



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

CIMM • NUMBER 047 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Friday, April 15, 2005

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Chair

The Honourable Andrew Telegdi

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• (1310)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Before we start off this afternoon—we have a few stragglers who will be here in a few minutes—I'd like to thank the staff of the committee for the great job they have done. We have another seven days of hearings; we started back on April 1. We did Winnipeg and the next day Regina, Calgary, and Edmonton. Friday we were in Victoria. Saturday we were holding hearings in Vancouver. Monday we were holding hearings in Vancouver. Then we went to Ottawa for a vote and then back to Toronto for two days and now we are here. They have been travelling with us and they left their families behind.

In addition, I would like to thank the people in Ottawa who have worked so hard to put this trip together. First I'd like to thank Denyse Croteau, who is the administrative assistant to the clerk. Her work has been essential to this successful trip, and she deserves special kudos for putting up with our clerk, Bill Farrell, who is right over here. Bill has been our taskmaster on the road, ensuring everything works as it should and that everyone is where they should be when they should be, except—there you go. You see, we have Mr. Temelkovski back.

Keeping a group of MPs in line is not an easy task. It's like herding cats. Thanks, Bill.

Jean-Philippe Brochu is another clerk who has come out for a few days to help our committee during its busiest hearings. He has done an admirable job.

Next we have our good-spirited console operators, Lynne Noël and Fiona Story, and our interpreters, Nicole Sweeney, Paule Antonelli, and Mona Raynaud. These important folks aid us greatly in our work, and it has been a pleasure to work with them. Thank you all.

Diane Lefebvre and Richard Ménard are logistical staff. They help to plan and facilitate everything from A to Z. Thank you, Diane and Richard, for your excellent work.

Ben Dolin is the analyst and researcher for the committee, and he ends up writing most of the reports. At the end of the day, he has the task of taking the testimony of hundreds of witnesses we have heard and crafting a report that reflects the committee's thoughts on these important issues. Thank you, Ben.

I'd like to also acknowledge Jean-Francois Lafleur, Sylvain Dubois, and Tatiana Ermandez. Finally, we have a representative of

Citizenship and Immigration, Canada's parliamentary affairs unit, Grant Easson. He has been dutifully taking notes of the testimony before the committee and reporting back to the minister. It has been a pleasure to make this important trip with you, Grant.

On behalf of the committee members, I would like to say thank you to everyone. Thank you.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Proceeding on to our afternoon hearings, we're going to be dealing with the issue of family reunification. We have a fair number of witnesses, so we want to make sure we keep to a five-minute time limit. I strayed from that this morning, and I heard from the members of the committee about it. That also enables us to have the time for interaction between committee members and the presenters, which is really a very important part of this process.

Starting off, I would like to call on Brice Balmer, from the House of Friendship.

Reverend Brice Balmer (Chaplaincy Director, House of Friendship): Thank you, and it's good to be here.

The House of Friendship is a major agency in the Kitchener-Waterloo region serving about 32,000 people a year. I come out of that tradition as well as from some of our church connections through Interfaith Grand River, which is a multi-faith organization.

Settling into Canada has become more difficult for immigrants and refugees over the past 20 years because the federal government has changed its basic philosophy of welcoming new people and then expecting them, as well as preparing them, to be citizens who will make a contribution to our country and our local communities.

Systems now in place appear to test appropriateness and viabilities in immigrants, excluding many as they apply. Yet many of us wonder how appropriate the testing, evaluation, medicals, and background examinations really are. Have security issues of the last five years made us overzealous and too protective, so we cannot see the people who need to leave their homeland and who would be excellent Canadian citizens, especially those who are members of families back here in Canada?

I would not ask for the elimination of evaluation but for the redetermination about what we check and what is appropriate and necessary. How much local input does Citizenship and Immigration Canada have from the people who are natives and long-term residents of the country from which these immigrants are coming?

After immigration, family reunification is a primary issue, often more important than food or clothing or housing. Many immigrants and refugees talk of promises made by Citizenship and Immigration Canada that family members could join them in Canada—promises that are later denied. That's what Immigration says, and when they get here it doesn't happen.

Are the barriers to immigration and to entering Canada for visits necessary or appropriate? Does Citizenship and Immigration Canada realize the negative and powerful impact of longing, worrying, and remaining anxious about one's family back in the homeland? How can individuals concentrate on settling when their attention is focused on their families in refugee camps or countries of origin?

This is an issue not only for new Canadians, but also for established Canadians and faith communities who are willing and able to sponsor and settle refugees and immigrants. These Canadians are making significant donations of time and money. They are working for social cohesion in our multicultural cities. They are reaching out and creating networks with unfamiliar cultures, or new Canadian cultures, and they are becoming disillusioned with the federal government and Citizenship and Immigration Canada because of delays, denials, and frustrations in the immigration process.

I'd like to make a few recommendations. In my written submission you have more stories.

First, Citizenship and Immigration Canada should work more closely with the Canadian voluntary sector, including faith communities that are sponsoring, settling, and providing friendships to immigrants and families. When refugees and immigrants have solid community-based organizations or congregations as sponsors, the proceedings should be prioritized. Can the relationship with the voluntary associations be more equal in terms of power dynamics? We always feel we're subservient to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, yet we're also important in local communities. Voluntary associations feel powerless and end up waiting without knowing what is happening in the system through which the refugee or immigrant is coming.

Second, promises have been made to refugees and immigrants, but have not been followed through on. This creates distrust and cynicism, not only among the new Canadians but also among sponsors and other Canadians.

Third, turmoil in the countries of origin does not end with the signing of a ceasefire or the entrance of peacekeeping forces. New Canadians are very aware of the local ethos in their homelands. They know how resentments and vengeance are carried out, even when peacekeeping troops are present. They have more local and accurate reports than the Canadian embassies and the media.

•(1315)

Fourth, can Citizenship and Immigration Canada adopt a positive attitude toward individuals and families wishing to settle in Canada, especially when the situation is family reunification? Perhaps new Canadians might be used for orientation and in-service and other training of the staff who are handling family reunification claims. When I was talking to a number of people in this area, several of them reported very significant cutbacks in Citizenship and

Immigration staff. Has this compromised the quality and quantity of the services provided by this department?

Finally, when a family applies for family reunification, can positive settlement and friendships with Canadian sponsors, as well as participation in local Canadian organizations, including faith communities, be seen as important criteria? If the family in Canada is settled and participating in society, this is probably a family characteristic that will be replicated by other family members who become part of this network. Could the family reunification process be streamlined based on a positive history of Canadian family members?

There are local coalitions that can verify the reputation of local voluntary sector organization and faith communities. In the Waterloo region, the KW Council of Churches, Interfaith Grand River, the two social planning councils, volunteer action centres, and regional government could always provide assessments or recommendations of voluntary sector organizations.

There's a lot in this submission that I haven't gone over, but it has been a very helpful experience for myself as the author, as well as for the new Canadians, voluntary sector organizations, and faith communities who were consulted. The depth of concern for other people, and the frustration with the existing system, have been very, very profound in the Waterloo region.

I'm glad that you're here and are seriously considering what we're saying, but I also want to emphasize that it's not just an issue for new Canadians, but for those of us who've been Canadians for many years, or all of our lives. It really behooves the government to take a look at how this system may disestablish some of the social networks and the social cohesion we need severely.

Finally, I want to say that Ann Crossman from Lutheran Refugee Services is here with me, and she will be able to answer questions. Her contribution—and many others—is in the report I've written.

•(1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to Ms. Valenzuela.

Ms. Eunice Valenzuela (Director, Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support): Thank you for the opportunity to share our insights and experience with you on the topic of family reunification. The Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support has been serving refugee claimants in Kitchener-Waterloo for over 18 years and is the only organization in this area that serves refugee claimants through the painful and sometimes unjust system of the refugee determination process.

Last year we served over 400 families and individuals from all over the world. The majority of them struggle to be reunited with their families.

I would like to touch on a few barriers regarding family reunification, delays in reuniting these families of refugees who have been granted Canadian protection following the Immigration and Refugee Board determination process. I will share with you one story. I have more stories in my submission, but I think I want to share one story that shows a lot of the struggle regarding family reunification.

Maria came in 1991, was accepted, and applied for landed status in 1995. Further to her application, she was interviewed by CSIS officials in December 1995. A report was submitted to CIC headquarters in September 1997. In March 2001, CIC conducted another interview. This time CIC wrote a report based on this interview, the previous CSIS interview, and the previous CIC interview. Our last communication with CIC was a year ago, indicating that Maria's file was still sitting in the immigration minister's office. Still, we haven't heard a word. Maria has three daughters, and one grandson whom she has never met. It will be 14 years that this mother has been separated from her daughters and family. We have been approaching Mr. Telegdi's office on different occasions, asking for help with this family's situation.

This and other stories of refugees reflect a systematic cruelty that dishonours Canada; we believe it would be found intolerable by the vast majority of Canadians if they knew what refugees were going through.

