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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (1550)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 41 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today to undertake a study on "Report 5: Chronic Homelessness" of reports 5 to 8 of the Auditor General of Canada, referred to the committee on Tuesday, November 15.

All witnesses have passed their sound and Internet connection test.

[English]

I'd like to now welcome our witnesses.

From the Office of the Auditor General, we have Karen Hogan, Auditor General of Canada. It's nice to see her again. With her are Casey Thomas, assistant auditor general, and Sean MacLennan, director.

From the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, we have Romy Bowers, president and chief executive officer, and Nadine Leblanc, senior vice-president, policy.

From Employment and Social Development Canada, we have Jean-François Tremblay, deputy minister, and Nisa Tummon, assistant deputy minister, program operations branch.

From Infrastructure Canada, we have Kelly Gillis, deputy minister; Janet Goulding, assistant deputy minister, community policy and programs branch; and Kris Johnson, director general, homelessness policy directorate.

Before we begin, the clerk has informed me that we have until 5:45 p.m., with a hard stop at that time. I'll endeavour to get us through as many rounds as possible. Should we exhaust the line of questioning, of course, we can always adjourn early, but we must stop by 5:45 p.m.

To all our witnesses and guests today, I apologize that we're starting late. Unfortunately, votes in the House of Commons held members up for a little longer than anticipated.

Ms. Hogan, I'll turn to you. You have the floor for five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to discuss our report on chronic homelessness, which was tabled in Parliament on November 15. I would like to acknowledge that this hearing is taking place on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people.

Joining me today is Sean MacLennan, who led this audit.

This audit examined whether Employment and Social Development Canada and Infrastructure Canada worked together to prevent and reduce chronic homelessness. We also wanted to know whether the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, CMHC, delivered programs that improved housing outcomes for vulnerable Canadians, including those experiencing chronic homelessness.

We found that the organizations did not know whether efforts to date had improved housing outcomes for vulnerable Canadians. Infrastructure Canada did not have all the information it needed to know whether homelessness and chronic homelessness had increased or decreased since 2019. Where the department did have data, for example on the increased use of shelters by families since 2016, it did not analyze why this was occurring or whether there was a need to adjust its programs.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation did not know whether those most in need benefited from its housing initiatives. The corporation measured and reported on its outputs, such as the total number of units built, but it did not know how many people were being housed or which vulnerable groups were being helped. For example, it did not know whether units intended for persons with disabilities were in fact occupied by disabled persons. In addition, some rental housing units that the corporation considered affordable were often not affordable for low-income households and vulnerable groups.

[English]

One of my biggest concerns is the lack of federal accountability for achieving Canada's target to reduce chronic homelessness by half by 2028. The national housing strategy was launched five years ago, in 2017, yet there is still no lead to achieve this target.

Despite being the lead for the national housing strategy and overseeing the majority of its funding, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation took the position that it was not directly accountable for addressing chronic homelessness. Infrastructure Canada was also of the view that while it contributed to reducing chronic homelessness, it was not solely accountable for achieving the strategy's target of reducing chronic homelessness.

Infrastructure Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation were not coordinating their efforts to deliver on the national housing strategy's objectives and get a roof over the heads of individuals and families. This was despite the organizations' acknowledgement that collaboration and coordination, both inside and outside the federal government, are vital to addressing the housing needs of priority vulnerable groups.

Without a better alignment of efforts and clear accountability at the federal level, Infrastructure Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation are unlikely to meet the country's target to reduce chronic homelessness by half by 2028.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Auditor General.

We'll be turning to some questions shortly, but first we're going to hear from the other three groups.

I'll now turn to Ms. Bowers.

You have the floor for five minutes. Please proceed with your opening comments.

Ms. Romy Bowers (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank this committee for inviting me here today.

[*Translation*]

On any given night, tens of thousands of people in Canada experience homelessness. It's a complex issue that requires a collaborative approach. An approach that accounts for the many factors that can result in a person experiencing homelessness. These can be purely economic factors, but often they're also tied to health and addiction issues. When we speak about people being made vulnerable to homelessness, this is what we're talking about. It highlights the breadth of the response we need to muster.

CMHC leads Canada's overarching National Housing Strategy, or the NHS, which includes Reaching Home, Canada's Homelessness Strategy, led by Infrastructure Canada.

[*English*]

CMHC also delivers programming under the national housing strategy that supports the housing needs of vulnerable populations, including those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness. These programs are delivering real results.

For example, the rapid housing initiative specifically targets those most in need through the rapid creation of housing units. More than 2,500 housing units for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are currently being built with funds from this initiative.

The federal national housing co-investment fund supports the creation and renovation of affordable housing. Among its achievements, it has yielded over 3,700 shelter beds, 3,500 supportive housing units, and 1,600 transitional housing beds, so far.

Addressing chronic homelessness is a multi-faceted issue requiring support across all levels of government. CMHC and Infrastructure Canada recognize that reducing homelessness, including chronic homelessness, requires clear accountability, alignment of federal initiatives, and cross-jurisdictional support and efforts.

Therefore, we are ready to act on the recommendations in the audit work to more closely support the achievement of this objective. This includes further defining and analyzing the housing needs of vulnerable populations, and measuring how our programs are meeting those needs.

I believe it is very important to take this opportunity to point out that CMHC follows rigorous and strict governance and accounting principles in the delivery of its mandate. CMHC knows which population groups are targeted at application, and has a process in place to ensure that the units remain targeted to those households over time. We will continue to offer Canadians timely, clear, and transparent reporting that tracks spending and identifies recipients.

We have already created a website dedicated to the national housing strategy, which includes a regularly updated section reporting progress. This data is, however, limited by the fact that the programs are ongoing and that construction projects take time to be completed.

We are working on various initiatives, including a project in partnership with Statistics Canada, to access more comprehensive administrative data about those being housed in NHS units. In doing this, we carefully consider privacy implications of collecting data on vulnerable populations.

We are always seeking ways to improve our reporting, just as we welcome all ideas that can help to solve the problem of chronic homelessness in Canada. We believe the recommendations in this audit report can help us do both.

I am heartened to see that the audit's recommendations reinforce and strengthen our commitment to close collaboration and to a human rights-based approach to housing. These are the central pillars of CMHC's approach to addressing housing need.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Office of the Auditor General for this report. We agree with its recommendations and appreciate their guidance.

Thank you very much for your time today. I would be very happy to answer any questions.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bowers.

We will now turn to Mr. Tremblay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Tremblay, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay (Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): Mr. Chair, I am happy to be here today. I would like to acknowledge that I am speaking from the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin nation.

I want to thank the Auditor General and her team for highlighting the important issue of chronic homelessness in Canada.

[*English*]

I am joined by Nisa Tummon, assistant deputy minister of the program operations branch for Service Canada.

As you know, chronic homelessness is a pressing issue. Reaching Home is actually a \$3.4-billion program, over nine years, under the national housing strategy. It supports Canada's commitment to reduce chronic homelessness by 50% by the end of the fiscal year 2027-28.

[*Translation*]

In the fall of 2021, the Reaching Home program was transferred from Employment and Social Development Canada, or ESDC, to Infrastructure Canada to support the newly created position of Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion.

While accountability for Reaching Home was transferred, Service Canada continues to deliver a portion of the program on behalf of Infrastructure Canada. This was done to ensure continuity of service to communities and was codified through a memorandum of understanding between our departments.

[*English*]

ESDC, or Service Canada, has similar arrangements to deliver programs on behalf of other government departments. This means that we are still a bit involved in working particularly with funding recipients to ensure they provide the requisite information as outlined in their contribution agreements.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your attention.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have, including questions related to the role of Service Canada in service delivery for Reaching Home.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tremblay.

[*English*]

Now, from Infrastructure Canada, we have Ms. Gillis.

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Kelly Gillis (Deputy Minister, Infrastructure Canada): I thank the Office of the Auditor General for the performance audit of chronic homelessness in Canada. The report makes several important observations about our response to chronic homelessness, and we accept the recommendations.

Homelessness is a significant and complex challenge in Canada, and to address it we need better data and more coordination. When Reaching Home launched in 2019, it followed years of research and engagement with all orders of government and the homeless-serving sector, which pointed to the need for a new approach: an approach focused on transparency, coordination and evidence-based decision-making made at the local level to address their specific contexts.

This involved key transformations where communities are required to implement an international best practice called "coordinated access", which requires, among other things, developing a real-time list of all people experiencing homelessness and details regarding their housing and service needs. In order for communities to successfully implement this significant change, new tools, practices and guidance and modernized systems were required. We knew that to make this data-driven approach possible, the homeless-serving sector would have to radically transform how it operates.

We were making good progress in helping our community partners adapt to this new way of working when the pandemic hit in March 2020, less than a year after the program was launched. The first year of the pandemic saw a substantive shift in shelter services as communities reduced capacity in existing shelters to enable physical distancing, while bringing new temporary facilities online to compensate. In all, 2020 saw a 16% drop in the number of people accessing shelters, while the number of shelter users experiencing chronic homelessness remained steady at approximately 32,000 people. Since then, communities have reported a 79% increase in the number of people sleeping outside, including in encampments.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

Understandably, this change in priorities led to delays in implementing coordinated access and new systems to support results reporting.

[English]

During the first three years of the program, over half of the \$1.36 billion provided—\$708.6 million, to be exact—was aimed at helping communities to deal with the pandemic-related needs. Among other activities, communities used this funding for medical services such as hiring nurses for vaccination clinics in shelters, temporary accommodations such as placement in motels, PPE and help to provide basic services such as portable washrooms and handwashing stations to replace what was no longer available during lockdowns.

