opportunity to make some amendments to the Elections Act. I know CNIB has made many comments about being able to have a secure and independent voting experience.

I wonder if you could share how that has evolved over time and what still needs to be done at the ballot box for persons with vision loss or reduced vision.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I agree with you a hundred per cent that attitudes come from the top of government.

Here's a fun fact. My dog's name is Carla. She was named after Minister Qualtrough because of the work she did on the Accessible Canada Act.

I used to sit on the Elections Canada accessibility committee. Right now in this country, despite the fact that legislation says we have a right, as Canadians, to vote independently and in secret, it works for everybody except people who are blind. Despite the fact that we have Braille templates and so on, I am still, in this world, not able to go in, check my ballot and be assured, independently, that I've checked the right box and not spoiled my ballot. There always has to be somebody there to help me. I never have the right to vote in secret.

What needs to change at the ballot box is this: We need to come up with a way for people who are blind, partially sighted or otherwise disabled to access the same right every other Canadian supposedly has to go in and do this in secret.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you for sharing that.

I want to finish out this round on transit.

One of the pillars of the 2040 road map is employment. We know public transit can be very challenging for persons with disabilities, and we know there is serious operational underfunding in every transit authority across this country.

I wonder if you could share some of the experiences you've had or have heard about regarding transit, and what you think we can do to make sure persons with disabilities, who are already facing challenges getting into the workforce, can at least get there on transit.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: If you can't get there, you can't work. That's step one.

This is so important to the CNIB, and to people who are blind or partially sighted in Canada. One of the three key areas CNIB is working on is transit and transportation—accessible journeys. Transit is about going from door to door. It's not just about buses, taxis, planes or whatever. It's also about how I get from my door to the bus stop in the winter, when there's so much snow that my dog can't find the curb. The transit system has to be accessible, or we're not going to be able to contribute to society via employment the way we have the right to and the way we want to.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Zarrillo. You can ask a short question.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Are there any specific jurisdictions—Metro Vancouver is the one I'm closest to—that you hear about regularly that are less accessible or the hardest to reach on the transit side?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Rural areas are the hardest to deal with, but as I said, I travel a lot and I have yet to find the perfect system.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

Mrs. Gray, go ahead for five minutes.

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

Thank you for being here today. We appreciate it.

I'm Tracy Gray. I'm the member of Parliament for Kelowna—Lake Country, and I'm the Conservative vice-chair here. I'm wearing a black blazer and a mint green blouse. I have shoulder-length blonde hair, and I'm wearing a poppy.

First of all, just before I get into my questions, I want to be clear that the Conservatives supported the Canada disability benefit all the way through, at every stage of the legislative process, and we continue to support it. I just wanted to let you know that. I've expressed this to many disability groups and want to assure you of that here today, as well as any people who are listening.

The first thing I wanted to ask you about is recent reports of a passenger with a service dog who was kicked off a Porter Airlines flight in violation of Canadian Transportation Agency rules. The flight attendant on board attempted to put the service dog under the seat, ignoring clear rules stating that service animals can lie on the floor or even receive their own seat if they're larger service animals. Porter did not initially offer to refund or reimburse this passenger until media attention brought their situation to light.

My question for you, as the president of CNIB guide dogs, is this: How common is it that service animal regulations are being ig-

nored in federally regulated transportation spaces like airlines or railways?

• (1245)

Ms. Diane Bergeron: It happens very regularly. Often, what I hear—and I take my dog all over the world with me—is, “We would have left you enough space; however, the flight is fully booked and we can't take the space away from a person for a dog.”

I continue to remind people that this is not a pet; she is my guide dog. Although she is a dog, she is still a living, breathing creature, and folding her like a piece of luggage is not acceptable. It still happens quite often.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much for that.

We've heard from previous witnesses at this study about how common it is to encounter aging or outdated accessibility infrastructure.

How common is it for those who are blind or who have low vision to encounter any types of barriers that would be in federally regulated spaces or buildings?

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I would suggest that you attempt to close your eyes and get through an airport and see what happens.

In a lot of older airports and a lot of older spaces, there are all sorts of barriers and things that make it very difficult for somebody who's blind or partially sighted. There's dim lighting for those who have partial sight or low vision, and a lack of tactile indicators. There are echoing sound spaces that are very disorienting; there's no Braille and there are no tactile markings in any way to figure out where you are. I could go on forever.

There are so many ways that we could make it better.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you very much.

As my colleague said, if you have any other thoughts, please ensure that you write to this committee. It's good that we were able to keep this study open so that you were able to come here and be with us today. Thank you very much.