One recommendation is to prevent the harmful consequences caused by processing delays. Family members of refugees should be allowed to travel immediately to Canada so that their application can be processed while they are in safety and reunited with their families.

Another recommendation is about refugee children. Refugee children in Canada have no way to be reunited with their family members, although adults can include a spouse and common-law partner and children in their application. Refugee children can only apply for themselves. Our recommendation is that the immigration and refugee protection regulations be amended to allow refugee children to include their parents and siblings in their application for permanent residency.

Another recommendation deals with the definition of family members. Culturally appropriate definitions of the family need to be broadly understood. If the notion of reuniting an extended family does not fit into our legislation and definition, the legislation and definition need to be changed in order to respond to the needs of families we are supporting. We recommend broadening the definition of family to a more culturally inclusive understanding.

Another recommendation is regarding the processing fees. All of us are aware of the fees families need to pay in order to be landed. It is \$550 for adults and \$150 for a child, to be paid at the time they submit the application, and \$550 for a child if the refugee is a minor and the parents have not been granted refugee status, or the child is here alone.

• (1325)

This is a big problem for families with children, especially if some of the relatives of the refugee children are outside Canada waiting to be reunited with their families. We are asking that the \$550 processing fee be waived to help their circles and their families to

apply for landed status in Canada. We also request that the \$550 processing fee for humanitarian and compassionate cases be waived for applications involving women and children who are in situations of family violence. We recommend making the process of family reunification easy, simple, and quick, and offered at no cost to protected persons and under humanitarian applications.

To conclude, the simplest human compassion demands that families be allowed to be with each other. We need to fulfil our international human rights obligations. The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act should be defined to reunite families.

Thank you so much. I will take this opportunity to thank all of you for adopting unanimously the resolution calling for the implementation of the refugee appeal division. I would like to know what the committee is doing to follow up on this resolution and what response there is on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to go to some individuals who will offer their experiences. I would first like to call on Ms. Maleki-Tehrani.

Ms. Marjan Maleki-Tehrani (As an Individual): Mr. Chairman and members of the standing committee, I'm a constituent in the Waterloo riding. I arrived in Canada in 2000 as a landed immigrant from Iran. It took me almost four years to receive my immigration visa to come to Canada. I came to Canada by myself, with no family or friends. I was accepted for admission to the PhD program in developmental psychology at the University of Waterloo.

At the time I received my approval to land in Canada, my father was diagnosed with cancer. I asked for an extension to stay with my father during his last days, but it was denied by the Canadian embassy. My father passed away six days after I arrived in Canada. Over the next short period of time I also lost my grandmother. My mother was granted a visa to come and help me through the process of my grieving, as I was in a new country and alone, with no support. She did not stay for the full time of her visa, as she had to go back to Iran to support my younger sister.

I decided to support my mother and sister in coming to Canada in 2002. I originally sponsored only my mother, but I came to understand that I could sponsor my sister as my mother's dependant. I withdrew my original application and re-applied, adding my sister. My application was denied because I did not state my income for one year preceding the date of application. I mistakenly used the calendar year. This meant that I fell short of the minimum cut-off. I again applied to sponsor my sister and mother in October 2003, and to date there has been no news from the immigration office. I have tried to have my mother and sister come to visit since that time, but this has been to no avail.

I escaped Iran and the oppressive regime that was in control and sought protection in a democratic country in the hope of building a new life. I have waited a long time and planned for years to be able to achieve my goal. The dictatorship uses a dehumanizing strategy of separating family members as a psychological and physical means of torturing its citizens. My father was sent to work his last three years in a demolished refinery in the southern part of the country. He was separated from his family in an attempt by the regime to torture him because he was not part of the corrupted system.

The past five years of my life in Canada have brought all those bitter memories of separation back, only in a different guise. I've been again deprived of being with my family, spending all the hardships of life with no friends and family support. My lonely life has taken its toll on my health; I have suffered from chronic back pain since December 2000, six months after my arrival in Canada, through moving my 150-kilogram luggage around every time I moved with absolutely no help. I've spent days without food after being bedridden due to back pain—I had nobody to call. The past five years have been excruciating. This agonizing experience has changed me from a hopeful, strong, and persevering person who fought against all odds for 15 years to start a new life with her family in a new heaven to a severely mentally and psychologically incapacitated person.

• (1330)

As a human being, I'm part of a family, culturally, spiritually, and socially. I cannot imagine my life separated from them, especially since my grandmother and father have died. I have tried hard to win a scholarship and have worked part-time at the university to be able to afford to sponsor my mother and sister. Canada has stated that it acknowledges the importance of reuniting families. It is stated in a news release on the Citizenship and Immigration website from January 6, 1999, that family reunification remains the cornerstone of Canadian immigration policy, that Canada has a long tradition of supporting the reunification of Canadians and permanent residents with their close family members from abroad. However, this has not been my reality in dealing with Citizenship and Immigration in regard to sponsoring my family to come to Canada.

According to Citizenship and Immigration on their website on February 21, 2005, when one applies to sponsor family members in the parent class, the processing time is 20 months, and as of this date the files that are being processed are from June 2003. In comparison to other classes, the processing time runs from 29 days for spouses to five to six months for live-in caregivers. Processing of files consists of making sure all the information required is attached to the application and placing the files in categories to go to an immigration officer. Once the file has been processed, approximately 80% of the files from the Middle East and Africa are finalized in 23 to 45 months. In my case the file is finalized in Damascus, Syria, and the finalization time is approximately 34 months. In total, the time is 54 months, four years and six months, from beginning to end, according to statistics provided by Citizenship and Immigration. As of February, 21 cases are being processed from June 2003, and I sent my third application in October 2003. The waiting time for processing could be longer than 20 months. This means the finalization time could also be considerably longer.

The process of reuniting my family has taken at least four years so far, and it has left me suffering from depression and living without any family support. The belief of my doctor and my psychiatrist is that this is in part because of the lonely life I lead in Canada, being apart from my family, my concern about their well-being and safety, and the many challenges I face without their support.

Mr. Chairman and standing committee, this process needs to be more supportive and time-sensitive. In my case, reuniting my family in approximately four years and six months does not assure me of the commitment of the government to reuniting families. The government needs to take into consideration when prioritizing family reunification cases whether the sponsor has any other family members to provide support and a family context in Canada.

Thank you very much.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we're going to hear from Mr. Abdi Hussein. Try to keep to the time, because we have a lot of people.

Mr. Abdi A. Hussein (Hydrogeologist, Ministry of Environment, Guelph District Office, As an Individual): I will do my best.

I'm originally from Somalia, a nation destroyed through civil war...

Excuse me.

The Chair: Do you want to wait? We can go on with somebody else.

Ms. Verma.

Ms. Jackie Verma (As an Individual): Good afternoon to the honourable chairman and members of the committee.

My name is Jackie Verma. My husband and I have been living at 53 Simmons Boulevard in Brampton since 1990. We're Canadian citizens. We thank you for giving us this opportunity to bring forward the issue of sponsorship by grandparents of grandchildren who are not orphans.

I'm here to talk about myself and also on behalf of all those grandparents who would like to sponsor their grandchildren who face grave social, economic, and health risks in their own environment. Sometimes, due to their own personal problems, the parents cannot or do not get involved in their own children's upbringing. The worst scenario is when one parent dies and the surviving parent is in emotional distress, has no source of income, and is also suffering from a major disease. Children of such unfortunate parents are sent to orphanages or children's aid societies. It's even worse in the developing countries, where they don't even have such facilities. These children are simply sent to the streets.

Children are our future. We feel it's better to let the grandparents be involved in their care, when the grandparents are willing and are financially able to take care of them. The law in Canada doesn't give the option to grandparents to sponsor the grandchildren in cases where one of the parents of the children is alive. But sometimes that single parent is not healthy, or is simply unable to provide even day-to-day needs to those children. In those situations, we feel strongly that the grandparents' home is a better place for those children than the streets, or orphanages, or children's aid societies.

I'll give you my personal situation. I believe it's one of the best examples of such cases.

●(1340)

Our son passed away in January 1997. He was only 31. He left behind his young wife and two sons. Both of his sons were under the age of five at the time of his death. His very young widow, a housewife, has no means of income. Since our son's death, my husband and I have both been taking care of the children financially. Both of us have good income, and we can afford to do it, but it would be better if we could bring them in Canada to live with us. My husband could give them the fatherly love that God took away from them. They could grow up as happy kids and become strong and stable citizens.

In 2000 our daughter-in-law applied to immigrate to Canada on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. In 2002 the Canadian embassy sent her for a medical exam. At that time, for the first time, we came to know that she is suffering from HIV. Now she is inadmissible to Canada on medical grounds, and there's a big risk that our grandchildren will catch the virus. Now it's not only economics involved here, but a great health risk.