Despite needing to completely adapt their services to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, communities did not stop delivering long-term homelessness prevention and reduction services. Indeed, between April 2019 and March 2021, Reaching Home provided improved outcomes for 62,000 people who were prevented from becoming homeless, and nearly 32,000 people experiencing homelessness were helped to find housing.

The program also addressed some of the root causes of homelessness by connecting nearly 19,000 people to income assistance benefits, over 7,000 people to new paid employment, over 4,000 people to training programs and over 4,000 people to education programs.

Reaching Home improved outcomes for every person who accessed the 18,000 temporary accommodation spaces created when shelters had to reduce their capacity to ensure physical distancing. In fact, there were over 137,000 placements in these types of spaces between March 2020 and March 2021.

With regard to program delivery, as of November 25, a total of 33 communities out of 60 have implemented coordinated access, and we are working with the 27 remaining communities to have this program requirement in place by March 31, 2023.

[Translation]

Since 2019, the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness has reported that eight Reaching Home communities have achieved measurable and verified reductions in chronic homelessness. Key high-lights include:

[English]

Medicine Hat, Alberta, has gone to functional zero; Guelph-Wellington County in Ontario has sustained a reduction between 10% and 30% of chronic homelessness; Ottawa, Ontario, has reduced chronic homelessness by 15%; Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, has reduced chronic homelessness by 31%; and Dufferin County in Ontario is on track to reach functional zero, having already reduced by 74% since 2019.

Work to sustain functional zero is an ongoing effort. Knowing that some communities still have steps to take, this past summer we issued additional guidance related to coordinated access implementation to clarify program requirements and enhance the ability of communities to determine where they should focus their efforts.

Going forward, the government has doubled funding for Reaching Home to continue to support these communities in reducing chronic homelessness, but we know that more is needed. That is why budget 2022 announced a research project to support learning

about what works in certain communities and sharing those lessons with other communities. As well, a veterans homelessness program will soon be launched that will specifically address the needs of our veterans.

The audit report also rightly notes that most recent federal data available on emergency shelters is from 2019. The fact is that in order to continue having accurate estimates of national shelter use, it was necessary for the department to adjust its methodology in light of the creation of temporary shelter space in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done, and the national shelter use estimates for 2020 are expected to be released by the end of this calendar year. Estimates for 2021 and 2022 are expected in 2023.

Finally, I would like to address the findings on accountability. I accept our role as a leader in Canada's efforts to reduce chronic homelessness. Chronic homelessness is complex and requires active participation from all levels of government, non-profit organizations and civil society.

A key partner for us in this work, as the audit shows, is the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, as it has several mechanisms to address housing needs in Canada under the national housing strategy umbrella. For this reason, we are developing a strategy to ensure that Reaching Home funding recipients are aware of these funding opportunities that could support their efforts to address homelessness.

Internally, we are also implementing formal mechanisms to improve the collaboration between officials, which we know will translate into an improved alignment of efforts, including within the broader portfolio of infrastructure.

[Translation]

We are committed to continuing our work with other departments and other governments and with the not-for-profit sector, to support the most vulnerable Canadians across the country.

[English]

I look forward to speaking further about the department's work and our commitment to Canadians and to answering your questions.

• (1610)

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Some members will notice that I did give Ms. Gillis an extra minute there. We're still well under our time, though, as one or two of our guests did not use their full time.

I want to remind members that we have a good number of witnesses here today. When you're questioning the witnesses, please make it clear to whom you're putting the question so that I don't have to intervene for clarity. It will just allow for better flow.

As well, I will remind members that at our last few meetings, I allowed members to go over their time as we were studying the public accounts. I'm going to revert back to my traditional stop-watch here. If a witness is in the middle of answering a question and the time has expired, I will allow for that answer to be completed within reasonable limits, but the moment you interrupt the witness, your time will end. You should watch your clock as well, because I don't like to cut off witnesses [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Let's begin our first round with Mr. McCauley.

You have the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Mr. Chair, thanks very much.

Witnesses, thanks for joining us. AG Hogan and Mr. MacLennan, thanks for being here in person.

To start, I have to express my disappointment that not a single witness besides the AG office chose to show up in person today for such an important study. I recognize that someone might be out of town, or someone may be under the weather, but for every single witness not to show, it's a bit disappointing. I want to thank the AG for being here in person.

AG Hogan, you've read, I assume, the action plans from the departments. Do you get a sense that they're reasonable and that they're aggressive enough to tackle the ongoing issues?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We do review the action plans when they are submitted to the committee here. Some of them are not detailed enough for me to tell you whether or not they are aggressive enough. I must admit that it looks like actions will be taken, but I am disappointed that a lead will only be identified by December 2023, which in my view is another year out and almost six years into the national housing strategy. I believe federal accountability is important in order to align the programs properly and demonstrate achievement of the targets.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That was one of my follow-up questions. One of the biggest concerns you expressed was lack of accountability. Do you fear that we're going to lose another year if we're not actually appointing someone to be accountable for this for another year?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think it's clear over time that activity is happening. Housing units are being built and services are being provided, but the lack of accountability is not necessarily aligning the programs to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and ensuring that all of the organizations involved are providing the data needed to demonstrate achievement or progress towards that. I do think that one more year just delays the ability to demonstrate the progress.

In the audit, we did conclude that we felt it was unlikely that the government would meet its target, given its current progress and lack of data to demonstrate progress.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks. That's disappointing.

In the third paragraph of your opening statement, you commented about organizations not knowing whether efforts to date had improved outcomes.

I'm looking at some comments from the housing minister. He commented that 1.1 million Canadians have been housed since 2015, that half a million housing units have been built, and that 1.1 million Canadian families met their housing needs under this program.

What does he know that perhaps you don't know? Half a million houses have been built, but the departments don't seem to be able to communicate or track who's getting housed or whom they're helping.

Ms. Karen Hogan: I think I would agree with some of those statements. We show in our report that there are units being built. That is—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Half a million?

Ms. Karen Hogan: —clearly measured and the government is being accountable. We didn't look at all of the programs under the national housing strategy—we only looked at six of them—so perhaps the comments of the minister were broader.

The point we're trying to make is that building a unit targeted for a group doesn't mean a member of that group is actually being housed. In order to demonstrate that you're meeting the needs of the most vulnerable, you need to track that information: to measure the outcome, not just the output of creating a unit.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Right.

I'm going to switch over to CMHC.

Ms. Bowers, there was, funnily enough, a timely article in *The Globe and Mail*. The headline states that the housing advocate says that the national housing strategy is failing. That's our national housing advocate. She says that the national housing strategy "is failing" and "needs a complete overhaul."

What are your thoughts on her critique?

• (1615)

Ms. Romy Bowers: Chair, thank you very much for that question.

The national housing strategy is a significant development, in that in 2015—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: The housing advocate says it's failing. Do you agree with that?

Ms. Romy Bowers: The national housing strategy is intended to serve the housing needs of Canadians across the housing continuum. We have a number of programs that roll up under the—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: But our housing advocate, who has been appointed by the government, specifically says it's failing.

I have a straightforward question for you: Do you agree with our national housing advocate that the strategy is failing?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I do not agree with the statement that the national housing strategy is failing.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay, that's fair.

I'm going to go to your action plan, 65.2. It says that one of the outcomes is this: "CMHC is better able to confirm who is being housed in NHS-supported units".

If you need to be "better able to confirm", does that mean you do not know who's being housed in the units?

Ms. Romy Bowers: We have a rigorous due diligence process in assessing the applications that come into the national housing strategy portal. We are clear when applications are approved who the housing units are for, the target populations—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: But what's going on that you have to be "better able"—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): I have a point of order, Chair.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I don't understand.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Because of the nature of the housing—

The Chair: Pardon me, but I have a point of order. At least I heard a point of order.

Is that right, Mr. Fragiskatos?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes, it is, Chair.

The point won't surprise you. I've brought it up before. The questions are legitimate, but let's allow witnesses the space to answer them. That's all.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'd like to address that point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's not a point of order. This is my time. I'm asking very specific questions, and I would appreciate very specific answers on a very important topic that Canadians have a right to hear.

It's not a point of order, and I'd appreciate it if you would direct the member to stop interrupting.

The Chair: As members know, this time is reserved for members. If a member feels that a witness is being evasive, they have allowance to press that. Let's not get to the point of badgering, which I will not allow. However, give-and-take in this committee is to be allowed.

I'll turn the floor back to Mr. McCauley.

You have about 35 seconds left.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great.

As a follow-up on the same question, shouldn't it be more of a properly defined target, rather than "better able", as you noted in your action plan?

Ms. Romy Bowers: We are committed to defining the target more precisely, and we're committed to meeting the timeline specified in the audit plan.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

The Chair: That's your time. Thank you very much.

We'll now turn to Ms. Yip.

You have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

This is truly a sobering report. I thank the Auditor General and her team for studying and providing recommendations on chronic homelessness. I remain hopeful that, through the recommendations and action plans, more can be done.

Ms. Bowers, given that the government agreed with the recommendation on the need to improve coordination between CMHC and Infrastructure Canada on the effort to tackle chronic homelessness, can you speak to the importance of a whole-of-government approach when it comes to homelessness?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Thank you very much for this question, Mr. Chair.

