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Chair

Ms. Raymonde Folco

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Thursday, October 27, 2005

•(1115)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): Order, dear colleagues.

[Translation]

Orders of the day of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, meeting No. 48, Thursday, October 27, 2005. This is a videoconference.

Before we begin, I would like to give you some information.

About our witnesses, we will have—

The Clerk of the Committee (Danielle Bélisle): This is for next week.

The Chair: Yes, this is about next week witnesses. On Tuesday, November 1st, we will have five French-speaking witnesses suggested by Madame Bonsant, Mr. D'Amours, Ms. Bakopanos, myself or Madame Gagnon. They are from Quebec or Edmunston. This is going to be an interesting group.

On Thursday, November 3, we will have representatives from StatsCan, as requested by several members, as well as a witness from Labrador. He may come here or we will talk to him by teleconference. It's not yet decided. We thought we would be able to see this person today but it didn't work. Mr. Russell is helping us on this.

On Tuesday next, November 15—

The Clerk: There is a one-week suspension.

The Chair: When we return after the suspension, we could make suggestions — I think we should then be able to — to our researcher so he can prepare the document he must produce. We may also have Minister Ken Dryden during the week of November 24, perhaps on the 24th or the 29th. During the previous meeting, on November 22, we will have Minister Belinda Stronach. Many things are happening. We're making good progress based on our timetable of a few weeks ago. I just wanted you to know what's coming.

We can now begin our meeting.

[English]

First of all, let me welcome Mr. David Hare of the Canadian Federation of Students national office. Mr. Hare is the national treasurer. Let me also welcome Mr. Walter Johnstone, the executive

director of the Peterborough Downtown Business Improvement Area. As well, let me welcome Ms. Dawn Berry Merriam, from St. Joseph's at Fleming.

I would like to have more information about what St. Joseph's at Fleming is, and I'm sure you'll give it to us. Welcome, Ms. Merriam.

This is pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the study on the summer career placement program.

We will start with Mr. Hare. He will make a three-minute presentation. Immediately after, we'll hear Mr. Johnstone for his presentation, and immediately after that, Ms. Merriam for her presentation. Then we'll go to questions and comments from the members of this committee.

Mr. Hare, please go ahead.

Mr. David Hare (National Treasurer, Canadian Federation of Students - National Office): I'd like to start by thanking the committee for giving us this opportunity today to speak about the summer career placement program.

My name is David Hare; I'm the national treasurer for the Canadian Federation of Students, and I'm based here in Ottawa.

The federation represents over half a million students from coast to coast, in every province, at over 82 college and university campuses. We represent graduate, undergraduate, and college students.

There are two areas I want to touch on with respect to the summer career placement program. One is about perhaps larger modifications, things that have worked, and things we think could use improvement as larger policy items, just drawing from our personal experiences of having been able to use the program within our organization.

As the committee members are aware, the summer career placement program provides supplements to wages paid to students who are in full-time study and will be returning to full-time study after the summer break, to take on work that is identified in an area where there is a need in the economy for folks to receive some training or some experience. This is particularly helpful for not-for-profit organizations such as ours, in that there is a differentiation within the program about the subsidy provided to not-for-profit organizations, that being 100% of the minimum wage paid to such employees for a 35-hour work week.

There's no need to say that not-for-profit societies and organizations have limited resources. The differentiation, I think, is one of the benefits of the program, in that it does recognize that there is a lot of valuable work and good experience that students can learn from when working in a not-for-profit environment and doing interesting work. However, these are somewhat limited because of the organizations' limited resources.

We think the program does fill a very valuable role in providing a work experience that can be quite complementary to the academic fields of study that students undertake. Also, it provides them with the opportunity to work or do placements in areas that would not necessarily be available to them because the position would not exist without such funding or is something they hadn't necessarily considered.

Again, because time is limited, I'll move quickly.

We think the program is a good program, but there are obviously areas in which we think there could be improvement. Probably the first and foremost area is the length of time that the placements occur. They're ten weeks in duration, generally starting mid-June and not able to continue past September 3, which does make sense because obviously most students would be returning to classes at that point. However, a number of academic fields of study end generally in mid-April.

Given the context of what a lot of students are facing with respect to the cost of education, summer is a major time for earning money for the upcoming school year. The idea that someone would not be able to take on a position until mid-June when they have essentially mid-April to mid-June without employment or are unable to find a different job to fill that void, is somewhat unhelpful or unrealistic. One of the suggestions we would make is to examine extending it to a more lengthy time period.

This would also have a benefit for the organization or the company employing the student, because most of the jobs and placements that students are receiving are quite skilled. A lot of the time the students do not necessarily have the background in these areas, and they are learning as they are working. The learning curve can be quite steep, so ten weeks will not necessarily provide as much of a return for the employer. So there's an economic benefit in the sense that by extending that by potentially eight weeks, it's providing the employer with a longer placement and someone who is able to bring on more skills and understand the operations of the organization or the company better. Again, it is also a more meaningful economic return to the student, given the context that we see with the cost of education these days, which is first and foremost in students' minds.