I know we're in the last few minutes of this meeting and the last bit of my questioning here, Mr. Chair. In light of the developments of this week, I would like to move the following motion:

Given that

- (a) the Liberal government purchased a \$9-million condo on Billionaires Row in New York City for the consul general, Tom Clark;
- (b) it was revealed that Tom Clark pays only \$1,800 per month for the Billionaires Row luxury condo;
- (c) average rent in Canada is now nearly \$2,200 per month;
- (d) as part of the agreement, Clark pays only \$1,800 in rent, \$400 dollars less than the average rent payment in Canada; and

(e) as a result, the Liberals are effectively using taxpayer dollars to subsidize Tom Clark's rent in a \$9-million condo, on which, if a Canadian citizen purchased it, the monthly mortgage cost would be roughly \$42,000 per month;

the committee report to the House that it condemns this blatant abuse of taxpayer dollars at a time when Canadians back home are facing the doubling of rent prices across the country that is at near-historic highs.

That's the end of the motion, Mr. Chair. Really quickly, this is not a study to take time away from the committee. It should be in order. It simply requests reporting this to the House. I hope we can take care of this very quickly at the end of this meeting.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, you had your hand up.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

The reality is that it would, in fact, take time away from committee. With that, Mr. Chair, we're talking about a very important issue here, the issue of accessibility. I know members around the table, from all parties, at least I think all parties, have been looking forward to this meeting, and I move that we adjourn debate on the motion.

• (1250)

The Chair: We have a motion to adjourn debate on the motion introduced by Mrs. Gray.

We will go to a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The motion has been approved to adjourn debate on the motion. We will now go to Mr. Van Bynen.

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

My name is Tony Van Bynen. I'm the member of Parliament for Newmarket—Aurora. I was the mayor of Newmarket for 12 years. I had some excellent opportunities to get engaged with our community. I'm wearing a blue jacket, and I have a noticeable absence of the blond hair I had when I was young.

Some things I am really proud of in our community are the way some service clubs are getting engaged with the seeing-eye dog initiative. I believe that Lions Clubs has been raising money to make seeing-eye dogs available for people who are blind. It also has an initiative that it asked me to be involved with, which was setting up a separate, leash-free dog park for service dogs. One barrier it has run into is that it inhibits the relationship between the service dog and the person it is taking care of. That project has not gone forward, so I'm taking advantage of your experience with the guide dogs to get your opinion on that.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I would say that they have done this successfully in Halifax, which has a service dog park. They've opened it up to people with disabilities and their service animals. However, it is equally important to puppy raisers—the people who raise these beautiful creatures from about eight weeks old until they're 13 to 15 months old. Those dogs need socialization. They need to be able to interact with other dogs in order to develop good socialization skills among other animals.

Unfortunately, we can't take our dogs to regular dog parks, because there are potentially aggressive dogs, and our dogs are not

trained to deal with that. One aggressive behaviour against a guide dog or a service dog could ruin its career and the rest of its life. Right now, there's about a three- to four-year waiting list to get a guide dog in Canada, so we're very careful with our animals. We take them to special places.

I would love to have a service dog park specifically for service dogs. However, in saying that, I also think there is a component that, the minute I release my dog off her leash, I no longer have support. I don't think that should stop us from having a service dog park. I could take somebody to the park with me who could allow my dog to roam and to play with other animals, and who could help me round up my dog when I'm done and support me in the meantime. Personally, I think it's a great idea.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

I've heard of another support mechanism, which is people volunteering. If someone who's blind becomes lost, then they would show their location on their cellphone, and then they would phone a number. Is that the Phone It Forward program that you have, or is this a separate volunteer program that's just—

Ms. Diane Bergeron: That's separate. Phone It Forward is where we take phones from individuals who are upgrading their phones and getting rid of their old ones. We take the old phone and refurbish it. We wipe it clean, and then we provide it to somebody who's blind or partially sighted and who can't afford their own access. My cellphone is my lifeline.

There are two systems right now that are very popular in the blind community. One is called Aira. It is a paid subscription service. Then the one I use is called Be My Eyes. It has an AI feature in it, whereby I can actually aim the camera at this room and it will describe people. Then I can ask it questions, maybe some questions that people don't want me to ask, like "How old is that person?"

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Diane Bergeron: It also has the volunteer service, whereby, if I want to have somebody specific, I ask for them to volunteer, and they come on the camera. I show the camera, and they describe things. Be My Eyes is what it's called.

• (1255)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: To clarify, in terms of age, I've celebrated the 24th anniversary of my 50th birthday. I'll go forward with that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Your role as the treasurer for the World Blind Union establishes what...? I'd like to know what you're seeing as trends in different parts of the world that could be good opportunities for Canada to consider as best practices.

Ms. Diane Bergeron: The World Blind Union is a coalition of organizations, often for the blind, and we are in 190 countries in six regions. We get to see the best of the best and the worst of the worst.