Homelessness, as Deputy Minister Gillis has explained, is a very complex issue. It requires close collaboration between the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Infrastructure Canada. I am absolutely committed to strengthening the ties between our two organizations.

As I noted in my opening remarks, homelessness is about housing—it's about building housing and it's about supports associated with the housing—but it's also about providing the health and the social welfare supports that are required to help those most in need.

As DM Gillis mentioned, those supports are often provided by non-profit organizations, as well as other orders of government, and we're very committed to working across all levels of government to make sure that we all collectively work toward eliminating chronic homelessness in Canada.

● (1620)

Ms. Jean Yip: Ms. Gillis, what role does the federal government play in relation to other orders of government when it comes to this issue? I'm picking up where Ms. Bowers left off.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Certainly. Thank you very much for the question.

At Infrastructure Canada, we lead the program Reaching Home. Reaching Home is a transformational program that involves understanding, within the communities, by name, who is homeless and what their needs are. Being able to service those needs requires you to work with all orders of government: the communities at hand and the support levers within that particular community; the provincial or territorial supports that are within that community; and what we, CMHC and other government departments are doing.

In dealing with some of the complex issues—whether it's multi-generational racism, colonialism, mental health or addiction—those are some of the things that we are addressing when we're looking at chronic homelessness. Those support services are critical and are often provided by the local governments or the provincial or territorial government.

That alignment of work is really important, and the Reaching Home program is the transformation to be able to give the support services to the community entities that are delivering those supports and working with their communities to be able to provide that service.

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you.

My next question is addressed to both Ms. Bowers and Ms. Gillis. We've often heard about the plight of homeless veterans, as well as seniors, people with disabilities and women, who are also vulnerable. Is there any coordination and integration with other departments to help ensure that the needs of these vulnerable individuals are addressed?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Perhaps I will start.

In budgets 2021 and 2022, the government committed to developing a veterans program, which will soon be launched. I mentioned that in my opening remarks. That is something we are looking at and developing, specifically with Veterans Affairs Canada and the veteran-servicing community across Canada, to be able to tailor the program to the specific needs of those who have served our country.

We know there are about 2,500 homeless veterans across the country. We want to be able to target the support that they need to get what they require in the particular programs that we're going to be launching.

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Bowers.

Ms. Romy Bowers: The only thing I would add is that CMHC's programs often provide the capital funding for the actual structure of the housing that is required to house veterans or some of the other vulnerable groups that we mentioned. We work very closely with Infrastructure Canada, but also other departments, to make sure that there is a coordinated access of these vulnerable groups to our programs.

Ms. Jean Yip: Could you comment on the project with Statistics Canada that you mentioned in your opening statement about accessing more data to address these vulnerable persons?

Ms. Romy Bowers: As I mentioned earlier, when we accept an application for our funding, we ask for information about the vulnerable groups that the proponent is targeting, and we have a governance process to ensure that when the project is completed, the units are actually being occupied by the vulnerable groups that have been identified. Because of the nature of the construction cycle, there is a timeline between when the funding is provided and when the information about the occupants is provided, and that provides some gap in our reporting.

There are limitations in our reporting because of privacy concerns. You can imagine that, especially with respect to vulnerable

groups, there are limitations in the kinds of information we can disclose publicly. We are working on a project—a strengthened partnership with Statistics Canada—to gather more administrative data on an anonymized basis to ensure that we have greater information about the vulnerable groups that we're targeting.

The Chair: That is the time exactly. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to the committee, Mr. Trudel.

You have six minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses for being here.

There is a serious housing crisis in Canada, and so it is very important to discuss it today. I am going to ask Ms. Bowers my questions.

Yesterday, you put out a press release saying that Canada needs 3.5 million homes by 2030, whether they are in the private market or are social housing. Those are your own figures, CHMC's figures, and Scotiabank gave us the same figure in a study published a few months ago.

I spoke with a CMHC economist at a forum in Laval a few weeks ago. He said that 1.1 million homes were needed in Quebec alone. That corresponds roughly to the figure you published yesterday. He said that if we look just to the private market, it is going to build 500,000 homes. So there is a shortfall of 600,000 homes, and if we want to solve the problems of affordability and accessibility, the government is going to have to intervene somewhere in the process and build those 600,000 homes. At this point, the least we can say is that it isn't happening.

A few months ago, the federal housing advocate said in a report that in the last five years, the National Housing Strategy has resulted in the construction of 35,000 units and the renovation of 60,000 more, for a total of an additional 100,000. In Quebec alone, we need 600,000 homes right now.

When we talk about homelessness, the ultimate goal, at the end of the process, is to house people. There is therefore a connection with the National Housing Strategy, and it is not working. We are among the worst countries in the G7 when it comes to the average number of dwellings per 1,000 residents. I believe the number is 424. Five years after the national strategy was put in place, and after huge expenditures, we have not succeeded. There is also a lack of accountability.

I am going to ask you a specific question, Ms. Bowers. In Quebec alone, the market is going to be building 500,000 units, when we need 1.1 million. What is the plan to build those 600,000 units?

• (1625)

[*English*]

Ms. Romy Bowers: Thank you very much for the question, Mr. Chair.

As a point of clarification, when I talk to people about the housing crisis in Canada, I like to describe it from two perspectives. About 95% of the housing in Canada is created by the private sector. Less than 5% is community or social housing. The nature of the crisis is different.

With respect to housing in the private sector, there is a disconnect between the demand for that housing and the supply. The supply is created by private sector actors. One thing the government introduced through budget 2022 is a program called the housing accelerator fund. The housing accelerator fund is a program to break down barriers existing at the local level that prevent supply responses from occurring when there is increased demand. The program is in the process of being developed. We feel there is huge potential in that program to work with actors at the local level in order to break down the barriers to creating housing supply. That's one part of the crisis.

The second part of the crisis refers to the social or community housing sector. We have about 650,000 social housing units in Canada. It's 4% of our housing stock. It's quite a small percentage, relative to the total stock. It's one of the lower percentages among G7 countries.

Through the national housing strategy, the government has made unprecedented investments in housing. It is delivering results. I can provide a large number of pieces of information to you. The target of the national housing strategy, as it's currently funded, is to create 160,000 new units of housing funded by the federal government. Five years in, we're at about 62% completion. CMHC has made commitments for about 115,000 units. More is needed, and we are absolutely committed to using the existing funds we have available. They're also developing new programs to ensure there's housing for those in need.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, but I would like to have a bit more information.

You say your objective was to build 160,000 units and you have achieved 62 per cent of that figure. How many of those units will help the most vulnerable people, those who are spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing? Of that number, how many social housing units are there plans to build, exactly?

[*English*]

Ms. Romy Bowers: I should clarify that the 160,000 new units are the target for the 10-year period of the national housing strategy. To date, 115,000 units have been funded.

As you know, construction takes time, so these projects are at various stages of completion. Of the 115,000 units, approximately 45,000 are for deeply affordable housing, if that's your question.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: The National Housing Co-Investment Fund and the Rental Construction Financing Initiative essentially involve loans. The units built under those programs are referred to as affordable. In Montreal, however, the rents for this type of housing are on the order of \$2,200 per month.

According to organizations on the ground, the National Housing Strategy needs to be reviewed so that more money is sent to not-for-profit organizations to buy units that are currently on the private market. That would guarantee the long-term affordability of those units.

Do you think it is time to review the Strategy in order to create programs like that?

The Chair: Mr. Trudel, your speaking time is up, but you will have the opportunity to pick this up again in the next round of questions, in a few minutes.

[*English*]

We'll now turn to Mr. Desjarlais, for six minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses and the Auditor General for being present with us, and for producing this very important report. There's no question that homelessness and housing across Canada are major concerns, not just to parliamentarians but to folks who are actually living this every single day.

Unfortunately, I represent one the most dramatically under-housed populations in Canada. This is in Edmonton, Alberta. It's an emergency, and has been an emergency for several years now. When I say "emergency", I really want to put this into context. There are consequences to decisions, and there are consequences to inaction. In Edmonton, in 2021, there were more deaths recorded than in the two years prior combined. The Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness indicated there were 222 identified people who died in Edmonton last year. That represents a huge increase compared to preceding years.

It is also identified in some of the report information. In exhibit 5.4, the report showed that chronic homelessness was 11.3% higher in 2019 than the 2016 baseline. What we're seeing very clearly in Edmonton is what we're seeing right across the country: an increase in the number of folks who are identifying as houseless from city to city, and from coast to coast to coast.

I forget which official mentioned this, but it's also in the report. The target was a 31% decrease by 2023-24, and a 50% decrease in that demand by 2027-28. To have a chance of actually achieving that goal, chronic homelessness would need to fall by 38% between 2020 and 2024, and by 55% by 2027-28. It's going to be an incredible challenge, I see, in just how far behind we actually are in hitting these targets.

In my community, you don't have to look far. I encourage members to come to Boyle Street and McCauley, come to Alberta Avenue, and witness some of the dramatic increases in homelessness across our city in Edmonton.

The programs may not be working. We're here to figure that out. I'm really pleased to see the Auditor General table a report that's going to give us an opportunity to talk about accountability. We are not only facing a crisis in housing; we are also facing a crisis in accountability. We need to understand how these systems are functioning. Canadians deserve to understand how these investments work, and that these investments are actually hitting targets.