In one of the other areas that we would like to address, while there is a differentiation between the assistance provided to for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, again the minimum wage is the maximum amount. There are special cases for not-for-profit organizations, whereby they can get mandatory employment contributions covered as well in special circumstances. However, we would be looking hopefully to see the committee look at possibly raising the amount of the subsidy provided, particularly in the not-for-profit organizations, but also in the program as a whole. Again, as the program is twofold, providing experience to students and

providing good jobs to students, jobs they need over the summer to pay for the high tuition fees they're facing, it's often difficult, particularly for not-for-profit organizations, to pay a decent wage—given the context and the costs facing students upon returning to campus in September—when it is only up to the minimum wage that is covered.

● (1120)

The final area where we'd like to see some improvement—as we find that the program is good and is quite successful—would be to increase the number of positions available. Of course that's a question of resources on behalf of the government, and decisions need to be made about how to allocate those resources. But we do feel it's an effective program, it is complementary to studying, and it does further the agenda of a youth employment strategy that the government has undertaken.

So what I think is necessary, and what I hope for, is the extension of the amount of time and the number of positions.

Speaking for our organization, I know we would love to be able to receive funding for more applications to bring more students in and have them work. I'm sure the other witnesses will share the sentiment that these are valuable experiences, both for the organization bringing in new people and showing them what they do and getting assistance in the workplace, and for the students.

With that, I'll conclude my remarks. I hope I'm not over my three minutes.

The Chair: Yes, you are.

I was busy with the clerk. I apologize.

Is there anything you want to say as a closing statement, Mr. Hare?

Mr. David Hare: Again, I would just say that our organization thinks the objectives of the program are good and that the program seems to be well thought out, but there are some areas for improvement, particularly in the length of the placements.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Johnstone, we'll hear from you now.

Mr. Walter Johnstone (Executive Director, Peterborough Downtown Business Improvement Area): Can you hear me?

The Chair: Perfectly, and we can see you perfectly as well.

Mr. Walter Johnstone: Thank you.

I'm pleased to have the opportunity to share information with you about the program I'm involved with and the summer student placement program, which is part of that.

We've operated a water taxi service in Peterborough in the summer months for the past ten years. That program requires a partnership that includes Peterborough and The Kawartha's Tourism; the downtown business association, which I represent; some private businesses; a marine company; and the Holiday Inn.

Besides providing employment to three students through the summer months—and it's a job that's probably the envy of all their contemporaries, because they get to spend it on the water—it provides a key element in tourism in our region. Tourism in the Peterborough region is big business. It's about a \$150-million-a-year business, and the Trent-Severn Waterway system is a big part of that tourism. The water taxi operates on a budget of about \$20,000 annually; there is some revenue generated through sponsorships and through fares from people using the taxi. An example of the benefit of the water taxi to our community recently was that Peterborough undertook to be part of the Communities in Bloom program. The water taxi, which the judges took, was an integral part of the tour.

The water taxi helps my constituency a great deal because it allows people who come to our community by water or who are camping close to our community in one of the parks to access downtown without having to drive downtown. So we enjoy some very direct economic impact benefits in the downtown core, and those would be to small and medium-sized retailers, bars and restaurants, that kind of thing.

Not to repeat any of the process improvements that have already been given, the one I would comment on is the approval process. The timeframe is very, very tight. For us to mobilize the water taxi every year, we have to draw together a number of participants. We end up doing it in quite a hurry.

I understand some of the limits on the approval process and appreciate those, but that is probably the one point I would want to leave you with. If we can improve that approval process, it would help us immensely.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you.

Certainly we have heard this from other witnesses as well, so I'm pretty sure this is one of the recommendations that will figure in our paper.

I just wonder whether I could ask your MP if there is a summer job for me on the boats in Peterborough this summer.

Hon. Peter Adams (Peterborough, Lib.): I'm the admiral.

The Chair: You're the admiral. All right.

Thank you very much, Mr. Johnstone, I know Peterborough a tiny bit, but I think I want to come next summer maybe and have a look around.

Mr. Walter Johnstone: We'd be happy to have you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Merriam, we won't keep you waiting any longer. We'll hear from you now.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam (St. Joseph's at Fleming): Thank you so much.

As Walter said, we're very pleased to be here today.

You wanted to know a little bit about St. Joseph's at Fleming. It's a long-term care facility. It's brand new, but it builds on the culture of two long-term care facilities that came together last year. We have

200 residents, and we have over 100 volunteers who come in to support our residents. So that's a little bit of context on how we benefit and need to benefit from the applications for summer students through HRDC.

The values of St. Joseph's at Fleming really are to support a healthy community concept. That means providing quality care to our residents, but also trying to work very closely with community agencies and resources to support our residents.

We've been very fortunate. Over the last ten years we've been successful in having applications approved through HRDC for the summer programs. The benefit to the students and to us has been to give young people the experience of really getting some meaningful work. The students have been able to provide support to our residents through special programs. Particularly in the summer, we have residents who want to go out and do special activities, and we need the resources that are provided through the summer programs.