I'm humbly asking all of you, where do these children go now? The mother can trust only us in the world to take complete care of her children. We didn't want to separate them from their mother, but we are not left with any choice, because they are at health risk. She understands completely the risk of health involved in her situation. Due to her social environment, she doesn't want her sons to be a target of social abuse either. Therefore, she wants us to take them in our care. We are ready to take care of them and to save them from social abuse and from falling prey to one of the world's riskiest infections. But the law doesn't allow us to do so.

When a situation like this arises, the grandparents who are involved with their grandchildren cannot move on with their lives. All of this brings emotional setbacks and ill health to them. Believe me, life becomes a living hell. Speaking from our personal experience, my husband has developed a sleep disorder that has affected his daily activities. We are the only two in the house, so when he is affected, I am affected.

In the end, we humbly say to all of you that a change in the Immigration Act should be stipulated so that grandparents are able to sponsor the grandchildren who are in that kind of precarious condition. It would save all those grandparents and grandchildren from suffering the loss of life. It would give grandparents the chance to fulfill their desire and responsibility to give proper upbringing to the grandchildren, who are our future.

Thank you very much.

●(1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hussein.

Mr. Abdi A. Hussein: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and the committee, for giving me this opportunity.

My name is Abdi Hussein. I live in Waterloo. I'm originally from Somalia....

The Chair: Mr. Hussein, we can go on to another one.

Mr. Abdi A. Hussein: We have civil war, and destruction and anarchy have prevailed since 1990. Many families, including ours, were separated during the civil war in the fighting. Some of them lost their lives, some of them are still missing. As we have tried to sponsor the lucky few who survived that civil war, my family has been subjected to a cruel, unreasonable, and unjust process. Under the family reunification process we applied for my mother-in-law and her youngest son. It took four years and four months to process. That put their lives at risk. It cost us over \$20,000 U.S. Luckily, my wife and I are established in this community. Both of us have good jobs, and we were able to put up with the expenses, but the thing we couldn't put up with was the emotional component of the process.

The details, ladies and gentlemen, you will find in the brief submission I gave you, but I would just touch on a few things I would like to bring to your attention. The time that elapsed between application and approval for a family reunification file was unacceptably long. As I mentioned to you, I started the process on October 3, 2000, and things were not moving until three years later, when we requested our member of Parliament to intervene. Then the family file was completed, after four years and four months. I am happy to tell you that the young son, who was 16 when we sponsored him, came here as a man and immediately secured a job; he is now a taxpaying member of the community.

What we have experienced includes low-level immigration officials who have a lot of unchecked power, which they exercise arbitrarily, and that caused a great deal of grief. There were different occasions when the immigration officials, we felt, were acting like dictators; they were incompetent or corrupt or did not understand or deliberately disregarded applicable immigration legislation by removing the son from the file of his mother, with no reason or explanation provided, and telling us he's not eligible to immigrate, by not responding to our request for an update. There are many other areas in that circumstance where they exercised their unchecked powers to just make our lives miserable here and put our family members abroad in danger. In that situation the son was beaten unconscious, because he lived in a third country with the mother. They couldn't live in Somalia. They escaped the civil war. Then we had to put up the medical expenses on top of the emotional element.

• (1350)

The other point I want to mention is that immigration workers treat people from certain countries and of certain religious backgrounds with contempt and suspicion, virtually always on the basis that they are attempting to cheat. This is unacceptable discrimination. We see that in the requirement for DNA proof of our blood relationship. The son was subjected to a test, which is subjective and inconclusive, to prove his age. All of that speaks volumes. The details, ladies and gentlemen, you'll find in the brief I gave you.

In conclusion, I bring up these items not to complain, but in the hope that future applications may go more smoothly and that future applicants will receive the kind of service that's the norm at other Canadian visa posts in other parts of the world. Many people from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia I know are subject to this unacceptable discrimination.

We see the system as broken and in need of repair. What I'd like to recommend in my concluding remarks is that there be a separate, streamlined process for family reunification that would be run out of Canada, subject to specific time limits and open to broad types of appeal and supervisory involvement in rectifying the wrongheaded approach by the front-line officials. There should be created an office of immigration ombudsman with strong powers and the staff to oversee the time limits of the family reunification immigration process. Finally, the immigration ombudsman should be involved in mediation and be able to make recommendations to the minister to rectify the broken family reunification process.

Thank you very much for giving me your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Those members of Parliament who have been at this for a while will know it becomes pretty tough to deal with these kinds of cases in our offices. That is one of the reasons we're passionate about the committee we're on.

The next person we're going to hear is from the Community Coalition on Refugee and Immigrant Concerns, Ms. Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy (Community Coalition on Refugee and Immigrant Concerns): Thank you for coming and listening to the stories and testimonials today.

On behalf of CCRIC, we'd like to thank you for the changes to common law and spousal sponsorship, and for how couples can stay within the same country and not return to their country of origin.

Family reunification is very important, as separation can have a lot of negative effects; it can create a barrier to settlement, due to the psychological stress and depression that hinder their ability to advance financially, and to do so comfortably emotionally. Also, children are very much impacted by a traumatic event before and after it happens. The amount of time they spend without their caregivers can create problems into adulthood, as they may interpret that in many different ways with respect to their caregiver, thinking that maybe their caregiver doesn't want them to be there, or not understanding that separation. All of these things are costly to the Canadian government and costly to the lives of newcomers.

A few of the barriers to family reunification we'd like to touch upon are the definition of family and the costs and processing time. In Canada we pride ourselves on being multicultural, but on the very fundamental definition of family, we fail to take multiculturalism into consideration with respect to grandparents, and with some issues of same sex partners, etc.

The cost of sponsoring family members is very high, with DNA testing and the fact that newcomers tend to have larger families with a greater number of kids.

Employment is also a great barrier to newcomers being able to pay the bill for sponsoring their family members. Employment is a huge issue. It is said that four out of five people get their jobs for a week at a time. If we look around, a lot of people may be here without family or friends. If you consider those odds, it puts them at a great disadvantage. So we've looked to other wonderful programs, such as the one sponsored by the Maytree Foundation in Toronto, and we hope we can bring programs like that into Kitchener-Waterloo, so that those social networks can be created.

Family reunification helps newcomers feel confident, empowered, and hopeful, so that they can address this discouraging barrier of employment with confidence and security.

Processing times are troublesome. They do vary from one case to another, but they also vary geographically and by different classes. We hope it can be more equal in the future, so that whether you're from the Ivory Coast or South Africa, you aren't at a disadvantage just because of where you were born and where or at which visa posts you are being processed. Also, under the classification you're applying for, whether you're sponsoring clients or you're applying as an independent, we shouldn't discriminate.

We also wanted to discuss some miscommunications that occur when people are living in limbo and not aware of where their file is being kept and where the process is at. This is a big barrier to settlement.

That's basically what we have to say about family reunification. We hope you will consider changing the definition and improve the employment situation.

One of the major things is that although we bring people in from all parts of the world, and settlement and moving from one's country are a big grieving process, there are very few programs here—especially in the Kitchener-Waterloo region—to psychologically support newcomers who have come from war-torn situations. We help them with their life skills, or they get a cheque—which isn't necessarily sufficient to eat, let alone sponsor family members—and we help them get apartments, but how do we address the psychological needs from the traumatic experiences that many newcomers have had before they come to Canada?

•(1355)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have Mr. Gordon Armstrong.

Mr. Gordon Armstrong (Major, Commanding Officer, St. Catherines, Salvation Army in Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members. After listening to some of my caring colleagues here, I think I could just say ditto and save us a whole lot of time, but a whole lot of effort has been put into this, so I must go on.

Today I'm not sure of my role, or who I represent. I'm representing the Salvation Army, but not totally. I'm standing here before you as a pastor, and representing God in some ways, but I don't think totally. I do think I would like to be known as an ambassador for Canada. I have spent time, in birth and dedication, on being a Canadian.

In November 2001, I received a call from my office in Fort Erie. We're from the Niagara region, not from Waterloo. Refugees had crossed the Peace Bridge for asylum in Canada. I was called because they were standing out in the rain, and they were hungry and cold. They weren't allowed inside, because there was no room for them in the building. I brought down blankets and hot drinks for them, and after pleading with the customs officers to place them in a room nearby, we finally got that permission. It felt good to be a Canadian.

In July 2003, Juan and his wife, Clara, came into my office with a strange request. Juan had just been diagnosed with leukemia. McMaster University and the Salvation Army worked together to arrange for his sister to come from Colombia for tests, to see whether she was a good match for a bone marrow transplant. She was a perfect match. The operation was done, and Juan today is working in his new life. It was good to be a Canadian that day.

In November 2004, we were called again to the refugee centre. Buffalo had just heard that the border was going to be closed. The surge began. With our regional government, we opened a temporary hostel. Here we fed, clothed, and sheltered our newcomers, and made them especially welcome over the Christmas season. It felt good to be a Canadian.