I would say Japan.... The Emperor of Japan, who has a grandson who is blind, has decreed that the entire country will be accessible. You find Braille everywhere, and large print, colour contrast and tactile indicators. There is nowhere I went in Japan that wasn't accessible. When it comes to the physical environment, Japan is the place to look.

I would say that there's a lot of work being done right now in digital accessibility. The problem with that, of course, is that digital is an international space, and it's kind of this concept rather than a physical space. It's very difficult to do that. I would say that there's a lot of work being done in that area that we could be looking towards in finding ways to create better technology access.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[Translation]

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

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

Ms. Bergeron, I am going to ask you a short question, and I would like to hear your recommendations, if there's time.

Why do you say that guide dogs are not accepted in society?

[English]

Ms. Diane Bergeron: In the 40 years that I've been using guide dogs, I have been refused access to everything from ride-share and taxis to restaurants, hospitals and hotel spaces. I have been refused in libraries and public buildings. It happens regularly, to the point where I can tell you that I do not call a taxi or a ride-share without having a sighted person with me to make sure they can check the licence plate and be there as a witness, because it happens sometimes two or three times in a day.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: If I understand correctly, it deprives you of independence you would otherwise have if you weren't running into those barriers.

Can the regulations be changed to ensure that people who need a guide dog are not denied access to public spaces or transportation?

[English]

Ms. Diane Bergeron: I don't think it changed. The regulations and the legislation are in place. It's the enforcement that's part of the problem again. It's all about enforcement.

Also, it's about attitude. People don't understand it. In the time I've been with CNIB guide dogs, so since 2020, I have had people return their guide dogs after the dogs have been trained and after they have spent about a year with their dogs. I've had them return their dogs to CNIB and say, "I love the independence. I can get up and move around independently, but I can't go any further than the door, because the access refusals are becoming more of a barrier than the lack of independence to go freely around my environment."

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: That's unbelievable.

Thank you very much, Ms. Bergeron.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

The Chair: We have Ms. Zarrillo to conclude.

You have two and a half minutes.

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

Thank you so much to our witness today.

I thank you for raising Japan. I was fortunate enough when I was a city councillor to be on the accessibility committee for almost a whole eight years, and one of our members was from Japan. She actually leads the blind tennis in Coquitlam. She was constantly raising all the opportunities for us as a city to do better in making streets, parks and just city life in general more accessible.

You shared the larger opportunities for Braille, but I remember her mentioning to me even the way that pathways and sidewalks are done to make them much more accessible. I wonder if you could share some of the things you've seen, even across the globe, that have been very effective in making full inclusion in city life more possible.

● (1300)

Ms. Diane Bergeron: Sure.

One thing would be tactile walking surface indicators. When you get to the corners and there are little bumps on the ground, those are for us, to stop us from walking into traffic. They're very helpful. There are a lot of those in Japan.

One of the things that are interesting and that I've seen in many big cities—Japan was the first place I saw it—is that there are a couple of grooves in the middle of every sidewalk. You can put the tip of your white cane into that to follow that groove, or you can walk with your dog and keep your foot on it. It walks you straight down the sidewalk. That is an amazing feature for people, especially people who use canes. Unfortunately—because, again, of attitude, education and awareness—it's a wonderful feature until you come across the bike that's parked across it or the business that has decided to put its garbage across that line. Those are some of the things that do become barriers a bit.

One of the most interesting ones that I really enjoyed in Japan was when you go into their very well-known train system and put your hand on the railing to go up or down the stairs. When you get to the top or the bottom, underneath the railing is written, in Braille, what level you're at, what floor or which platform you're at. Sighted people don't notice it, but a blind person actually feels it with their fingers underneath as they're holding the railing. I love that feature. I thought it was amazing. If I could read Japanese Braille, it would be even better, but I thought it was a fantastic way of hiding a piece of accessibility and giving us a bit of an edge.

The Chair: Madam Zarrillo, our time—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: It's just on the infrastructure, Mr. Chair.

If I could ask that we get to this committee what the procurement process is for federal infrastructure in relation to disabilities and low vision and blind individuals, as part of this study, that would be great.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

Thank you, Madam Bergeron, for taking the time to be with us here today and for enlightening this committee on the challenges you face.

Committee members, I have two items. Minister Khera has confirmed her availability to appear for two hours on Thursday, December 12, and Minister Boissonnault will appear on seasonal workers on November 26, from 11:00 to 12:00.

As well, I need direction on Bill C-378, Madam Vien.

The committee initially agreed to Friday, November 22, as the deadline to submit briefs for Bill C-378. To provide the public with a little more time, is it the will of the committee to extend that deadline to Wednesday, November 27?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Does the committee approve the release of the draft press release prepared for Bill C-378?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Mr. Chair, as we make these changes to our calendar and our meetings, could we just routinely, every time there is a change in our calendar, circulate an updated version?

The Chair: That's a good point.

With that, is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The committee is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>