The two positions that were funded most recently were a recreation assistant and a "volunteer" coordinator. The recreation assistant helps us in providing new programs; the "volunteer" coordinator helps us get more young people involved through the ripple effect. Last year, our "volunteer" coordinator that you supported managed to recruit 20 young people, who came in as volunteers to support our residents and programs.

The program has also allowed us to give students very meaningful employment. People who are high school or college graduates—in fact we've also had college- and university-prepared students—come in to learn more about what long-term care is all about. In fact, they've gone on to actually work in the field because of the experience.

I think you've organized your agenda very well, because Walter and I have been able to give you some experience we've had with the student programs. Mr. Hare actually set the tone. Like Walter, we won't reiterate everything that was said, but there are many things Mr. Hare said that we agree with, such as there's a need for more than a ten-week commitment.

In a long-term care facility, to ramp up for student placement to really get meaningful experience we have to provide a lot of training, and ten weeks is the very bare minimum that is beneficial to both us as the organization and the student, to get that experience.

If we could have earlier approvals, that would allow us to have a better chance to get more students in for interviews to see who would be most appropriate before they leave. As you may know, Peterborough has a university and a college, and come April a lot of those folks have to go back home. If we had the ability to say we had the positions, we want to do the interviews, and you'll be starting at such and such a time before June, it would be of great benefit.

You've probably heard from everywhere else that we need more resources. If we could have additional approval for more students we'd certainly be able to make use of those resources and give more students the opportunity to have some meaningful employment in the long-term care sector. As Mr. Hare said, if we had the resources to cover more than just the cost of minimum wages, that would allow us to have a different calibre of students with more experience.

Like Walter, I do not want to go beyond the three minutes. Those are some of the issues we feel are very important. We're very appreciative of some of the work you do to allow us to have these student placements.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Merriam. To you and to the other two participants, we really appreciate your presentation.

Certainly I think meaningful summer employment is an important notion. It's important for students to be able to make a little money over the summer, but if they can have meaningful employment that they can use as experience, not just to tell their employer they have experience but particularly to be able to see whether this is the kind of field they are interested in, in the first place, that would be very interesting.

We're going to go into our first round of seven minutes, starting with Mr. Devolin.

Mr. Barry Devolin (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Many people have mentioned the issues around the approval process and the timetable. I don't want to talk about that, because I think we understand where people are coming from. I want to talk a little bit about the program design and the budget. I guess it's a question for all of you, but maybe Mr. Hare could answer it first.

As you know, this program exists, and within the program there are some rules and parameters in terms of how it's set up—for example, the number of weeks that students are eligible for and the amount that's paid, percentage of the minimum wage, those issues.

The total budget envelope, the total amount spent year to year, is kind of a separate decision that comes out of the budget. So one concern I would presume you must have is that if you extended the number of weeks from 10 to 14, or 16, or 18, but subsequently there was no growth in the size of the budget envelope, the \$97 million or \$100 million, what we would end up with is probably longer terms for a smaller number of people.

Have you had that discussion? Presuming for a moment that the \$97-million or \$100-million budget does not increase, would you still support increasing the number of weeks of eligibility, recognizing that it may actually result in fewer spaces?

Mr. David Hare: Again, that's explicitly a discussion we haven't yet had. You're identifying one of the areas where we thought the program could be improved. Obviously, to make the program more comprehensive is going to require a greater commitment of resources on behalf of the government, which is a discussion to be had during the budgeting process.

We would hope that the committee would support such a recommendation and talk to their colleagues who sit on the finance committee, and again in the debates on the budget.

So I don't think we could really say explicitly. We haven't come to a position on it. What I think needs to be recognized—and I think I touch on it in my remarks—is that there's a mutual benefit, not just saying students would like a job for the entire summer, which obviously most students require, given the context of how expensive

it is, but also for the employer, the organization, there is a tangible benefit in having that additional....

As one of the other witnesses mentioned, having them, given the training period in a lot of these positions, as required, is very valuable to the organization that's employing. So I don't think we're in a position to say either/or. The message I think you'll find agreement with the witnesses on is that it is a valuable program. It's set up with a number of very well-identified areas on how to make a good program work, but there is a necessity. To make this program really flourish, an increase in resources will be required.

• (1135)

Mr. Barry Devolin: I apologize; I don't mean to sound argumentative. As I listen to the conversation, if we talk about taking 10-week positions and extending them to 16 weeks, if we talk about increasing the percentage of minimum wage that would be paid, and if we talk about—and I've heard it a couple of times—increasing the total number of positions available across the country, when you add those three together it's not hard to come up with the need to double or triple the budget for the program. It wouldn't be an incremental \$10 million or \$20 million more, but if you added those three things together....

I just want to be clear. Has your conversation gone that far? If you were asked to put a budget number on it, is that what you're talking about—\$200 million or \$300 million?

Mr. David Hare: I'm a little wary at the moment to put a budget number on it.

If there were to be increases in the amount of resources allocated and the focus of what change would be made, I would say the extension of the placements, the length of the placements, would be the first thing we'd look for, ahead of the other two, just because of the nature of not only the amount of earnings that the student can get and the benefit to the employer of having that extra time, but also, as one of the other witnesses mentioned, the ability to actually get students into those positions, where you have students leaving in mid-April, sometimes, from communities where they're studying. If I had to prioritize, I would put the extension of the length of the placements as number one.