On December 29, 2004, some 400 refugees, making a last-ditch effort to get into Canada, ran the border. We were called in the late evening. School buses were their homes for the next several hours, and we had an opportunity to feed them and give them something to drink on those cold, frigid nights. Even though language was a barrier, some of our refugees who had already gone through the refugee program came and interpreted for them. It felt good to be the welcome wagon for Canada during that time period, even though we had to send them back for a short time.

But when I come to tell Nubia and Angela that their 13-year-old daughter cannot come to Canada, or tell Mary that her 17-year-old son who is hiding cannot come to Canada, I don't feel much like a Canadian any more. Neither do I feel much like a Canadian when I receive letters from the Niagara health system that say such things as, "Andrea...has been attending regular therapy appointments since 2004", and "Andrea is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder related to the events which occurred in Colombia". Her husband, her father, and her cousin were shot to death, unrecognizable, because they refused to be part of the guerilla faction at that time. The letter

also said, "She is emotionally exhausted, finds sleep and daily functioning difficult", that it is "extremely important" for Andrea to have her 10-year-old son David with her "as soon as possible", and that she is "very frightened for his welfare". Gee, I wonder why.

Being a humbled man in your presence, when we ask these newcomers to Canada to do the dangerous and damaging things that we ask them to do, both physically and mentally, I cannot be proud to be a Canadian.

•(1400)

As has already been stressed, our first recommendation is that family members of refugees with convention status be allowed to travel on a temporary resident permit immediately to Canada so that the permanent resident status process can be done while they are safe and in the family unit.

Second, enact legislation that requires expedited reunification of separated children at risk as soon as one or both parents are protected persons in Canada. Overall, we're trying to say that as soon as one parent is granted convention refugee status, expedited reunification of immediate family members, spouses, partners, and dependent children under 22 should be facilitated by CIC staff in Canada and by employees in Canadian embassies.

The fact that we are here today and have the opportunity to be able to share the stories and the concerns you've heard with a government that is ready to listen...I'm proud to be a Canadian all over again.

Thank you for your time and the effort you're putting in during this period.

•(1405)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to questions.

Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of you for being here. Thanks for your time and thank you for your presentations.

It is very sad to listen to your frustrations of reuniting with your families and near and dear ones. All of us know that families are very important to all of us. We value families. Please continue in your endeavours and don't quit.

Before, reunification cases took 24 months. Now it takes double the time. Why is it taking more time now? What is the reason? Do we need more trained staff in our embassies abroad? What should be done to improve our system?

Ms. Clancy, you mentioned in your presentation that we should not discriminate geographically and have different classes. Could you please elaborate on that?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I was drawing from the statistic I found from the Canadian Barristers' Association that over the past five years the number of approved cases for parent sponsorship has decreased by 75%. That was compared to processing times and approval rates for independent and other classes.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: On my first question, are there any drawbacks, any flaws in our system? What needs to be done to improve the system, to speed up immigration cases, which are taking double the time?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Ensure that there is equal processing time, no matter what geographic region you come from or what class you're applying under. Maybe that means having more staff at visa posts that have longer waiting periods. Maybe that means ensuring that policy equally recognizes all applications, whether you're sponsoring your parent or coming as an independent, etc.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Is there anyone else who would like to answer?

Ms. Marjan Maleki-Tehrani: . The geographical place you're applying to makes a huge difference. I applied to Syria, because right now all of the Middle East is processed in Syria. Three years ago that was not the case. An Iranian gentleman who sponsored his parents three years ago—he's from Kiev in the Ukraine—was able to bring his parents in less than a year. But now Syria is processing lots of cases and is overloaded.

In the case of different status, which Ms. Clancy mentioned.... The same gentleman married this year. He went to Iran and in less than a month he was married. He came back, and his wife would be processed in less than 30 days. After living 30 years with my mother and my family, it would take me close to eight years for my file to be processed. This is a kind of discrimination between a spouse and a parent. I can't see why there is this difference. Who can put a value that a spouse is more important emotionally to a person than a parent?

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Clavet.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Clavet (Louis-Hébert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is very moving. Nobody can be insensitive to what you live. I really sympathize with you.

Ms. Verma, first, you have convinced me it is important for us to support the sponsoring of grandchildren who are not orphans. I am not yet a grandfather but I have a twenty year old son. For your son's sake, we will try to get that authorisation, that right to sponsor grandchildren who are not orphans.

I would like to go back to two testimonies.

Mr. Hussein, from Somalia, four years to reunite a family. Everybody agree this is too long.

You have mentioned those decisions we also know about in our ridings. Those are arbitrary decisions. Since you used the term « contempt », I will use it too: there sometimes is contempt in the attitude of immigration officials.

About your suggestion to create the office of the ombudsman for immigration, I would like to know whether this ombudsman would have the power to investigate cases of abuse of power by some immigration officials who take nonsensical decisions. Is that how you see the role of an ombudsman? Could he cancel decisions when they are clearly stupid? Could you help me on this?

• (1410)

[English]

Mr. Abdi A. Hussein: Thank you very much for your question.

Although I'm not a legal person, just following the logic, if that office is given the power to oversee the process, where there's a legislated timeframe for the process, that would give people like me and many others who don't have the opportunity to go anywhere else to make their case and plead to the ombudsman. The ombudsman will have the power to intervene in mediation, and if the ombudsman sees the process as flawed, with abuse of power by the front-line officials, he can make strong recommendations to the minister to make the necessary changes.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Clavet: I have another question for Ms. Maleki-Tehrani, an Iranian who came to Canada in 2000.

These last five years have been a nightmare for you: your father died, you tried to sponsor your mother and younger sister, to no avail. Four years and six months later, it still goes on. You have escaped from an oppressive regime in Iran.

Would you say the psychological torture you were submitted to in Iran is worse than what you live now in Canada?

[English]

Ms. Marjan Maleki-Tehrani: It's torture, but in a different way, I guess. When they ask me, I always say it's as if I'm in a prison, but it's a beautiful prison. It's that I cannot enjoy what I have any more. I have a new freedom, but I've lost. You gain something and you lose something else, so it's a different kind of torture.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Clavet: Did you ask people to help you? You have been through the immigration process, but did you ask people around you to help you? Some people must have helped you in Canada.

[English]

Ms. Marjan Maleki-Tehrani: Do you know what happened? In 2001, soon after I lost my grandmother, she was in England at the time, and I could not even go for her funeral, because it took a few months to get a visa even to get to England. Even my adviser told me, Marjan, maybe you should go back home, because people, especially in North America, are very busy. They don't really have time to spend and give you that support you get from close friends and family members.

So yes, I have spoken with lots of people, and they always tell me, Marjan, no one can take their place and give their advice, especially in the Iranian community: if you're that desperate, it's always good to go back home.

Mr. Roger Clavet: Thank you very much.

Mr. Marjan Maleki-Tehrani: You're welcome.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have Mr. Siksay.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you all for appearing this afternoon.

For 18 years I was a constituency assistant to a member of Parliament, and it was my job, as with Mr. Telegdi's staff who are here today, to work with people in exactly the situations those of you who have shared personally have described. It was very difficult and frustrating work. It's always hard to know what the next step is, how to get people the support they need, and ultimately, how you make the change that's necessary to make sure your situations are solved and this doesn't happen to anyone else. I'm glad to be part of a committee that's working on that and working to encourage the government to make those changes. I hope we can do that in ways that help those of you who still have outstanding cases, to make sure this doesn't happen to other people in the future. But I appreciate that you've come to share your stories so personally. I know that is not an easy thing to do in a situation like this. Thank you for being here.

There's nothing I disagree with in the suggestions or recommendations that folks have made this afternoon. They're all very valid. The fact that we're putting refugee families through this after we've offered people protection—you have to use strong language—is outrageous. We make these promises, we offer people protection, and then we don't follow through to ensure that they get the protection that has real meaning for their family lives. It's outrageous that we talk about family reunification and don't recognize the reality of people's families, the reality of the kinds of relationships that make up those families, the relationships between parents and grandchildren and siblings. Even aunts and uncles, I think, need to be recognized in some way in our law. I tried to do that with a private member's bill in this session of Parliament, to take one approach to that. Unfortunately, that didn't meet with the approval of a large number of members of Parliament. I do agree with you that the definition needs to be extended in a way that recognizes the realities of families, and I want to work towards that.

Ms. Valenzuela asked about the refugee appeal division. The whole committee has taken a strong stand on that. A number of us have raised it. Whenever the minister comes, he can be sure he will be grilled about the refugee appeal division by me. On my first meeting with both ministers, that was something that I raised with both of them. I haven't got a good answer from either of them. It's not an expensive proposition: \$2 million to run the refugee appeal division, and maybe \$8 million to set it up in the first place. It's a minimal thing, it's a paper screening. It's not what we might hope for, but everybody in the refugee sector has agreed that this is a necessary thing. It was part of the government's own legislation. Why they won't implement something that Parliament approved, that was their own proposal, I can't understand. We are following up on that with a report. We'll hear officially from the government, as I understand it, but others, including myself, are raising that at every possible time and have asked the minister questions about it in question period as well. We need to move on that.