I was so disappointed to see in this report that we don't know the targeted information of those vulnerable populations that were served. If we are truly going to have a program that's outcome-based, that talks about and addresses homelessness, these critical factors must be included. We can't simply talk about the number of units. Understanding who is in those units is a critical piece to the Auditor General's report, and one that this committee is tasked with, trying to enforce some accountability and understand why we have a national housing strategy built without the target of ensuring that vulnerable folks actually got placed in housing.

This is strange. We're talking more about units than about the people those units should serve. It's incredibly important that we talk about the programs and the outcomes that we expect and that Canadians expect.

My question would be for CMHC, Infrastructure Canada, and ESDC: Who is ultimately responsible for achieving the national housing strategy targets?

I want to preface this by stating that the Auditor General points out very clearly that each of the three departments mentioned had a failure in trying to interact with one another in a way that was going to produce the best outcomes.

Starting with CMHC, who is responsible for achieving the national housing strategy?

• (1635)

The Chair: Just let me interrupt; I have paused the time.

Mr. Desjarlais, it sounds like you want to hear from everyone, so I just want to put you on notice that you have about one minute and 40 seconds.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you, Chair.

Please be quick with the responses.

Ms. Romy Bowers: CMHC is responsible for the overall national housing strategy and all its targets. We work in collaboration with Infrastructure Canada on the homelessness target.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much for that.

Infrastructure Canada, go ahead.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you.

As Ms. Bowers said, we work in collaboration on that particular target.

Infrastructure Canada is responsible for leading on the program Reaching Home, which is a really important program. It is outcomes-based and we're working with communities to have the data that you have mentioned. We are making headway in each community as we're operating and implementing coordinated access to know who is in the community and what housing and services they need, and for us to be able to monitor that.

That was impacted by COVID, but we are on track now with our 60 community entities. Half of them have coordinated access. It is giving us much better data on the impact on those in society and their needs, so we can adjust our programs to be able to service those needs.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: ESDC, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

For us, the role is quite limited and simple. We support Infrastructure Canada in some of the aspects of the Reaching Home service program delivery, which means, for example, the relationship with the recipients from the contribution agreement's perspective.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I think that's my time.

The Chair: Very good. That's your time.

I paused the time when I interrupted you, Mr. Desjarlais, so I would not take your time.

We're turning now to Mr. Aitchison.

Welcome to the committee. You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's an honour to be here.

Thank you to all the witnesses and to the Auditor General.

My first question is for either representative from the Auditor General's office.

We heard from the CMHC that it follows rigorous and strict governance and accounting principles in the delivery of its mandate. Would you agree with that statement?

Ms. Karen Hogan: This audit really didn't look at CMHC delivering on its mandate. That would be something we would do in our special examination.

Here, we looked at the management of six projects under the national housing strategy and whether or not they were accountable for the achievement of a key goal in that strategy, which is to reduce chronic homelessness by 50% by 2028.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Would you say that they did not follow rigorous accounting strategies when it came to that particular part of their mandate?

Ms. Karen Hogan: They definitely track where money is going. They're accountable. They have agreements in place for whom they lend to. They contract the units being built.

However, our main finding was that for tracking the outcomes of who is ultimately housed and whether or not these initiatives have improved the lives of the most vulnerable, they were unable to demonstrate that to us.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you.

My next question would be for ESDC.

I know that the Parliamentary Budget Officer reported that an average of \$118 million a year was spent on homelessness programs. That was bumped up to \$357 million a year, yet homelessness is on the rise. This speaks to the importance of tracking and accounting for where the money is spent.

Mr. Tremblay, can you explain to us where that money has gone, if homelessness is, in fact, on the rise?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: As I mentioned before, the role that we have is to manage some of the programs on behalf of Infrastructure Canada, so I would defer to my colleague at Infrastructure Canada to explain—as she has done a bit already—where the money is flowing and for what.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to acknowledge that of the \$1.36 billion, \$708 million—and we can account for every dime of it—has gone to emergency measures during COVID for doing things I mentioned in my speech, such as PPE, vaccination clinics and shelters, handwashing facilities, and temporary measures for social distancing so people could have a safe place to sleep. It was really about keeping people safe during the crisis. The top-up during the COVID period was to deal with the health crisis at that particular point in time.

The government has—

• (1640)

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Ms. Gillis, I'll jump in there, if you don't mind.

Reaching Home spent \$1.36 billion between 2019 and 2021, which is about 40% of the budget. Why have you spent only 40% of the budget, considering the fact that homelessness in Toronto, for example, is on the rise? It's on the rise in Winnipeg. It's on the rise in every major city. Tent cities are growing literally across this country.

The City of Toronto has reported that 216 homeless people in Toronto died last year. That's 4.2 people per week. Forty people a day, on average, were turned away from homeless shelters in Toronto last year. That's up to 63 people so far this year.

Why did you spend only half the money?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: This is a nine-year program. Originally it was set at \$2.1 billion. It was topped up during COVID to deal with the pandemic and that crisis. The government since, in budget 2022, has continued to increase its support for the homeless community at that doubling level until the end of 2025-26.

It is over half a billion dollars a year to support communities across the country by bringing in a transformational program to support communities, knowing their population and what housing and support needs they have and being able to work with the community to support service and non-profit organizations and provincial and federal governments to provide those supports.

The government doubled its support for Reaching Home during the COVID time period and will extend it past the COVID time period.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you.

I have a quick question for Ms. Bowers.

How many employees are there at the CMHC, roughly?

Ms. Romy Bowers: There are roughly 2,400 employees.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: How many of those employees would be responsible for delivering on the six main national programs of the national housing strategy?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I don't have the precise number, but I would guess about 40%.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: When the national housing co-investment fund has spent only about 50% of its budget, the rental construction financing initiative has spent only about 53% of its budget, and the Auditor General is telling us that we don't really know how many people have been helped or if it's really working, I'm wondering if you can explain to us, number one, why only half the budget has been spent.

The Chair: I'm afraid we're going to have to wait for an answer on that. I apologize about that. Your time is completely gone.

I'm now going to turn to Mr. Dong.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses for coming to today's meeting. This is a very important discussion here.

My first question is for the Auditor General.

Auditor, have you done any audit of the government's performance dealing with homelessness in the recent past, let's say in the last five years?

Ms. Karen Hogan: No, we have not in the last five years.

Mr. Han Dong: Reaching Home just started in 2019.

First I want to go to Ms. Gillis.

My understanding is that Infrastructure Canada is the ministry that is responsible for delivering Reaching Home. Is that correct?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: That's correct. It was transferred to us in the fall of 2021.

Mr. Han Dong: It was transferred to you in 2021, okay. Who was responsible for it before it was transferred to your department?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: It was ESDC.

Mr. Han Dong: To your knowledge, has ESDC had a chance to carry out what was contained in the strategy in 2019, given that the pandemic also started very early on, in March? Were they able to roll out some parts of the strategy?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: I will begin and then see if Mr. Tremblay or Nisa Tummon would like to add anything.

During the COVID period of time, it was less than one year that the new Reaching Home program had been launched, and it was a transformational program. The homeless-serving sector did need to transition their own services to just keep people safe.

That said, as the Auditor General noted in her report, nine community entities across the country did implement coordinated access, even though they were managing during a COVID period of time. Since then, we do know that, as of right now, about half of our communities have implemented coordinated access [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and, as I noted in my opening remarks, we're seeing results for those community entities that have implemented that new program. We're seeing reductions—

• (1645)

Mr. Han Dong: I'm sorry; could you repeat your last sentence? The connection wasn't very good, and I couldn't hear you.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Certainly. What we are seeing, as of right now, November 25, is that about half the community entities we fund—approximately 60 of them, across the country—have implemented the program. It's what we call “coordinated access”.

This is an international best practice—an information system wherein all the service sectors use the same information to know who is homeless in their community and what their housing and support needs are. It can be done in a very efficient and effective way, where people in a community can coordinate efforts to provide the right services to a particular individual. Half of our community entities, across the country, have now implemented that particular.... It's quite a transition and transformational change in how the non-profit and homeless-serving sectors operate. We provide an information system free of charge to help them do that.

We've also worked with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness to help them provide technical assistance to make that transition. Now, we are seeing, in some communities—Medicine Hat, Alberta, for example, or even Ottawa—reductions in chronic homelessness, because they have implemented coordinated access.

That said, we know we need to do more. That's why, in budget 2022, they gave us a bit of additional funding to work with communities across the country, in order to understand what's working, what we've learned from it after implementing coordinated access, and what more we have to do. This is on top of doubling the funding of Reaching Home to the end of 2025-26, so we can provide more support to communities in implementing this important transformation.

Mr. Han Dong: That's very good.

You said half the communities have implemented it. How many are left? What's the plan to complete the project?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for the question.

Outside Quebec, there are 27 community entities that have to implement coordinated access. By the end of December this year, we will have a detailed plan to help the community entities implement that particular new transformational system.

We have, as I mentioned, engaged with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, which will be providing technical assistance to

those 27 community entities. As well, we're going to be doing workshops in the summertime, and we will continue to do so. We'll issue additional guidance to communities to help them make that particular transition. We will be doing very customized support to help those communities reach the program requirements, because we know it's going to make a difference in those communities.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

The Chair: That is your time, Mr. Dong.

Could I ask, Ms. Gillis, that you modify the location of your microphone a bit? There's a bit of feedback right now, and it's not clear enough for the interpreters. If you could just move it up—

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Is this better?