Mr. Barry Devolin: Thank you.

I'm wondering if Ms. Merriam or Mr. Johnstone had a comment on this issue. If you had to pick and choose, which would you choose—longer terms, higher wages, or more positions?

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: Or all of the above?

Unfortunately, I know exactly where you're coming from. I guess the thing is, we wouldn't want to see fewer positions. I would not want to see the program changed so that fewer organizations have access to it. I think that's the one warning I would give. For the program you have right now, I think that ten weeks is the absolute minimum you should be offering. It would be nice to see it go beyond that, but I understand that it would cost more. You certainly wouldn't want to cut it to less than ten.

The Chair: Mr. Johnstone, do you want to add something to this?

Mr. Walter Johnstone: Very quickly, for the particular program I'm involved in, we are able to tailor it to the ten weeks quite successfully because it aligns very well with our busy tourism season. However, we do have the same limitations that the other witnesses have talked about as far as recruitment of young people.

One suggestion might be on the application process. In the application process, the description of the program—at least the one that I do—is very cryptic. It probably doesn't provide Service Canada staff with a very good picture of what our real needs are and what the potential for the program is. There is the possibility, the alternative, of more flexibility in the term of the program, not necessarily uniformly across the country, but to meet specific needs in specific areas. For our program, we fit the 10 weeks, but Dawn's program may be a 12-week program or a 14-week program, for example.

● (1140)

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: That's a really good point, the fact that different organizations have the different criteria.

The Chair: They have different needs.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Madame Bonsant, it's your turn now.

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Good morning. Thank you for coming.

My question is addressed to Mr. Hare because I know that the Summer Career Placement Program concerns students.

In real life, you have to take chances when you decide to invest in youth. I think \$97 million is not much for a program as important as this one when we live in the knowledge society. I believe we should absolutely keep this program and even improve it. We're talking about our future here.

Mr. Hare, since you're the president of the Canadian Federation of Students, I would like you to tell us about the impact of not being able to provide employment in rural areas to students coming from a rural background who study in an urban setting. Do these students stay in their urban area without a job? I am very concerned about the impact on rural areas. Can you answer this question?

[English]

Mr. David Hare: I believe Statistics Canada is going to present before the committee and might have more on this, but I'm not aware of any particular study anecdotally. I can say that when students travel away to study, they often do build roots in the community where they happen to be studying. When provided with the opportunity to work in this community, they will jump at it, particularly when it's a job that is beyond your average minimum wage summer job.

Again, it can have the effect of having students stay in the community where they're studying as opposed to returning home. I can't speak particularly on whether it's driving a mass exodus, if you will, from their home communities. Again, this might be a question that Statistics Canada has done more research on.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant: I have another question for you.

You talked about the hourly wage. Next week, we will have witnesses from StatsCan. In an area of my riding, a university degree in psychology was required to work in a shelter for battered women. If I understood you well, you would agree to different levels of wages based on the level of schooling. In Quebec, we have the CEGEP level which is in between high school and university.

Do you agree that it's a good thing to enhance both the job and the employee in the position he or she will hold during the summer?

[English]

Mr. David Hare: Again, obviously certain numbers of the placements will require certain levels of training, and obviously there's going to be a differentiation in the wage that's paid. And again with these placements, there's also generally a comparison done as to what the prevailing wage is in the industry or in the position they're filling, so there is going to be some variance there. I'm not sure what benchmark could be used, though, by HRSD or whoever would be administering the program, in determining what the prevailing wage is.

I think obviously there is a consideration of who you hire for the position, the placement, given the qualifications that they bring to the table, and that can obviously be reflected in a wage. And I think there you would run into some difficulty in placing in certain areas, particularly, as I have mentioned, the not-for-profit sector, where there's incredibly valuable work, but a comparable position in the private sector might be remunerated much better. In the not-for-profit sector, the resources are just not there, so I'm not sure how you would derive those tables.

But obviously prior levels of education and the qualifications required for the placement are going to dictate variances of wages, and again I think the point we want to hammer home is that, while we appreciate the wage subsidy, particularly for not-for-profits, of 100% of minimum wage, minimum wage is barely minimum wage at all, really, a minimal living wage, so there does need to be a focus on increasing it.

[Translation]

The Chair: Madame Bonsant.

Ms. France Bonsant: Can you tell me how many of your students were able to find a job through participating in this program? What's the percentage?

● (1145)

[English]

Mr. David Hare: Again, I don't have the specific breakdowns. We don't have the tracking of how many of our members go on to summer career placement. Again, HRSD might be able to provide that.

[Translation]

The Chair: Madame Bonsant, do you want to know the percentage of students who use this service or the number of students, among those who applied, who were accepted in the Summer Career Placement Program?

Ms. France Bonsant: I wanted to know the statistics about the percentage of high school students who apply to program and are accepted. Moreover, I want to know what percentage of CEGEP students who applied were accepted. I also want the same figures at the university level.