This is turning into a speech rather than questions, unfortunately, but there's so much here.

Major Armstrong mentioned the work done at the border at Fort Erie. I'm someone who has a problem with the safe third country arrangement. I know your border work is probably going to be much reduced now because of that agreement. Whereas people used to be

able to come and make their way into Canada and receive the kind of welcome the Salvation Army and other organizations provide, that's not going to be easy any more. If they come through the United States, they're going to stay there or be sent back there. At Fort Erie we used to have something like 75 or 95 refugee claims a week, and I think there have only been 70 in total through January and February at that border crossing. So we've put real limitations on our willingness to help people who come looking for the protection of Canada. That's something we've heard a lot about at this committee, and we're going to continue to follow the implementation of that agreement, but again, it seems like a limitation rather than an expansion of our responsibilities, of our hope to be a helpful country.

• (1415)

I just have to get one even more blatant political comment in. This is a country that hasn't put new money into its immigration program in a serious way. It hasn't put new money into processing and meeting the basic responsibilities in many years. This department had huge government cutbacks back in the 1990s, and that money has never been restored.

We're also a country that has no federal deficit any more. We've been running surplus budgets, and we continue to offer wealthy Canadians and corporations tax cuts. When we hear about the kinds of problems and situations we've had today, they are just examples of how we need to use our tax dollars, our collective resources, to meet these kinds of needs. I think we're failing as a nation on that, and I for one want to see us address that.

If it means spending some more money...you know, people always say money's not the solution to everything. That's true, but money does help in certain circumstances, and I think these are some circumstances where that will help. Since I've been skyrocketed into this wealthy Canadian category with my new job as a member of Parliament, I want to see my tax dollars going to fix this kind of problem.

I apologize for not giving you the chance to speak, but I wanted to be on the record on this.

Thank you very much for coming.

• (1420)

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

We're going to move on next to Mr. Temelkovski.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski (Oak Ridges—Markham, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's been a tough afternoon. We all have stories. I came to Canada when I was 13 with my mother and my brother. We didn't see my father for four years, but everything's okay. Things will get better.

But it's not an easy issue. The issues we face are multifaceted. We heard from a grandmother with grandchildren; we heard from somebody wanting to bring their mother-in-law in; we heard from somebody missing their son, their mother, and their sister. If we could bring all of them we'd have to increase the number of people who come into Canada. We have line-ups right now, and 750,000 people are waiting to come. It's not that easy.

These questions are very difficult to answer, and when you're in government you have to prioritize, the same as you have to prioritize in your own home. Do you buy a bigger car or a bigger TV? I don't want to trivialize it to that point, but governments must make tough decisions, sometimes excluding some people or prolonging their unification. It's definitely not easy.

We have heard so many things. It's good for us to hear all of this, and hopefully our report will reflect... Hopefully the government will take into consideration some of the recommendations we'll make, and there are many recommendations.

This is the end of our second week of travel. Next Sunday we'll go on to St. John's; next week we'll be on the east coast and we'll hear more. The week after that we'll be out again. There are a lot of difficult questions that are being asked and difficult stories that are being told, and we share all of that with you. Most of us know and have felt it first hand, second hand, or third hand. We've lived some of the stories you're telling us, so keep working.

Thanks very much for coming out and sharing them with us and reminding us one more time where we came from.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Beaumier.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier (Brampton West, Lib.): Thank you.

You talk about discrimination based on our priorities. Are a spouse and children more important than a parent to the individual? Perhaps not; however, the spouse and children—especially the children are the responsibility of those who bring them into the world. The only way we can solve this problem is by increasing our numbers.

Mr. Hussein, I want you to know that when they treat you rudely at the embassy, and immigration officers talk down to you, it's absolutely not discrimination because they talk down to us too—badly. I think maybe some of them get a little burned out, but we all acknowledge that the treatment prospective immigrants receive in our embassies is not worthy of our nation.

Jackie, I'm really proud of you. On one of the problems we have, as members of Parliament we could all say to you, "Come and see me. I've got another idea." I assume you've been to see your member of Parliament. I've asked Jackie to come over tomorrow because we're going to try a different approach. But that isn't why we're here. We're not here to solve individual cases. I'd like to take you all home with me, but that just wouldn't solve the problem.

Thank you for being here. I know it's been difficult for many of you. I know that Jackie has done this for her grandparents who aren't here to represent themselves.

What we do today certainly won't be done in time for you, Marjan, because you've already encountered this. But Mr. Temelkovski is right. When you get to be old like me, you find out that everything does work out in the end. But thank you for bringing these things to our attention. We'll do our best to get these changes made and push them along as fast as we can.

• (1425)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chong.

Mr. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm sympathetic to many of the stories you've brought to us today, but I do take issue with some statements that have been made here today by a number of people. It's been stated that public servants or civil servants at Citizenship and Immigration or the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade discriminate or act prejudicially against those who apply to immigrate to Canada.

While some of you may have had unfortunate individual experiences with these departments, you cannot make those sweeping statements about the thousands and thousands of civil servants who work at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and at Citizenship and Immigration Canada. These are hardworking and dedicated public civil servants who have devoted years to their country and years of service to Canada. I think we have to keep that in mind in these hearings.

There certainly are problems in the departments. There certainly are problems with long waiting lists. But these are systemic problems, and I don't think we should denigrate thousands of hardworking public civil servants. I'd just start off by saying that.

In a lot of the testimony today I didn't hear many concrete solutions or ideas for the problems we're facing. So my questions are directed to Mr. Balmer and Ms. Clancy regarding the number of issues and challenges we're facing in this country regarding immigration. Specifically, I'd like to hear your ideas on things like whether we should rebalance the weighting we're giving to the economic class of immigrants versus the humanitarian class. Right now it's 60-40. That was rebalanced a couple of years ago by government. Before that, there was more weight given to the humanitarian class. If you don't think the current economic-humanitarian 60-40 split is good, then what split do you think we should implement instead?

Regarding the long processing times, do you have any ideas there as to how we can shorten those processing times? Do you think the departments need to hire more staff? Do you think we need to maybe use technology to streamline the process? Is it an issue of too much paperwork and not enough technology?

Those are the kinds of issues that I'd like some tangible solutions for, some specific ideas on how we can address some of these challenges.

• (1430)

Rev. Brice Balmer: Since you asked me, first of all, I'm not sure I would want to be on record as being against specific staff people. There's a very important issue of transparency that I heard the whole way around, that I heard as I went out and talked to people. Things are not transparent in Immigration Canada. We don't know why. We don't know where files are. We don't know what's going on. I'm not willing to say it's a problem of individual staff people. There's a systemic problem here, which I think you know more about than I do.

I can tell you what's going on at the local level. I'm a person who works at the local level with a voluntary organization, with faith communities, and I can tell you there's a lot of angst here because there's not transparency.

So how do we create transparency in the Canadian immigration system?

Second, I think among the voluntary agencies and the faith communities that I work with, yes, we're really concerned that we as Canadians are humanitarians. People who can get here economically can get elsewhere economically as well, but some of the humanitarian cases can't go other places. So I think there's a very strong concern, especially when we see the humanitarian cases doing very well after they've been well settled. The struggle with it is to settle people well, so that they have a chance, and so their family is with them, so they can make it.

I used in my illustration the issue of the Hmong people who were from Southeast Asia, who were up in the mountains. Many of the women were illiterate. They've come, and 25 years later these people have their own homes, their own bands, etc. They've done very well, but we resettled them much better at that point. We had more supports in Canada for the people to come.

I'm very concerned that yes, we probably need more staff. I would think we do. I've talked to several former Canadian immigration people who say there's a strong need for more staff, and for extremely good staff training so that they're very understanding of what's going on in the country they're bringing the people in from.

And I think we need to do more in terms of trying to get programs into the local community. In the agency I work for and around the Waterloo region we do lots of resettlement work, spending a humungous amount of local dollars, both voluntary sector dollars and local government dollars, to do what we have to do. About two years ago—whenever Elinor Caplan was Minister of Immigration—I sent a letter in, because they said the system for Canadian immigration was to be parallel to the system of the Waterloo region. I said that we, at the House of Friendship, were spending \$27,000 a year giving food hampers to new Canadians who were getting their money from HRDSC, and that we would like to have that \$27,000 comparable to the way welfare does it, because that's what their principle was. She sent back a letter saying they weren't going to do that.

So again, I think part of the struggle for me is that you've downloaded a whole bunch of stuff onto us as donors, regional taxpayers, people who are in the voluntary sector, plus there's no transparency on up the system. We're trying to do a yeoman's job

down at the local level, really hearing from and walking with the people you've heard from today. We walk with these people every day. The agency I work with has 32,000 people coming through the system—not all of them are new Canadians, maybe half.