The Chair: That seems to be better. I'll wait for the clerk to signal—looking at translation—but that's much clearer. I can even tell based on that.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Trudel, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If I may, since I'm not sure I'll have another two and a half minutes, I'm going to split my time with Mr. Morrice of the Green Party.

I am going to speak for a minute and 15 seconds. I am going to try to be brief.

Ms. Bowers...

The Chair: Excuse me for interrupting you, Mr. Trudel. I just have a little question for you.

Do you want me to warn you when your minute and 15 seconds is up, or do you want to time yourself?

I ask because members sometimes go past their speaking time.

So it's up to you to choose.

Mr. Denis Trudel: It's preferable if you interrupt me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Right. Thank you.

Mr. Denis Trudel: I am going to try to be brief.

Ms. Bowers, you undoubtedly know that many housing projects in Quebec financed by the Rapid Housing Initiative, the RHI, are unable to get started at present because of the labour shortage and rising labour costs. That is a very important issue.

I have had an opportunity to discuss this with Mr. Hussen, who told me there were a lot of similar cases throughout Canada.

Have representations been made to the government for these projects to be adequately financed?

We are talking about good projects that have already been accepted, particularly in the case of the RHI projects, which are intended to help the most vulnerable people.

Has this been brought to your attention? Is the government considering investing to finance these projects so they can get started?

[English]

Ms. Romy Bowers: Thank you for that question, Mr. Chair.

CMHC believes that increasing the supply of housing is absolutely important to increasing the affordability of housing. One of the barriers to bringing supply online is the lack of skilled trades in many regions across Canada. There are many programs at the provincial or territorial level to increase the number of students going into the skilled trades. We think that's a great thing. There are also initiatives, under immigration programs, to attract immigrants in the skilled trades to Canada. Those are very positive developments to increase the supply of housing.

In addition to that—

• (1650)

The Chair: I'm going to stop you right there.

[Translation]

Mr. Trudel, you will have another turn to speak, so you can come back to this subject.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: We'll turn now to Mr. Morrice.

[Translation]

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Thank you, Mr. Trudel.

[English]

The Chair: You have the floor for about a minute and 13 seconds, so I was pretty good on the time there.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Chair.

[Translation]

I also want to thank Mr. Trudel.

[English]

I'm disappointed in the report. It mentions that Infrastructure Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation didn't know if their efforts were improving housing outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

I want to share with you data from my community. In the time since the national housing strategy was launched, the number of people experiencing homelessness has tripled. It's up from 333 people to 1,085 people experiencing homelessness in my community. This is what the crisis looks like on the ground.

With 30 seconds left, I have a question for CMHC. Ms. Bowers, if there's one change you feel needs to be made to CMHC in order to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness, as opposed to having it triple, what is it?

Ms. Romy Bowers: The national housing strategy started as a \$40-billion program. It's grown to a \$70-billion program. It's a very ambitious initiative, and I would encourage the government to expand its scope. We at CMHC are committed to making sure that the funds are directed to those most in need.

The Chair: That is the time. Thank you very much.

We'll turn now to Mr. Desjarlais.

You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to quickly turn to paragraph 5.76 in relation to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation not knowing whether it not it was improving housing outcomes for vulnerable Canadians and contributing to the prevention and reduction of chronic homelessness. In addition, that same section says:

The corporation did not know who was benefiting from its initiatives or whether housing outcomes were improving for priority vulnerable populations, including people experiencing chronic homelessness. We also concluded that rental housing considered affordable and approved under the National Housing Co-Investment Fund was often unaffordable for low-income households, many of whom belong to vulnerable groups.

When I hear that figure, you must understand—particularly members of the CMHC—how concerning that is when we're talking about massive-scale investments not getting the results or being able to demonstrate those results, simultaneous to seeing the reality on the ground in my communities and on Boyle Street. These are real places that have real impacts. Two hundred and twenty-two people...almost 460 people died in the last two years. This is happening in our backyards, and we need to find some ways to get some accountability.

My question is clear: How can we have any faith in CMHC's ability to deliver on affordable housing when we don't know how to measure affordability, and when the OAG found that your definition of affordable housing was out of reach for low-income households?

That's for the CMHC.

Ms. Romy Bowers: The national housing strategy is composed of a number of different programs. The level of affordability that is targeted is different depending on the program. There are a number of programs that are very targeted and directed toward vulnerable populations.

For example, the rapid housing initiative was a program that was developed during the COVID crisis. We have delivered over 10,000 units in funding commitments for housing units serving those most in need. Many of these units are still in the process of being constructed. We can confirm who is using these units once the construction is complete.

There is a timing lag that's created in the provision of this data. CMHC is very committed to providing greater transparency and making sure that the gap between when we receive this information and when it's available to the public is closed.

We accept the recommendations of the Auditor General and we feel that we can work much more collaboratively with Infrastructure Canada to make sure that there is greater transparency and accountability about these outcomes.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you. That is the time.

We'll turn now to Mr. Genuis.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Reading this audit reminded me of an episode of one my favourite TV shows, “Yes Minister”. It's an episode where there is a hospital that has been empty for months but is nonetheless employing administrative staff, and the public servants assure the minister that it's one of the most hygienic hospitals in Britain.

In all seriousness, though, this is really horrendous stuff.

I'll read from the audit:

As the lead for Reaching Home, a program within the National Housing Strategy, Infrastructure Canada spent about \$1.36 billion between 2019 and 2021—about 40% of total funding committed to the program—on preventing and reducing homelessness. However, the department did not know whether chronic homelessness and homelessness had increased or decreased since 2019 as a result of this investment.

Essentially, what the Auditor General has concluded is that the government, despite spending billions of dollars on combatting homelessness, can't measure and can't track homelessness. In many cases, it can't track it overall and certainly can't effectively know the impact of the measures it's implementing as to whether the money it's spending is actually making a difference or not and how the overall picture is changing.

One conclusion for me from this is that the government doesn't actually have a national housing strategy in any meaningful sense. They have a document called that, with aspirational goals, but they are not measuring progress towards those goals in any meaningful way, which hardly merits the term “strategy”. I think it is important that the committee hear from the minister at some point to provide some explanation for this shameful balderdash.

I guess I just want to ask this of our public servants, though. It doesn't seem to me that it should have been necessary for the Auditor General to point this out. For ministers and for public servants who were working on the national housing strategy and have been for a number of years, and presumably noticed that there was a lack of measurement or benchmarks, why did it take the Auditor General's pointing this out for you to note that maybe something was wrong here?

I'll hear from all of the departments. We'll start with Ms. Gillis at Infrastructure Canada.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you, Chair, for the question.

What I can say is that during the audit period we were in during the COVID time, for community entities, we gave them a delay and an extension to report the results of their spending. What I can tell you now is that with the money that was spent, aside from the \$708 million that I already talked about for emergency measures, we supported 3,378 projects. That supported almost 32,000 people—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, but that's just not my question.

Did you think there was problem vis-à-vis measurement prior to the Auditor General's report coming out?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: During the audit period, during the COVID period of time, we gave an extension for the reporting of the results. Since that time, we do have the reporting of the results for the first two years of the program, which have made measurable impacts in placing 32,000 people in stable homes. A year later, 70% of them are still placed in those homes. It had 62,000 people who were prevented from becoming homeless. We put 8,100 emergency support measures in place. The community entities we funded across the country have provided the detailed information—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, but respectfully, the purpose.... What the Auditor General has concluded is that there is a lack of basic information about the overall picture and how we're progressing towards the overall picture. In many cases, just basic numbers are not being kept.

I don't have time to go through all of the officials at this point, but it would be nice if there were some acknowledgement that there is a grave problem here. Maybe I can bring in one of the other officials. Let me put it this way: Is there anybody here who wants to acknowledge the grave problem we have?

Go ahead, Mr. Tremblay.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: If I can quickly answer your questions, I remember the hospital in “Yes Minister”, as you do, but in the hospital, there were no patients. This is not the case here. There has been funding. There have been programs. There has been progress. The issue—

• (1700)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: But we just don't know if it's working.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: Can you let me finish?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Please.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: What happened during COVID is that we decided that those groups were getting more money and had to transform the way they delivered services during COVID and face the challenge of COVID, and if they were not able to report in time, we postponed the report. That's why a lot of the information didn't come in time, but it's coming, so we'll see with this information, as my colleague from Infrastructure Canada mentioned. Some of this information is coming, and they're now getting some of the trends and what exactly the money is achieving.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That is the time.

I'll turn now to Mrs. Shanahan.

You have the floor for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to talk more about the measures and how the data is collected. I think that is where there may be a misunderstanding.

Ms. Gillis, could you tell me who is responsible for data collection? Who is living in these units?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Under the agreements, the community groups have to have the data and send us the information according by various deadlines. During the pandemic, we gave them an extension because they were very busy.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Who are these community groups? Are they associated with the federal government, provincial government or municipal government?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: They are not associated with the federal government, but often with not-for-profit organizations that receive the funds to deliver services in their community.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Why are we working with those groups?

You said it was a transformational program, but we are waiting for the results.

What is the difficulty here? Could we not simply add up the dollars and units?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you for the question.

The objective of the Reaching Home program is not to build housing. It is to give communities funds so they can deliver services to people who need help to find housing or temporary financial support for housing.

This program could also help communities design educational programs. It is not meant for constructing buildings; it is for delivering services.