The Chair: We will send this request to StatsCan so they can give us these figures when they come next Thursday. You may also ask them the question directly.

Ms. France Bonsant: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Madame Bonsant, you have one minute left.

Ms. France Bonsant: You also said you would like to have more time.

Ms. Merriam, would you be ready to choose your students at the beginning of January? It would probably be better than to wait until it is almost too late, as was the case this year in June. Would you be ready to send your applications right after the holidays, in January?

[English]

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: We'd be very pleased to meet any timeframe that would help you make approvals sooner. We could do it any time, and we would certainly want to work with you on that.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Davies, please.

[English]

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much.

The Chair: You have seven minutes, Madam Davies.

Ms. Libby Davies: Thank you very much, and I'm pleased to be here today.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming.

Actually, I'm going to begin on a little bit of a negative note. This has been a very successful program, but it seems to me it's a very good example of how to turn a successful program that's helped students into a near disaster.

I represent Vancouver East. We experienced a cut this year of 60%, and it was just absolutely devastating in our community. We lost over 119 jobs. We did get some of that back because the former minister Madam Robillard, when she realized the impact of the changes in 2005, as you know, did give the money back to anybody who had had a cut over 30%.

I held a forum in our community, and we had a huge turnout of all the agencies that had been impacted. We came up with a whole number of suggestions, which I've now sent to the new minister, but I feel very skeptical about whether or not they're going to listen. This is a really good program, and it really benefits students and youth. It really benefits local agencies and local businesses. It's one of the few programs where local MPs have some input into what goes on, which I very much appreciate, and yet because of the change in the formula, there's been a massive impact on the program.

So I just actually wanted to ask Mr. Hare, the treasurer of the Canadian Federation of Students, one of the things that was noted in my community—

Mr. Todd Norman Russell (Labrador, Lib.): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

I don't mean to cut you off, Ms. Davies, but you made lots of suggestions there. You sent a brief. Could the committee get a copy of that? I'd love to have a copy of what you presented to the minister.

Ms. Libby Davies: Yes, certainly.

The Chair: Send it on to the clerk, please.

Ms. Libby Davies: It's basically from a community forum. We came up with a whole number of changes that we thought should go into the formula, to not repeat what happened this year.

Yes, I'd be happy to share that with the committee. In fact, I was just going to highlight one of the changes. A number of people told us that because they rely on the census for the student count, this is very inaccurate, because, first of all, where students live or where they go to school is very different. And there are groups that are very under-represented in these censuses, such as aboriginal youth, immigrant youth, and in a place like East Vancouver this would account for a lot.

I wanted to know, Mr. Hare, whether or not from CFS's point of view you might have any suggestions about how the formula should be implemented, or what kind of formula there should be to ensure that we are actually really targeting the numbers of students, in how we count them. I don't think the census is very accurate. It's not giving us a real picture of what's out there. I don't know whether you have any suggestions about how we could tackle that so that we are getting an accurate count.

• (1150)

Mr. David Hare: Again, this actually comes to a problem that's faced by a number of programs in a number of ways. Post-secondary education funding is dispensed as well by basing students on census data depending upon whether they're counted in their home community or whether they're counted in the area where they study. I'm not sure of the mechanism you would use to do it, but looking at students and at the communities where they study as well is necessary, because the students are a transient population. They travel quite a bit to study, in many cases. So there does need to be a recognition that using census data that might be an accurate reflection of the composition of a given area in some areas is just not an applicable method for students, given the nature.... And it can, as you mentioned, have a devastating impact in East Vancouver on the program and how the funds are disbursed.

There needs to be a recognition of where students are studying, of the communities in which they might be putting down roots, away from their home community, but also a recognition of where they're coming from. They may need to return for other reasons, or just to be back in their home community for those precious few months. There needs to be an examination of how that counting could take place, though, because I do believe that the census does not provide an accurate instrument for that.

Ms. Libby Davies: Do I have a couple of minutes more?

I would like to follow that up. It seems to me that the count is one thing, to find a fair way of determining where students are in what riding and taking that into account. But the other factor that agencies and groups and non-profits came up with in my community was that you need to also factor in where there are particular systemic barriers facing youths and students, in particular, aboriginal people, immigrants, groups that are under-represented. And there needs to be a criterion that recognizes areas where young people are really facing a lot of issues, and that needs to be factored in, in terms of inner-city communities, because this program is so important to them.

Again, I just wonder whether the CFS would see that as a good criterion, as part of the program, so that we're actually meeting a social need in communities that are very much at risk.

Mr. David Hare: Absolutely, that would be a criterion that we would hope to see placed into the summer career placement program. It's also interesting, because it's a summer career placement program for students, you also have the doubly negative impact of that. Those groups are traditionally under-represented within post-secondary education. I'm speaking from a post-secondary education background...for the students' background. They are traditionally groups that are marginalized within post-secondary education, so their access to this program is diminished even before the funding is doled out and before the positions are provided.

Ms. Libby Davies: Okay, thank you very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam, CPC)): All right, do you have one quick supplemental question?