So we're working at the local level, but we feel abandoned by the federal level. As Bill says, there's money up there that gets put on the debt, and it's the money of the taxpayers, people here. But we feel offloaded. And we hear these stories day after day after day, the stories you're hearing. So what do we do?

I think it's a humanitarian issue, and it's a moral and ethical and issue, as far as I'm concerned. I happen to be a pastor as well as a social worker, and I think we have a moral and ethical and humanitarian issue at the federal level. I don't see it as much at the local level. I think it's at the federal level.

• (1435)

Mr. Michael Chong: So when you say that—

The Chair: It's over. Thank you, but we are at seven minutes and 22 seconds. Thank you very much.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Anyway, I would like to thank everybody for coming to this portion of the hearings.

Brice, one of the things that bothers me the most is that the biggest payment we make from the federal government is paying interest on the debt; I just see what we could do with that money.

I think Lui said it right: this is a tough issue. There's no way I would ever deny the experiences of people who come forward, because these are their own personal experiences. As permanent members of the committee, we have heard a lot of them, and we have taken officials to task on things like granting visas, because that's a huge problem. In the past year, visa rejections increased from 70,000 to over 150,000, and each one of those rejections, which make up almost 20% of total applications, has a human face to it. As members of Parliament, we deal with this all the time.

So I would like to thank you. You have been heard and your recommendations have been put forth. We're going to be putting together a report, and we'll be making sure that each and every one of you who presented will get a copy of it. So with that, I'm going to suspend this hearing for a number of minutes, and then we'll reconvene in five minutes with the next session.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael Chong: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I would just like to clarify that I wasn't here and don't normally sit on this committee, so I'm not familiar with the rules you struck on the first day, or at the first committee or second committee, that you met. I am just wondering what the order of precedence is for members asking questions. In the committee I normally sit on, it goes from the Conservatives, to the Bloc, to the New Democratic Party, to the Liberal Party, and back to the opposition. I notice that we didn't do it that way, so I'm just wondering what the order is.

The Chair: Actually, the chair makes sure that the permanent members of the committee, who have spent a great deal of time on the issue, are able to get their questions in.

Now, Mr. Chong, you had seven minutes, or beyond the time allotted to the other members. Thank you very much.

Mr. Michael Chong: No, I understand that, but I'm just wondering what the order is, or what the rules are for the order.

The Chair: I just told you: once the permanent members have spoken, you get to put in a question.

Anyway, we're suspended.

• _____ (Pause) _____

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• (1445)

The Chair: Order. We'll start the next session, on international credentials. The presentations are to be five minutes. I know it can be emotional, but this shouldn't be quite as emotional as the other one, so we'll try to stick to the five minutes.

We'll start with Mr. George-Cosh.

Prof. Stelian George-Cosh (Professor, Conestoga College, Institute of Technology, As an Individual): Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak to this standing committee.

I came to Canada more than twenty years ago. I went through the process of getting accepted into the Professional Engineers of Ontario as a professional engineer. It took me about three years. In the last five years I have volunteered on both the academic committee and the requirement committee, and I have learned all the details of this process, not only from my personal point of view but also from the hundreds of others I've listened to. So what I present to you is very much based on the engineering profession, but I'm also familiar with the medical and health care and economist professions.

Very briefly, a potential immigrant to Canada is assessed on a points system that takes into consideration academic qualifications and work experience, among other things. Academic status is defined by the number of years in school and work experience in the workforce. With these points, the applicant is accepted as a permanent resident and arrives in Canada. But as a professional, he is not in Canada, he is in a Canadian province, something that he did not know or understand.

Canada has a system of recognition and assessment of academic credentials that is different from the rest of the world. The academic status is completely separate from the professional status. A graduate from a university engineering program cannot practise engineering unless accepted by a provincial regulatory body for the engineering profession in that province. Similarly, a graduate of a medical program cannot practise medicine. Regulatory bodies are established for each and all regulated professions and trades in each province. Sometimes a trade is regulated in one profession but not in the other, because requirements for a licence or certification are different from province to province. Once the licence is obtained, because of these admission differences the licence is not always portable to other provinces.

It is more than confusing for the new immigrant. They came from a country where the system of academic qualifications was enough to recognize them as a professional by the government bodies and by, more importantly, the job market and employers. The newcomer has to start a lengthy struggle to have his professional status recognized, and then look to find employment. Many will accept any survival jobs much below their qualifications just to make a living, and they are becoming bitter as the time goes by. They try for years to be accepted as professionals according to the academic credentials and get employment in a profession that they practised prior to coming to Canada.

Recently, many have started to leave Canada, accepting defeat in this struggle. The brain drain is to countries that for decades had only one-way migration—toward Canada—and this migration is of those with many points in the immigration system, those accepted as top professionals by academic qualifications and work experience. An article was published by a human resource expert in Romania, entitled “Attention, Romanians who conquered the West are coming back”. Both Romania and Moldova made changes to accommodate repatriation in 2003. As far as I know, in Romania, where every year we get about 5,000 professionals—I'm not talking about family refugees, or class refugees, I'm talking just professionals—I can tell you that in the last two or three years, hundreds of them are returning.

I am active on one of the largest forums in Canada of Romanian users. I have gathered from those professionals that they still very much like Canada, with its standard of living, human rights, or lack of racial problems. The main reason cited for leaving is our system of credentials recognition and professional licensing. So something is not working and must be corrected.

• (1450)

Over recent years big dollars have been spent in trying to make improvement at both levels, federal and provincial, in foreign credential recognition, as well as licensing and certification of professions and trades. It has become an issue recognized by governments at all levels, by numerous agencies and media, and by many politicians. This parliamentary commission is the best example, and hopefully the one to make it right.

What has been done so far follows the constitutional structure. The federal government has power over immigration but cannot do too much in terms of streamlining the process of licensing professionals in Canada, which is under provincial authority. This division of authority is making an obstacle for our immigration process. Professional licensing, as done by different provincial bodies, is fragmented and not always identical between provinces or transferable to another province. For this reason, any federal effort in providing credential recognition and assessment may be futile if a provincial regulatory body does not recognize it.

In other parts of the world...the European Union is streamlining the academic credential format to be easily understood and accepted in any of the European Union states.

I recommend the following action. A good part of this licensing process is recognition and assessment of foreign credentials. It is a complex element because of the large number of countries from which we bring immigrants. A federal body with a unique approach to evaluating foreign credentials is required. It can function with the same experts who are doing the service now at the provincial level, but it will be more efficient, based on the economy of scale.

This will make the immigration process seamless and will make for a uniform assessment of potential immigrant professionals in Canada, as well as providing the foundation for their professional status being easily understood anywhere in Canada. The time is right, and this Commons standing commission has the authority to make it happen.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak at this hearing.

• (1455)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we're going to go to Mr. Janzen.

Mr. Rich Janzen (Research Directeur, Centre for Research and Education in Human Services): Mr. Chairman and members of the standing committee, thank you for this opportunity to present to you.

My name is Rich Janzen, from the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, and I'm co-presenting today with Jassy Narayan, who will introduce herself momentarily.

Our submission is based on a community-wide planning process for an upcoming summit on immigrant skills here in Waterloo region. Over the past four months our community has been very busy coming up with a comprehensive region-wide strategy to integrate immigrant skills into our local labour market. Already over seventy people from diverse sectors of our community have been involved in pre-summit discussions. Interest and energy in this summit have been strong from all quarters, from business, education, government, community-based organizations, and immigrant groups. Fifteen of the region's leading institutions are sponsors of this summit, and the outcome is to have the summit be the launching point for an immigrant employment council.

The written submission we submitted is a synthesis of these pre-summit discussions. Specifically, it highlights the recommended action plans of the different pre-summit task groups. These actions will be presented, discussed, and prioritized at the summit on April

28. Our submission, therefore, offers your standing committee an opportunity to hear what one mid-sized Canadian region is collectively doing to respond to the barriers immigrants face in finding meaningful employment. In reality, the submission is not from Jassy and me but is a community-wide submission.

I should emphasize that the recommendations are written from the perspective of action to be taken at a local level. They're not so much telling the Government of Canada what to do, although there is some of that, as they are suggestions of what could be done at a local level in tandem with provincial and national partners. We believe Citizenship and Immigration Canada could play an important role in supporting local communities to address immigrant employment issues. We also believe the application of the strategies we present is relevant for communities across Canada.

In our written submission we outlined 18 different recommendations, and I won't go through all of them. Some of them deal with strategies to recognize immigrant qualifications, such as creating greater awareness of available credential assessment services and advocating for credential assessment as part of the immigrant selection process. Some of the recommendations deal with enhancing immigrant qualifications, for example, by enhancing language training programs and expanding and increasing access to programs and courses for internationally trained professionals.

But there's a whole list of other strategies that apply to issues broader than credential recognition. Some are directed at the workplace—enhancing workplace language and communication skills of immigrants, promoting workplace cultures that support the integration of immigrants, and providing Canadian workplace experience for immigrants—and some are directed at supporting immigrants directly, providing current, complete, and reliable information to immigrants at multiple access points.