[*English*]

These services are customized to the needs of the individual, potentially addiction services. The person is linked to the actual help that they need depending on their individual circumstances, and that's where we work with non-profit organizations for them to have an information system so that someone who's homeless doesn't have to go through their community to different organizations trying to find the help they need. Instead, it is centralized and coordinated by all the homeless-serving sector within that particular community, and it is an internationally recognized best practice.

Now we are seeing some of the fruits of that practice being put in communities across the country, but we know more is needed, and that's why we're working on, first of all, doubling the funding to those particular community entities over the next number of years so they can do more. As well, we are doing further analysis to understand, once you've actually put in this transformational, coordinated system, what more communities need to be able to deal with this very complex, serious problem.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you for that.

You did mention there has been tremendous success. I forget how you said it exactly, but Quebec was not included in that number, so I'd like to learn more about that. In my community, Châteauguay—Lacolle, we've had tremendous progress with a project in the rapid housing initiative that would address at-risk youth. I'm so thrilled. We're working with Kahnawá:ke. This is a first for Châteauguay to work with Kahnawá:ke in transforming what was an eyesore, an old hotel on our main street.

Can you talk to me a little bit about what agreement you have with Quebec?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you very much for the question, Mr. Chair.

With Quebec, we work directly with the province, and the province works with community entities. We have just reached an agreement with Quebec to implement coordinated access. We have seven community entities within that particular province, and we're working on a detailed implementation plan, so we'll be advancing coordinated access within the province as well.

• (1705)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Okay.

I want to ask about measures and how they're put together. We had a strategy. We have targets. Are the measures not included within the strategy?

I don't know who can answer me on that. Who wants to take a leap at it?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes, we track seven indicators of success very closely for the national housing strategy. I can give you a sense of what some of these indicators are.

One thing we track is how many households have their housing needs either significantly reduced or eliminated. We also track how many new housing units the government has funded. We look at existing community housing stock and the number of units repaired or renewed. We also look at preserving community housing stock and how the federal government's investment is protecting community housing stocks. We have numbers associated with that as well as progress. We have the Canada housing benefit, which is not an investment towards—

The Chair: I apologize. I have to stop you there. The time is well over. A member might come back to you on this, I suspect, and there might even be a request to see that information, but that's not for me to say.

I'll turn now to our next round. This will be our final full round. We might have time for a few other questions at the end.

Mr. Aitchison, you have the floor for five minutes.

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

I'd like to return to the question of the report that's come out, Ms. Bowers. One of the bigger concerns I have with this report is that.... It's bad enough that, really, one of the main mandates of the organization is to do a lot of research on housing in general and it's not doing a good job of keeping track. The bigger concern I have is this business that no one really seems to know who's the lead, and we won't have one until next year, I hear. That seems particularly odd to me.

Ms. Bowers, how often do you meet with the Minister of Housing and Diversity and Inclusion?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I meet with the minister on a regular basis.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Have you met with the minister since report 5 of the Auditor General was released in order to discuss the findings?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes, I have.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Did the minister express his concerns? Have you come up with an action plan with the minister to solve the problem?

Ms. Romy Bowers: As part of our regular process, the minister would review the action plans proposed by CMHC and Infrastructure Canada and would have the opportunity to ask questions and approve it.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: When you worked at the Bank of Montreal, I'm assuming that the bank had a bonus structure for employees for great work. Did they have a bonus structure at the bank?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes. The bank, like many other organizations, had a total performance system that included bonuses and other benefits.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: CMHC, I understand, gave about \$48 million in bonuses in 2020-21. How many employees would have received a bonus?

Ms. Romy Bowers: In 2022, our bonus expense amount was about \$30 million. I don't have the exact number of employees who received it, but I can certainly get that to you, as required.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: The bonus structure at the CMHC is predicated on what? Great performance, I'm assuming. How does it work?

Ms. Romy Bowers: When we're looking at our total compensation, it's based on performance. We also do benchmarking on a regular basis to make sure that our compensation package is aligned with comparators in the private sector as well as the public service.

CMHC has a dual mandate. We provide a competitive insurance product and compete with the private sector for employees. In addition to that, we deliver appropriation-based business. We take that into consideration in determining our compensation structure for employees.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: I'm assuming that the insurance part of the business is doing a lot better, considering that we've only spent half of a couple of programs and the housing situation in Canada is getting worse. Can I assume that maybe most of those bonuses went to the insurance side of the business?

• (1710)

Ms. Romy Bowers: CMHC takes performance measures very seriously. We have a series of internal performance targets that we cascade down to our employees. We ensure that, for example, some of the housing targets I mentioned to you are being met on a regular basis.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: So while tent cities are growing and more homeless people in cities are dying, with the number doubling in the city of Toronto, we have housing officials and bureaucrats getting bonuses of \$48 million. How much of the \$48 million in bonuses would have gone to the people who are working in the national housing co-investment fund or the new rental construction financing initiative? How much of the \$48 million? Would it be half of it or 40%, sort of like the same ratio of the employees involved in those departments?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I'm sorry, but I don't have that level of granularity available. I can certainly provide that upon request.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: It seems perverse to me. I'm sure it seems perverse to the people who don't have a home and are living in tents. I wonder how much \$48 million could buy in tents for places across this country from Vancouver to Charlottetown. I'm frustrated by this. I think that we need to do an awful lot more.

I appreciate the Auditor General's giving us this report, because it has told us that we're not getting the job done. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has told us the job's not getting done. Nobody is accountable, but people are getting bonuses. You can imagine my frustration and the frustration of the people I represent.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Aitchison, you have about 10 seconds left. There were several offers for documents. Do you want to request those documents that were offered? You need to do that. They won't be sent unless you make that request.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I didn't realize I had that time.

Yes, I would like those documents.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm now turning to our next member.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses today.

I want to begin by asking Ms. Bowers a question relating to something she raised earlier, which was the housing accelerator fund. I ask that in light of the fact—and it is a fact, one that should not escape the attention of this committee—that housing and homelessness are not just the business of the federal government but need to be addressed by all levels of government. This is not to absolve the federal government of its responsibilities, certainly.

Just this past weekend, I listened to two economists. One was from the Smart Prosperity Institute and the other from the C.D. Howe Institute. They outlined how municipal policy and distortions in terms of supply and demand give rise to homelessness. The point was made that you have people driving until they qualify, if I can put it that way. This has been especially the case in southern Ontario and the GTA. The GTA is very expensive in terms of housing. People would go outside of the GTA to find an interest rate that suited them. In turn, those middle-class folks, once they settled in communities, would go into areas and buy up homes. Those homes would be renovated, gentrifying the area. You have the problem of “renovictions” taking shape. That renoviction challenge leads to homelessness in some cases. It's not in all cases, but it can.

Where I'm going with that, Ms. Bowers, is this: How can the housing accelerator fund help to deal with the challenge, specifically on the supply/demand distortions we see in municipalities so that more housing can be built and we can meaningfully address the challenge of homelessness? I do think the municipalities are our partners. I do think that the accelerator fund can help in this regard.

How do you think it can help address what I've just outlined?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I believe we need to have a healthy housing system as a whole to address homelessness and housing affordability. As I mentioned in my earlier remarks, 95% of the housing in Canada is provided by the private sector. There is a huge demand for housing in Canada, particularly in our large cities. There have been impediments for the private sector to provide the housing that is needed.

The purpose of the accelerator fund is to provide incentives to municipalities and other local actors to clear away some of the barriers for some of those supply responses to take place.

At the federal level, because we have a system that is free market-oriented, this is one way we can use federal fiscal powers to create incentives and changes at the local level.

Housing is a very local problem, and there are unique challenges in cities and communities across Canada. The purpose of the fund is to be flexible enough to provide funding to help local officials and politicians break down local barriers and bring on supply much more quickly than they have in the past.

• (1715)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I know that municipalities have their share of challenges, of course. In certain communities—my own included, London, Ontario—we're not seeing enough housing being built. When you don't have enough housing being built and you have very high demand, you do have problems that can lead to homelessness. I'm looking forward to the housing accelerator fund. I'm looking forward to seeing how that can help municipalities.

Chair, I want to read one of the key recommendations in the auditor's report. It says that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Infrastructure Canada should “align, coordinate, and integrate their efforts” and “engage with central agencies to clarify accountability”.

I don't know if we'll have time to hear from both. I'll go to Infrastructure Canada, since I already went to Ms. Bowers.

What is being done specifically to better coordinate with CMHC so that this recommendation can be realized?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you for the question, Chair.

We have an assistant deputy minister coordinating committee that has been in place—it meets biweekly—as well as working-level meetings among ourselves to make sure that we're coordinating our programs.

Going beyond CMHC and us, CMHC and I met with our housing provincial and territorial colleagues yesterday. We struck a working group on housing and homelessness so we can coordinate our efforts, not just from a federal perspective, but from a provincial and territorial perspective, which is also extremely important, to make sure we are using and leveraging all of the resources that help our communities across the country.

The Chair: Thank you. That was excellent time. You were just a few seconds over.

I appreciate that from you both.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Trudel, you have the floor now for two and a half minutes, again.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ms. Gillis, and I would ask her to answer in concrete terms.

We talked about organizations on the ground, such as Réseau Solidarité in Quebec, that work with organizations located more or less all over.

Those organizations submit reports on what is happening or not happening and the number of people they help. What we have learned is that those reports are sent to the Integrated Health and Social Services Centres, the CISSS; in Quebec, it has to go through the ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux. We have learned that since 2020-2021, the CISSS reports have not been handled by Infrastructure Canada.