Ms. Libby Davies: No, thanks.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Okay.

Mr. Adams.

Hon. Peter Adams: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

David, I'm going to talk mainly to Walter and Dawn.

I want to try, because we're having these hearings and we're getting suggestions, to talk about the program a little bit more generally. As you know, since Canada was a rural society, work experience has been one of the great strengths of our education system, in elementary school, in high school, and in college and university.

The strengths are it gives students viable experience, it gives them money, which is increasingly important at this time, as you have said; it gives the employers energetic new workers; and it gives, in the ideal world, really good training. At the moment, all that is still true. We pioneered co-op programs, for example, and things like that. Everyone agrees this is a small piece of that puzzle. With the seasonal nature of our economy in many parts of the country, it still applies as it did when people lived on farms.

Dawn, in your case, given the fact that your seniors residence is on a college campus, I'd like you to talk about that and student experience. It seems to me that in the ideal case you have an employer, which would be St. Joseph's at Fleming. Walter, this would apply to you as well. Then you have the student, and then you have clients. You have customers. Dawn, in your case, these are

particularly important. It's the interaction of the students with the seniors who you work with, and ideally all three benefit. You benefit, the student benefits, and the seniors.

Walter, it's the same with you. I wondered if you, Walter, when you get a chance, could mention the sort of training the students get and also their role over and above this water taxi as ambassadors to the community and the fact that they have to be knowledgeable in the community.

If you could throw in something about high school students versus college or university students in the program, I'd be grateful.

So over to you.

● (1155)

Mr. Walter Johnstone: Thanks, Peter. There are a couple of points you touched on.

The students who do the water taxi are typically either college or university students. However, we don't disqualify high school students. They have to have their boat operating safety certification. They have to have lifesaving certification. They have to have first aid. Some of that training we provide. We also provide them with a fair amount of orientation to the amenities and the features of the community. They learn about the community as part of their process so that they can share this with visitors.

When it rains, for example, the students don't just sit on the water taxi. They'll go to the downtown core and canvass businesses that may want to use the water taxi as a way of getting coupons into the hands of the passengers on the taxi. That's part of the ripple effect I think you're talking about where it isn't just the employment of the students. It also helps the businesses in the community and provides a better experience for visitors.

To give you a very specific example, partly because of the water taxi experience, we've undertaken, again working with Service Canada and the JCP program, an ambassador program this year that we're running as a bit of a pilot. It is five organizations across the community, not just limited to Peterborough but spanning the Kawarthas, from the Buckhorn and District Tourist Association, to the Chamber of Commerce here in Peterborough and the Chamber of Commerce in Lakefield, where JCP has allowed us to hire some younger people and put them into the community almost as a mobile concierge. That exercise was largely caused because of our experience with the benefit of the water taxi.

Hon. Peter Adams: Walter, that's great. You had better give Dawn a little bit of time, because we have three minutes.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: Very quickly, I want to give you an overview in terms of what our students do. They work with the residents. They work with the staff. They also, as I mentioned before, work with some of the other volunteers and volunteers.

One of the issues I want to raise, Peter, is if you look at the ten-week placement with our students, we are looking at about a two-week orientation before we would let those students actually be without their mentors. We're dealing with a very vulnerable population in a long-term care facility, so we have to have students who are well trained, are mature, and have a responsible nature.

If you were to look at some of the backgrounds and some of the experiences they get, you're looking at sectors such as sociology, psychology, nursing, recreation, social services, counselling, program planning. Those are some of the skills they'll be coming out with. They also have to have some of those at least understandings to go into the job.

Hon. Peter Adams: I think we were hoping to have Lynn Covert, who'd been the student manager—David, you should know this—with you today to get her experience as the manager of the program. We had a student from B.C. the other day. Unfortunately, Ms. Covert is away today. She would have been a good example of the energy I think these young people bring into the system.

By the way, I understand you are in the headquarters of our summer student employment program. That's where they operate from.

• (1200)

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: Peter, could I say one more thing?

If you were to look at the whole issue of timing, I want to emphasize that ten weeks for a program is really the minimum that is effective for an organization like ours.

Hon. Peter Adams: We appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Okay, we'll go to Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Okay, my question would be to Mr. Hare.

With respect to your indication that you thought there should be more applications that you could fill, can you give me some idea of the percentage of applications you received that were unfilled—the percentage in whole?

Mr. David Hare: Actually, what I was referring to was the number of applications our particular organization had applied for, the number of positions. We applied for three positions; we were lucky enough to get two.

Obviously, you can't always get what you ask for. But again, there are a lot of areas particular to our organization—I'm sure the other witnesses can agree there are a lot of areas in the work not-for-profits, in particular, do—that can provide for valuable work experience. There's a lot of opportunity out there; it's just that we were unable to secure the funding. I was referring more to the applications we had made to HRSD.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Okay.