But it's the last recommendation, the 18th one, we wish to highlight, for the formation of a Waterloo region immigrant employment council, and that's what Jassy will highlight.

• (1500)

Ms. Jassy Narayan (Co-host of the upcoming Immigrant Skills Summit in Waterloo Region, Member of three pre-Summit Task groups and founding member and past president, Focus for Ethnic Women, Centre for Research and Education in Human Services): Good afternoon. My name is Jassy Narayan, and I have lived and worked in this community since the 1960s.

I'm affiliated with an organization in this community called Focus for Ethnic Women, which has been preparing immigrant and visible minority women for employment and community integration for over seventeen years. Over that period of time, we feel, we have counted over 1,700 women from over fifty countries for whom we have opened doors to employment.

On behalf of Focus for Ethnic Women, I have been involved in the planning process for the Immigrant Skills Summit, which Rick has talked about, to be held on April 20. Our vision and plan is to establish a permanent council that would look at immigrant skills and related employment.

As a member of a culturally diverse community, I see the summit and future council as a hope and a promise. This morning I was present when somebody mentioned poetry. In the afternoon, earlier to our presentation, there was agony, and I would like to think of ours as hope. I see it as hope because many immigrants in this community have felt isolated in their journey towards meaningful employment to have credited not just what they bring as skills but all the other accreditations.

I see it as a promise by the wider, inter-sectoral community, which Rich has mentioned and is in your documents, to make this a Canadian enterprise and not merely another struggle for immigrants. I think it's a way the immigrants in this community will feel justified that it's not only a struggle for those of us who already struggle...but for the problem of employment and all those other things Rich talked about...to become part of our community concerns.

One of the most encouraging features of the planned summit and proposed council is the ability to address the multi-layers of systemic racist barriers immigrants face daily in this community on an individual, family, and group basis. The proposed council is a unique model, as Rich says, for mid-sized urban communities. It builds on the Toronto experience, which we have adapted in very significant ways to draw on the strengths and experiences that are already in our community. We feel Citizenship and Immigration Canada could take a leadership role in the funding and coordinating of models such as the one we have designed and developed for use across Canada.

At the local community level we're already committed to doing our part in integrating the skills we as immigrants bring to this country, and we look to the federal government for your support.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have, from the House of Friendship, Ms. Deborah Schlichter, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Deborah Schlichter (Executive Director, House of Friendship): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members.

Before I start, I want to give you a snapshot of what House of Friendship is. We're a multi-service non-profit organization. We provide 16 different programs and services to low-income families and individuals in the Waterloo region. It is through this experience that we are bringing forward our concerns about the impact on immigrants when their international experience and credentials are not recognized. So the part we're looking at is the impact.

One of the programs we provide is an emergency food hamper program. In 2004 we provided almost 27,000 emergency food hampers to individuals and families in need of short-term food assistance. Approximately 40% of the people using our food hamper program are new to Canada. That is an astonishing number. They're surviving on either government assistance programs or low-wage employment. However, many of our program recipients also come

with a wealth of international experience and specialized training. Why are they ending up in line for food assistance? That's the question.

To illustrate this point, I want to share a story I've been given permission to share on behalf of a family that uses the food hamper program. Altug and his wife Sevil came to Canada from Turkey in August 2003 with their daughter, who is now eight years old. Altug has a bachelor's degree in food science engineering, which is similar to our bachelor in food sciences program. Sevil, his wife, has a PhD in the same division, food science engineering. Both have had extensive experience in the food-related industry, primarily with international food companies, such as Coca-Cola, that are around the world. They had some English training in their home country before they came to Canada. They had some ability to read, write, and speak English before they came. When they came to Canada, they had very high hopes. They also came with the equivalent of \$30,000 Canadian, with the expectation that within six months they would be able to gain employment. They immediately enrolled in an ESL program to help improve their English language skills, which would help them find work.

Over a very short period of time their savings quickly disappeared. The high cost of housing and other basic needs took the savings away. They ended up on the Ontario Works government assistance program and found it very difficult to live on the amount of money they were given as an allowance. They ended up at our emergency food hamper program looking for food assistance to help them get through the month. They also began to volunteer in our program. We encourage that as a way of also getting involved, but they saw it as a way to use their extensive food experience in a volunteer capacity, since they weren't able to find work, as well as a way to practise their English language skills.

It is now April 2005. Sevil finally obtained a full-time job in the food-related industry in November 2004. Altug has a promising job interview that he's hoping will be successful in getting employment.

These are some observations from Altug and Sevil. On the one hand, what they found helpful was the new Canadian program, with the support they provided, the English language training, and the working centres employment support program. Support programs really did help make a difference. They also found it very helpful to be on a work placement that enabled them to be in the Canadian work environment and learn. On the other hand, here are some observations they had as well.

•(1505)

They call their first six months in Canada a nightmare. Not only did they need to adjust to a new culture, a new language, a new climate, but they also saw their hopes and dreams fade away very quickly. The job hunt was very discouraging: when they applied for entry-level jobs, they were told they were overqualified; when they applied for jobs they were qualified for and had experience in, they were told their English language skills were not adequate.

They also felt they were misled by the Canadian embassy in Turkey. They felt that what had been presented to them as an easy transition to Canada had been misleading; they had not received information about the difficulties they might face. If they knew then what they know now, they say they would not have come. They feel very disappointed.

We know from 2001 census data that the unemployment rates of recent immigrants are higher than those of other Canadians. The unemployment rate of recent immigrants in the Waterloo region is almost 14%, compared with 5% of Canadian-born individuals. When new immigrants are not able to find employment or cannot find employment that provides adequate income and uses their training experience, they can quickly end up in poverty. In the Waterloo region, over 33% of recent immigrants lived on low income in the year 2000, compared with just under 10% of Canadian-born individuals.

What should be done? I know you're looking for suggestions, answers, and thoughts. The programs that were available to them sounded very important. Those need to be continued and expanded—the English language training opportunities, along with all of the supports that go along with that to reduce barriers. So child care, transportation, and all of those kinds of costs are very important. Continue and expand the support programs that are there for new immigrants as they adjust, meaning the settlement programs and the financial and employment supports. Look for ways of recognizing international qualification and experience—and you've heard some suggestions already of some of those kinds of things. What's really important is to reduce that gap between when people come to Canada with lots of skills, experience, and hope and when they actually are able to find employment suited to that experience and hope.

Our concern is that we have people with very valuable work experiences and skills that are not being utilized; instead, they are ending up in poverty, surviving on low wages or government assistance programs, and needing to use emergency programs, such as food assistance, to cover their basic needs. This is just one serious impact of what happens when the international experience and credentials of new immigrants are not recognized.

Thank you.

•(1510)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Sen.

Mr. Mazlum Sen (As an Individual): Mr. Chairman, members of Parliament, thank you very much for giving me an opportunity to talk here. Like other colleagues of mine, I wasn't registered, but at the last minute I was given a chance. Thank you. I will be sharing

some of my experiences, as well as some basic recommendations, if I may.

I am going to be talking about two issues, pre-arrival and post-arrival. By profession I am an immigration consultant who helps people immigrate to Canada. Some of their names have been mentioned. When people apply for immigration they have big hopes, and of course Canada is a wonderful country to come to. The first obstacle they face is the Canadian immigration department. Unfortunately the Canadian immigration department is not running as smoothly as some members have mentioned.

I can say that I have had a lot of difficulties communicating with them. Sometimes the straightforward cases will take four or five years instead of taking only a year. Why? Because of a lack of training, and there aren't enough people there. For example, some of my files got lost. I can prove with documentation that the embassy received...after writing several times, no numbers were given; therefore, I had to withdraw and keep silent.

For another thing, there was someone who applied four or five years ago. They were asked to have a medical. The medical was completed. There was a tuberculous problem. The tuberculous problem was established. Once the problem is established, the person shouldn't be asked again. But it didn't work this way. The file was transferred from one place to another. It took four years. The guy is still not in Canada. Hopefully he will come soon.

Another issue is what happens to these people after they arrive. As Ms. Schlichter mentioned, most of the people will either be over-qualified or will not be able to have their credentials recognized. For example, if you were an ambassador in Turkey...if you were a sick person in Turkey, where would you go? You would go to a Turkish doctor and get treatment. If you are Filipino, you will get a Filipino doctor and he will help you, or a Romanian doctor in Romania.... How come this person who takes care of our ambassador in Turkey cannot take care of you in Kitchener or in Waterloo? That's the dilemma we are facing.

My recommendation for this particular case would be to open a training or welcoming centre right beside the hospital, at which foreign doctors, or pharmacists, or nurses could take part on a volunteer basis under the supervision of a doctor. No one would have objections to that. I think the only objection to that might be from the physicians' association, which is the body overseeing this program.

In the States they have one exam. After passing this exam the doctor can practise, no problem.