As we know, there will be no warming station opening in Montreal's north end, even though there are people who need this during the winter. So the homeless people who warm up at these stations overnight are going to have to spend the night outside.

In Longueuil, La Halte du Coin, a high acceptability threshold resource, is threatening to close on December 24. Last winter, that organization took in 35 people overnight. The lack of funds means that the organization is going to have to close its doors.

I am trying to understand how that works.

This organization is working to reduce homelessness, but it lacks funds. The people who work for that organization help homeless people find overnight shelter.

My question is quite specific: if the reports are not making it to Infrastructure Canada, how can we help these organizations? It is actually Infrastructure Canada that funds these organizations.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for his question.

We are working with Quebec, which determines the amount of the funding granted that is allocated to the community. We are also working with the province on the Reaching Home program.

That program needs more money in order to provide services to people in the community who are experiencing homelessness, and that is why we have doubled the funds up to 2025-2026.

Mr. Denis Trudel: How do you know they need money, since the reports never make it to Infrastructure Canada?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: During the pandemic, we extended the deadline for reports and outputs. We have now started to receive reports from everywhere in Canada. We are working with Quebec to get the outputs.

• (1720)

Mr. Denis Trudel: Has the auditor...

The Chair: Mr. Trudel, your speaking time is up. You will probably have another minute of speaking time shortly.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to emphasize the importance of ensuring that the witnesses understand the purpose of this committee. It's to ensure that we utilize the words of the Auditor General, who's made it very clear in her report that there are systemic failures within CMHC, Infrastructure Canada and ESDC, in particular in the operations of data collection for outcome and co-operation among all three groups.

It's imperative that this committee understands and that the director of CMHC understands that this is truly a measure of accountability for Canadians. We expect far more than the answers we've been receiving today. We expect an admission that it's important you understand that the Auditor General reports are important to Canadians and that you must heed the advice, not just of this committee, but of course of the Auditor General.

Chronic homelessness was 11.3% higher in 2019-20 than the 2016 baseline. It was just mentioned by CMHC that their plan is to ensure they can incentivize the private market to ensure they are building the supply. We're seeing that their plan is resulting in an increase in homelessness.

Does CMHC think that the private market can continue to be incentivized to build the appropriate number of units, yes or no?

Ms. Romy Bowers: The private sector cannot provide housing to support those most in need, those at risk of homelessness and those who are most vulnerable. That's the role of government. CMHC has a number of programs that support those Canadians who are most vulnerable.

The role of the private sector is to provide housing for—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: What do you believe the role of public housing is in Canada? Is there sufficient investment to ensure that we have the funds to build public housing? Is there enough money? Do you have enough money?

Ms. Romy Bowers: The national housing strategy is a very significant development, in that it represents a return of the federal government to investing in public, social housing. It's not about—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I'm concerned that when we transfer funds to for-profit developers, we see an increase, especially in the rental program, to the total cost of rent, which makes it even more out of reach for those persons.

We saw in that report just this summer and last summer out of Toronto. We're seeing larger increases to rent that are receiving funding from CMHC and are leaving these units out of reach. Why are we seeing this—

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, that is your time, but I'm hoping you will have another minute in our next round.

We'll turn now to Mr. Genuis.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

As we have been talking about, this report from the Auditor General reveals significant gaps, approaching a total absence, in terms of data collection and evaluation with respect to the government's performance in attempting to combat homelessness. The findings of the Auditor General are pretty clear, and the members—at least the members of the opposition, and maybe some members of the government—are gravely concerned about these findings.

I'm getting the sense from the responses to some of these questions that there's not a fulsome recognition of how damning these findings are.

I'll ask a simple question. We can go through the deputy ministers. More or less, a yes-or-no answer should be fine for this. Do you agree that something has gone gravely wrong here?

We will start with Ms. Bowers.

Ms. Romy Bowers: I accept the findings of the Auditor General and will take concerted action to implement the recommendations.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Do you acknowledge that those findings are that grievous errors have been made in the process?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I thank the Auditor General for the findings, and I'm very committed to addressing the action plans that it advised.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay.

Take two.... Go ahead, Ms. Gillis.

• (1725)

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you, Chair, for the question.

We have submitted an action plan to address the findings of the Auditor General, which we think are extremely important.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Did something go gravely wrong here?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: As I said, we agree with the Auditor General's recommendations and we are actioning them.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Go ahead, Mr. Tremblay.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: I have the same response.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: The same response to which? Do you mean the latest?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: Yes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Thank you.

To the Auditor General, is it your finding that things have gone gravely wrong? Are you surprised that someone didn't notice earlier in the process that there wasn't effective data collection or a response to it?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Our audit identified that the government set an important target in the national housing strategy. None of the entities we audited felt that they were the lead responsible to ensure the accountability and achievement of that target.

I think it flows that when you're accountable for something, you set yourself up to measure it properly. What we saw is that data is being collected. Information is being collected. It's not being fully analyzed, but it is more about outputs than about outcomes.

This target is one that is really outcome-driven, which is to see that those most in need have been housed, and that chronic homelessness and homelessness have decreased.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you very much for your work.

My conclusion here is that nobody was responsible for achieving this target, or saw themselves as responsible for achieving this target, and nobody thought that was an issue, even up until now, when it has been pointed out. There's a formal acceptance of your findings, but I don't get a sense of appreciation of the gravity of what has gone wrong at all. I look forward to being able to engage with the minister on it.

I'll follow up on my colleague Mr. Aitchison's point about bonuses. In spite of the findings of this audit, and the larger situation in terms of the dire worsening of the homelessness situation in our country, significant bonuses were paid out.

To follow up on his question, who makes decisions about bonuses paid to senior public servants? Is that a decision made by the minister or by public servants? Is it automatic? Where does that decision come from?

Ms. Romy Bowers: I'll answer with respect to CMHC, which is an independent Crown corporation. We are governed by an independent board of directors, which approves our compensation framework as well as recommendations with respect to the bonus framework.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

I have 30 seconds, so I would like to quickly hear from the other two deputy ministers, please.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: For senior public servants in the core public service, the Treasury Board Secretariat has a policy that all departments follow in how they approach performance management.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Who makes the decision, though? Who signs off on that policy?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: There are different committees at Infrastructure Canada. In the end, the application of individual performance bonuses to individuals would be by the deputy minister, but it is within Treasury Board guidance and guidelines.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Would the minister be consulted on that?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis. You will have another very brief opportunity in another round, but to ensure that happens I'm going to keep us on track.

I believe the next member is Ms. Bradford.

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses who are here today.

Our government believes that housing is a human right.

Ms. Bowers, could you please explain how the national housing strategy reflects a human rights-based approach to housing?

Ms. Romy Bowers: The significance of the national housing strategy is the focus on housing as a human right. The national housing strategy is constructed to serve the needs of all Canadians, so there are programs to address housing needs across the housing spectrum.

Having said that, there is a recognition that the government has to play a most active role in serving the housing needs of those most in need. When we are developing the programs for the national housing strategy, we ensure that the bulk of our funding—in particular, things like grants and contributions that are non-repayable—is directed toward those non-profit groups and other organizations that help those most in need.

• (1730)

Ms. Valerie Bradford: According to the OAG, the national housing co-investment fund had a measure for affordable housing that was not the same as that of the national housing strategy overall. The result was that the rent for approved housing was often unaffordable for low-income households, many of which belong to priority vulnerable groups.

What steps do you plan to take to harmonize the definitions of housing affordability?

Ms. Romy Bowers: We use different levels of affordability based on the nature of the program. The co-investment fund provides housing for those most in need, but there's also a concept of funding mixed-use projects—housing projects where there is a range of people with different income levels. In recognition of the varying needs of housing providers, we have some flexibility regarding the affordable housing definition.

We do have sub-targets within the national housing co-investment fund for those most in need. For example, to date, we've funded 3,700 shelters and 1,600 traditional housing units where the affordability that's achieved is very low. We also have housing where there is mixed use, and in those units, we have units that are of very low affordability. Mixed in there are housing units for Canadians who are maybe in the second or third income quintiles, as well.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: CMHC reported that as of March 31, 2022, over \$9 billion had been committed to the six initiatives examined by the OAG, and some \$4.5 billion had been spent, representing about 30% and 15% of planned expenditures, respectively.

Why is the actual spending such a small share of the planned spending, and how do you plan to correct that issue?

Ms. Romy Bowers: The national housing strategy is a 10-year program. We have spending targets by year. Our intention is to commit the funding by the end of the program. When you look at the national housing program as a whole, we're about 50% into the execution of the strategy, and we're about 50% in terms of commitment of funds.

I do want to point out that there is a lag between funding and actual occupancy of the housing units. Housing takes a long time to construct, and oftentimes that's what results in the delay in terms of providing information about who is benefiting from those housing units.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Exhibit 5.4 of the report also shows that between 2016 and 2020, the number of people using emergency shelters fell, while the number of shelter users who were chronically homeless rose. How do you explain this discrepancy? Will this result spur a change in the funding strategy, and if so, how?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: I will answer that question.

During that period of time—during the COVID experience—the shelter capacity was reduced by about 30%, so there weren't as many shelter spaces for people to use. That said, temporary measures were put in place. We had 137,000 people avail themselves of those temporary spaces. There was a reduction in shelter capacity during the pandemic.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Okay.

I believe those are all the questions I have.

Do I have much time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: No, you have 27 seconds.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Okay, that's fine.

The Chair: Are you done?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: I'll let the chair decide who gets it.