To Mr. Johnstone, concerning the approval process and the partnership you've talked about between business and students, our focus has been on the students in large measure. But there's some energy required from those who supply the jobs. My question to you concerns an aspect maybe we've overlooked and need to pay more attention to. The fact is there is training involved, there's a shortened period of time in many of these programs, and there is a requirement from the business community. Perhaps we should keep that in mind as well. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Mr. Walter Johnstone: I believe you're right on point. The uncertainty around the approval process means we have to pull those partners together in a very short period of time. When you rush that sort of process, you sometimes don't do the job as well as you possibly could, and your program is always somewhat at risk. Maybe the major point within this is that the uncertainty around the program continuing in the next year is always a bit of a struggle for us.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: This is directed to Ms. Merriam. In terms of the number of applications you made compared to the numbers that were approved, what percentage was that? I'm not sure I caught that.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: We applied for two positions, and we had both approved.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Okay. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): All right, we'll go to Mr. Russell.

Mr. Todd Norman Russell: Thank you very much.

It's a pleasure for me to be here, and also to welcome you.

I have a couple of questions. Coming from Labrador—I'm not sure how it applies in your circumstances—in terms of the student summer employment program, is there a special effort to reach out to the more disadvantaged, if I can use that word, such as aboriginal people, who may exist within that particular population base or in the set of people we're talking about, or to people with disabilities? I'm looking to see if there's some outreach happening in terms of how the program is applied. Do you make special accommodation for that? Or is it even looked at?

I know there are other programs. But still, this is one in which we should have some understanding of the unique circumstances of particular groups.

The other question concerns evaluation. Do any of the organizations take the time to talk to the student who's been placed after the term of employment, to get feedback and understand how it was valuable to them, or how it could be improved?

Basically those are my two questions.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: Could I answer one of the questions?

I guess, in terms of the special populations, we have had very good success in having students from other special groups, for example, the physically challenged. And we've accommodated them in terms of their needs, because our home is physically accessible. I certainly think that in a long-term care facility and a not-for-profit organization, we have those values of wanting to be inclusive in our hiring process.

In terms of the evaluation, we have been really stringent on that. After each year, I sit down with the students and want to know what went well, what didn't go well, what they enjoyed, and what they would suggest we do differently, in order to meet their needs and those of our residents better. I also ask them to be very candid and to write a letter that will go back with our evaluation to HRSDC. It's really important for you to know how well the program worked; it's important for us to know if we met their needs, too.

•(1205)

Mr. Todd Norman Russell: Is there anybody else?

Mr. David Hare: Just with respect to outreach, as the previous witness mentioned, because of the way the program is currently set up, it's basically up to the people who have applied to seek it out. There are no criteria. As a member of the committee has already mentioned, some of the criteria could be included—because there are no criteria, as such, now.

With respect to people with disabilities, there is additional funding available within the program to make the accommodation and the worksite accessible, but again, there are currently no criteria to promote the hiring of people from disadvantaged or marginalized groups, so it's strictly on the employer. Again, being a not-for-profit organization, we share similar sentiment or values with the previous witness in speaking on this. But I think there does need to be an examination, as was pointed out by one of the other committee members, of possible criteria for addressing under-represented groups.

Mr. Todd Norman Russell: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): All right. Is that it, Mr. Russell?

Mr. Todd Norman Russell: Yes, thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Okay.

Mr. Lessard.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is addressed to the three groups.

First, I want to thank you for the information you provided us. It was very informative. I also think it's a good initiative to invite here both student representatives and people who hire them. It's obvious the concerns are similar, particularly as to what is needed to improve the program.

I share your view. This program is highly appreciated because it specifically meets a need of employers who want to help the most vulnerable people in our society. At the same time, it helps students and contributes to their training. These are two important interrelated dimensions in our society that deserve to be fully recognized.

It seems to me that you are not here to specify which options you are going to choose but to let us know what options are available. Three options were presented. First, an increase of the jobs. God knows how many applications are rejected! It's obvious there is a great need in that regard. There's also the issue of the duration of the placement. I think this matter was appropriately dealt with. Mr. Hare did this very well. Then there's a consensus among students and those who hire them on the issue of minimum wage.

The question is addressed to the three of you, but more particularly to Mr. Hare.

Did you measure or did you design any measuring tools to establish the best salary to pay under these circumstances? For example, is it the median salary of a region? Is it a salary set within

the range between the median salary and the minimum wage? Did you consider this issue? We will have to debate it and, indeed, I think it's important.

[English]

Mr. David Hare: Again, based on minimum wage.... I don't actually have the statistics for what various recipients of the funding from the program have paid out. While the amount that is provided as a wage supplement to employers in the case of for-profit is 50% of the minimum wage and in the case of not-for-profit is 100% of the minimum wage, employers are able to pay above that. An organization will pay above the minimum wage for our placement students in recognition of the challenges facing students and the need for a decent wage.

I don't have the particular data, and that might be something that HRSD might be able to provide. Unfortunately, I don't have that comparison.

But I think there also has to be a recognition that there is disparity, obviously, between the provinces on what the minimum wage is and that minimum wage really doesn't live up to the name "minimum wage". It doesn't provide the minimum living wage, particularly when you're given not only the cost of living, but also the massive tuition fees we see across the country.

I don't have that specific data right now, but it would be interesting to see.