My observation will not be finished with that. After a certain point I got frustrated and I tried to go through the business immigrants.... I realized business immigrants are the good ones. Mr. Clavet knows that Quebec gets 92% of the investors, and that's a lot of money. This money could be devoted to people who are coming. There is \$400,000 per person going into the province. Now Nova Scotia is following in those footsteps, and Prince Edward Island is doing it. This money could be allocated to Canadian companies for less interest. Instead of that, they should attach some conditions saying, please hire five immigrants who have just come. So your money will be spent on immigrants.

• (1515)

This kind of stuff can be done. These are all observations or recommendations from me. Most definitely, we also have to still consider new engineers' programs, skills-for-change programs, working-for-work programs, and even giving tax breaks to Canadian companies that will hire immigrants, who are going to be cheaper for them.

Thank you very much. These are my recommendations.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I know committee members have flights to catch and we have the bus coming. The only way I'm going to get you guys out of here on time is if everybody limits their intervention to two minutes. Is that good enough, or would you want to go over?

Mr. Bill Siksay: When is our bus coming, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: At 3:30.

I don't have to go to Vancouver, but I know you do, and I appreciate you're going to be back on the other side of the country on Monday. So what are your thoughts?

Mr. Bill Siksay: Let's go.

The Chair: So we're going to go two minutes each. We've got all your records. Off we go.

Mike, you can go ahead.

Mr. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Professor George-Cosh. It's nice to see you here today. I actually met the other day with John Tibbits, the president of Conestoga, a very impressive man.

Do you see the professional associations, the professional engineers associations, the Ontario Medical Association, the other provincially regulated professional associations, as organizations that are willing to work with immigrant communities to recognize their credentials, or has there been a reluctance on their part to take a look at recognizing foreign credentials?

• (1520)

Prof. Stelian George-Cosh: Probably there is a reluctance, because each one is trying to defend its own turf. But if the federal government were to establish an agency and draw experts from each province, from each regulatory body that is doing that at present, I don't see any problem there. They should buy in. And once the federal agency starts to provide those cards or some recognition of the credentials, I believe this will work well.

Mr. Michael Chong: So we should create a national recognition, as opposed to provincial recognition?

Prof. Stelian George-Cosh: Well, the immigrants are coming to Canada, and they try to look up to Canada, to the federal government.

Mr. Michael Chong: Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Clavet.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Clavet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for Ms. Narayan or Mr. Janzen. An Immigrant Skills Summit will be held on April 28, if I understood correctly, in the Waterloo region. This seems a rather unique summit. You are going to create an immigrant employment council. Can you quickly tell me what this kind of immigrant employment council would do?

[English]

Mr. Rich Janzen: We will be entering the preparation phase for the immigrant employment council right after the summit. The idea is to look at the different barriers immigrants face to finding meaningful employment, having a council that consists of some of our elected and non-elected community leaders, as well as people who live the experience of being an employer or being an immigrant themselves, people who together could come up with workable solutions that cross sectors. A lot of the solutions we have now dealing with immigrant employment are sector-specific. We have a lot of very good immigrant employment organizations in town that provide good support for immigrants, but there isn't always that connection between the community-based organizations and the business community, the educational institutions, the local government. So this is a forum in which all the different constituents of our community can come together to find creative new solutions that are much more coordinated in ways to respond.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Clavet: Thank you.

[English]

I have a quick question to Mr. Sen. I think your idea of having something near a hospital for foreign-trained doctors, technicians, and nurses is a good one. I think that would be a good idea. Would it be efficient? How would it work?

Mr. Mazlum Sen: What I was suggesting is...for example, Grand River Hospital is here. There's the emergency part and then you could create another part and call it a training and education centre, for example. One doctor could oversee about 15 to 20 doctors, whoever, who are actually trained by their own countries, their doctors. If a person goes there, like me, instead of going to the emergency room and waiting for five hours, I can go to the training and education centre and ask them to check what is wrong with me.

For example, right now in Ontario you can listen to a nurse on the phone who will tell you what to do. Isn't that much better than the nurse who is on the other side and cannot even see you?

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Siksay.

Mr. Bill Siksay: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses for your presentations.

I have questions for all of you, but unfortunately we have no time. I wanted to ask Monsieur Janzen and Ms. Narayan something, but I have a comment first. I'm glad to see there's a component dealing with racism, with that explicitly, in your program. It has been interesting to see how folks are uneasy about using that word at these hearings we've been having across the country. In Toronto there was actually one group where the folks who were appearing about their program were very comfortable with using that because they thought it was very important to be very explicit about it. So I'm glad to see that you're working with their program as well as being able to vocalize that word.

I wanted to ask about the participation of small and medium-sized business people in the process. Have you been able to have them as part of it? Are they participating? We know this is where a lot of jobs are created in our economic system, but it's also been a group that's been hesitant to participate in this kind of initiative.

Ms. Jassy Narayan: I want to make a comment on the racist thing and then Rich will tell you about the business.

Systemic racist organizations never tell you they are, so it's a word the immigrants use a lot to push the buttons if you have to change something. The hope is that these organizations that do not employ immigrants to the degree we are living in this community...and a significant piece for me is that we have the lowest unemployment rate in Canada. That has not been created without immigrants' hard work, taxation, etc. What we find is we are not represented in the hiring of ourselves, our community, by the largest institutions here. So I use the word to get everybody else comfortable with it because it's our life experience.

Rich will tell you about the business.

•(1525)

Mr. Rich Janzen: Traditionally, employers have been the group that hasn't really stepped up to the plate in dealing with immigrant employment issues. Locally it's starting to happen. We have been involving mid-size and large-size companies as a part of this pre-summit planning. We're happy to have our local chamber of commerce, the Greater Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber of Commerce, which will actually be co-leading with my organization the preparation phase for the council. So this is a very strong message that the business community is starting to recognize; they're recognizing that there's a "what's in it for them". It's not only an immigrant issue; it's a community-wide issue.

Mr. Bill Siksay: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Temelkovski.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have a short comment. Mr. Sen mentioned that companies should employ foreign-trained professionals, if nothing else, for the cheaper labour, because it's cheaper for them, and I'm not sure—

Mr. Mazlum Sen: When I say cheaper...some of my clients, when they came here, were, let's say, the general manager of so-and-so and were making \$100,000 in their country. They're willing to take a position at \$40,000 only to be called an engineer. It's not cheaper in

terms of Canadian standards—otherwise it would be against the act—but it would be cheaper than what they have to get from Turkey.

If you were to bring a person in on an employment visa, that person would ask for \$100,000 because there's a negotiation, but here he is willing to work for \$40,000. I have seen my clients coming here, making \$100,000, but just because they would like to have a better future, or better education for their children, they're willing to take entry-level engineering positions, no problem.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Thank you.

The Chair: Madam Beaumier.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: I don't have any questions.

It is a problem. But I think the federal government has to take the lead in its hiring and promotion practices as well.

The Chair: Mr. Siksay.

Mr. Bill Siksay: Can I use somebody's extra minutes, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Okay. I'll split it between you and Mr. Chong.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: Had I known you were going to let him go again I would have never given up the rest of my time.

The Chair: All right.

Go ahead, Bill.

Mr. Bill Siksay: I want to ask Ms. Schlichter about the example she gave of the couple who came here with experience in a multinational corporation, yet even that wasn't transferable to work in Canada. I find that a little unusual, because it seems to me there must be some kind of common corporate culture across a company. For example, I believe you mentioned Coca-Cola.

Can you give me a little bit more information about their experience? Was it just outright not recognized when they went for work interviews here in Canada?

Ms. Deborah Schlichter: That was also my question. It makes sense that within the same organization, the same company internationally, they could move from country to country, but that is not the case. It depends on who the hiring person is. There are obstacles, and we've heard already today there are systemic obstacles to hiring practices.

So regardless of whether it's the same organization, across countries it doesn't happen.

Mr. Bill Siksay: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

In wrapping up, when we were in Toronto the other day, we heard from a lawyer who had come from Poland. We were running out of time again and were running to catch the bus, but last night I thought a lot about what she said.

It seems to me that we're such a player now in the world community that surely there are going to be linkages between Canadians with that kind of experience and firms that are dealing with Poland, exporting and what have you. I wonder if we can sort of put our minds around it, because when I was in Ukraine for the elections, the same thing was happening.

Many lawyers from Canada, with Canadian law degrees, have gone to Ukraine. They're helping them develop their legal system. But on top of it they get to practise law in both Canada and Ukraine, because our population just makes it incredibly positive for that. So I tend to look at this as a real opportunity, and we have to think of better ways of utilizing it.

I want to thank everybody for coming. We have been hearing about this issue in all the cities we've gone to. We will be producing a report, and our able researcher, Mr. Ben Dolin, is going to make sure you all get one.

So thank you for coming. We'll see you next time. Hopefully it won't be this many years before the next parliamentary committee comes. Maybe Monsieur Chong will bring one in.

The meeting is adjourned.

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

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

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