The Chair: To confirm, are you done?

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Yes, I'm finished.

The Chair: Very good.

It is now 5:33 p.m. There are lots of questions here. We're going to have lightning rounds. We'll have two minutes each for the government and official opposition members, and the Bloc and the NDP will have a minute each. That's two spots for the Liberals at two minutes each, two spots for the Conservatives at two minutes each, and the Bloc and the NDP will each have one spot at a minute each.

Without further ado, I will turn to Mr. McCauley.

You have the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Bowers, I want to get back to the comments made by the federal housing advocate. Have you met with Ms. Houle?

Ms. Romy Bowers: Yes, I've had the privilege of meeting with Ms. Houle. She's a member of the national housing council. I've met with her on four or five occasions.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You disagree with her comments that the strategy is failing. We're seeing homelessness rise across the country, as stated. There are tent cities, people losing hope, and deaths. Then, of course, we have this horrific report. Our federal housing advocate is saying that the system is failing, but you disagree with that.

• (1735)

Ms. Romy Bowers: The national—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You disagree that the strategy is failing, despite what our federal housing advocate, the evidence, and the Auditor General's report say. You don't agree that the strategy is failing.

Ms. Romy Bowers: The national housing strategy represents the re-entry of the federal government into funding affordable housing. There's been significant progress made in making sure that—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I'm sorry. Those are wonderful talking points—

Ms. Romy Bowers: —non-profit organizations—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: —but you don't agree that the strategy is failing.

Let me ask you about the AG's commentary on the lack of data from CMHC.

I'm looking at your corporate report for 2022-26. The top two items under “How we achieve our strategic results” are specifically around data gathering and using such data to “[i]ntensify our research and analytics, and improve data availability” and to “inspire and influence change”. Yet, the AG comes along with a report that says CMHC is basically doing the opposite.

Why is there a dichotomy between what your strategic report says and reality?

The Chair: You have time for a brief answer.

Ms. Romy Bowers: Data is very important to making good housing policy. CMHC is very actively engaged in improving the quality of our data sources. As with many data initiatives, this takes time. We're very committed to making investments over time in order to have the best-quality data to serve Canadians and those most in need.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll turn to Ms. Yip.

You have the floor for two minutes and a few seconds.

Ms. Jean Yip: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is for Ms. Bowers.

Given the transitory nature of homelessness, the people affected are in and out of emergency shelters and other support services. How can data be collected accurately?

Ms. Romy Bowers: If I may, Mr. Chair, I think DM Gillis may be the best person to answer this specific question, because it's more directly related to homelessness.

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the question.

We work with community entities and shelters across the country, which provide us with shelter data. We have just received some. The Auditor General rightfully pointed out that, in 2019, we did not get that data. That was because of COVID. As I mentioned before, they changed the capacity, reducing it by about 30%, then increasing it by putting up temporary shelters. We had to change our methodology to capture accurate information.

We are catching up with that. Before the end of this calendar year, we'll be publishing the shelter data for 2020. Soon into 2023, we'll be publishing the data for 2021 and 2022. By the fall of next year, we'll be completely caught up in the cycle of the normal data capture on the homelessness systems across the country.

Ms. Jean Yip: Is that being captured on placetocallhome.ca?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: As part of our action plan, we are looking at a more efficient way to capture the data. Right now it comes in different formats from communities and shelters across the country. To do it in a more efficient way, we've actually hired a consultant to look at how we automate it. We provide a free system, called HIFIS, to community entities, which they can use as their case management system. We're looking at that as a way to automate and have more efficient and timely capturing of shelter data information across the country.

The Chair: That is the time.

If the answer had gone on a few more seconds I would not have cut off the witness, but we just don't have time to get into a whole new round. Another of your members will have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Trudel, you have the floor for one minute.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Bowers, a person who receives social assistance in Quebec gets \$765 per month. That is obviously a very vulnerable person.

The minimum rent at this time for a person who obtained an affordable unit under CMHC's programs is \$540. That means, in Quebec, that the people with the lowest incomes are unable to pay the lowest affordable rent under CMHC's programs. That really makes no sense. That is why social housing units cost 25 per cent of their income. However, even with that assistance program, it leaves very little money for a person earning \$765 per month.

I have two very specific questions to ask you.

Earlier, you have some figures that do not correspond to the ones I have. Do you know how many actual social housing units have been built in Canada in the last year?

Do you know how many social housing units have been built in Quebec in the last year?

• (1740)

[*English*]

Ms. Romy Bowers: There are approximately 650,000 social housing units across Canada. I don't have the breakout by province, but I'll be able to provide that to you after the committee. My apologies for not having that information.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: That's good.

[*English*]

If you could provide that, please, it would be most helpful.

Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor now for one minute.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll jump right into it. I would like to quote the Auditor General. She said in her opening remarks, "One of my biggest concerns is the lack of federal accountability for achieving Canada's target to reduce chronic homelessness by half by 2028." I echo the importance of accountability in this committee.

Second to my point, the national housing advocate uses the word "failing" in her response and audit of the work of CMHC and the national housing strategy. How can I or members of this committee or Canadians be satisfied with the responses provided here today?

I'm not satisfied with the responses the witnesses presented to us today. I believe they're unsatisfactory to the core of the mandate of the Auditor General's report. We didn't hear, in fact, an admission of failure on two accounts in particular, which are data and the actual outcomes.

I have no further questions to ask. I'd just encourage folks to make really certain that they know how important it is to Canadians to end homelessness.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Desjarlais.

We're turning now to Mr. Aitchison.

You have the floor for two minutes.

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

I just have to come back to the situation in this country. We've talked about the housing continuum and the spectrum of housing. From all reports, I think it's safe to say it's in crisis in everything from shelter beds to people trying to buy their first home. Home prices have doubled in this country. The housing affordability gap—that's the average price of a house versus the borrowing capacity of the average household in Canada—is now a whopping 67%. Canadians are spending 64% of their income on their housing. Just before this government took office, that gap was 2%.

The crisis is real. This all seems very bureaucratic. It seems like they're saying that everything is going to be fine and not to worry because they're going to have someone take the lead here shortly and they're going to get this done in another year. All the while, the proof of the failure is not in the reports from the housing advocate. The proof is in the growing tent cities in this country. The proof is in the growing number of homeless people in all our cities. The proof is in the number of people turned away from those shelter beds. The proof is in the number of people literally dying in our streets.

We seem pretty calm and pretty casual about this. It's failing. We've heard it. We can see the results. We simply are not doing enough.

My question, quite simply, to Ms. Bowers would be this: If you're not spending the money that's been allocated, why would you want more? There's a request. You said to Mike Morrice that the solution was—

The Chair: Please allow an answer.

Ms. Romy Bowers: As I indicated, we were allocated funding on an annual basis, and we are successful in funding projects as we receive them. There's no question that the nature of the housing crisis in Canada is serious. CMHC is very committed to working with our partners across the federal government, across all levels of government across Canada, and with the private sector and the non-profit sector. In my view, housing is a team sport—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

There's one more round, and it's going to a government member.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have the floor for two minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Chair, it's Mr. Fragiskatos next.

The Chair: Pardon me.

Mr. Fragiskatos, excuse me.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: There's no problem, Mr. Chair.

I respect and admire, frankly, the passion of colleagues around the table. I know Mr. Aitchison comes from the municipal level, and he's proved an effective MP wrestling with a number of hard issues. I know his sentiment is sincere.

I would put to him, respectfully, that homelessness is a result of many things, but we're not going to deal with it meaningfully when cuts are being called for. I hear my Conservative friends in the House, for example, so frequently target EI and call for, effectively,

EI to be cut. It seems a bit rich sometimes when I hear this kind of questioning.

I'll leave that there—

• (1745)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Is that really a point of order?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, I know where you're going here, but what's good for the goose is good for the gander. You might not like what Mr. Fragiskatos is saying, but it's his time.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I don't mind what he's saying at all. I think it's quite revealing, actually, of what the government—

The Chair: What's your point of order?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: My point of order is that this committee has a particular mandate around reviewing audits. Mr. Fragiskatos is quite liberal with his application of points of order to others—

The Chair: Okay, this is—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: —and he's going so far outside the committee's mandate—

The Chair: I'd appreciate it—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: —to grandstand on utter nonsense. It's obviously not true—

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, stand down.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm going to turn it back to Mr. Fragiskatos.

You have a minute and 19 seconds, sir.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: The question goes to Ms. Gillis.

Recognizing that the challenge of homelessness is not only a federal responsibility, to what extent is the Department of Infrastructure engaged with provinces and territories to share information and establish even shared outcomes in terms of dealing with this? I think that collaboration is necessary. We've heard about the importance of greater collaboration between CMHC and Infrastructure at the federal level, but what about the engagement with provinces and territories?

Ms. Kelly Gillis: Thank you for the question.

That's a really important partner in dealing with homelessness across the country.

I mentioned yesterday that Ms. Bowers and I held a federal-provincial-territorial meeting with deputy ministers of housing across the country with full support and agreement for us to work together in creating a working group about how we align better.

When we look at Reaching Home, that particular program is working with community entities that also work with provinces and territories. We have advisory boards where provincial representatives are often on those boards, as well as ourselves, to ensure that we're leveraging all of our programs to make a difference within those communities.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will quickly thank all the witnesses for coming in today.

I apologize to members for not being there. I prefer to chair these from the committee room, but that was just not possible today.

[*Translation*]

The meeting is adjourned.

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