•(1210)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Do you have a further supplementary? Proceed.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: You will understand that for us, this is inescapable, as we saw a little earlier. We have to discuss the related costs. It's very important to me to be able to better support students and employers in the context of a program which is so appreciated and meaningful. I would like you to tell us about any further ideas you may have about this. You can even do it later on, perhaps next week. Does your organization have any suggestions? If not, we will debate the matter between us. However, it would be very helpful to have your views. I am not only talking to Mr. Hare, but also to Ms. Merriam and Mr. Johnstone.

[English]

Mr. David Hare: The solutions as far as the program is concerned would be to increase the amount of wage subsidy that is provided. But that doesn't solve the problem for students—and this might be a bit off topic—who don't happen to get a summer career placement. Again, this comes back to an issue of minimum wage. There is minimum wage set by the provinces, but there needs to be a recognition that to not just live off minimum wage, but also pay tuition fees while not being able to undertake the same number of work hours during the course of study, minimum wage is not going to cut it.

So the solution would be to look at an increase to the wage supplement as an incentive to employers to increase the amount they pay, but I think a broader instrument that would have more far-reaching effects would be discussion around examining what an appropriate minimum living wage is.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: Could I add something? It gets back to one of the questions that was asked around rural access.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Excuse me, Ms. Merriam. Perhaps I can better explain my question. I think the other two elements are of a political nature. This is why I didn't mention them. Costs can be measured based on the figures StatsCan people will give us when they come to the committee. The people from this area can evaluate the minimum wage. But you shouldn't think I am ignoring the other two elements. I am not.

I am sorry, Ms. Merriam, please go on.

[*English*]

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: I guess my comment was supplementary to that, in that it may not be the need to.... Certainly, increasing the minimum wage might be one thing, but there was a comment around people accessing and being able to get to work from rural communities. Part of the problem is the need to have a transportation allowance, so that might be something to think about.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): All right, thank you.

We'll proceed to Ms. Davies, please.

Ms. Libby Davies: I have just a brief follow-up question.

One of the groups in my community that did receive funding—finally—was the law students' advice and referral program. It's an example of how important this program is, because lots of people, unfortunately, have to rely on law students due to cutbacks in legal aid. It's a good experience for the law students, but lots of people have nowhere else to go but to law students for advice and referrals, and yet one of the criteria in the program is that you have to be under 30. What we heard from this program is that some law students, particularly, are older now, and unfortunately some of the people who were applying got cut out.

I wonder whether the three representatives here today have any comment about 30 being one of the criteria. Clearly there are lots of students under 30, and we could hire everybody and still wouldn't be meeting the demand. But should we actually be looking to extend the criteria around age? If you're a student, okay, you're a student, and there are mature students who go back to school. That's really important to encourage and support. They do get cut out of this because of the age criteria, and I was just wondering if you had any suggestions or ideas about that.

•(1215)

Mr. David Hare: Absolutely. I'm not familiar with the initial idea behind why it was set in there in the first place, but we do see changing demographics within post-secondary institutions—particularly, as you say, the people who study professional programs. Given the cost of education, folks tend to be dragging out education somewhat longer to try to accommodate those costs. If you add a professional degree to that, you're quite likely to be over 30. You have folks who go back to pursue education through retraining and who would benefit perhaps from taking a placement program.

Again, while I can't say with any certainty what numbers we're looking at, I don't think it would be a devastating impact, but you are limiting the ability to provide that experience, in the case of legal

aid, to folks who may not have considered pursuing a different stream from the traditional field in law, and also providing a service to the community that would otherwise be unavailable.

So I definitely think a re-examination of the age criteria is in order, given the changing nature of post-secondary education in the country.

Ms. Libby Davies: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Are you happy with that answer?

Ms. Libby Davies: Yes, unless the others would like to make a comment. I addressed it to all three.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Would someone else like to chime in on that one?

Mr. Walter Johnstone: From my perspective, the age limit isn't... [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...but if that were addressed, it would open the door for us to have a better demographic representation of the student population.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: From my perspective, if we had more mature students it would certainly assist us. We might not have to have quite as lengthy an orientation process. But I don't know, I'd have to think about that; it certainly bears thinking about.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Thank you.

We'll now move on to Mr. Devolin.

Mr. Barry Devolin: One of the issues that I think our committee is wrestling with is the formula that determines how many dollars per constituency, based on the number of students and on the student unemployment rate in that riding. The question is, how do you account for where the students live? We're going to find out from Statistics Canada, but I suspect it's on your taxes at the end of the year, where you say where you lived on December 31. So a student who's actually from Haliburton, who's going to Trent or Sir Sandford in Peterborough, if they claim that as their residence.... In the summer they move back to Haliburton, but the dollars are still in Peterborough.

What we've heard is that some employers over the years have hired students through this program and had a good experience, but all of a sudden the funding formula changes, and they don't get approved at the last minute. They feel ripped off, in a sense; they feel that they had a partnership, and they held up their end of the deal, which was to create a job, to create meaningful work experience, and all of a sudden that disappears. It creates confusion among employers.

To the folks from Peterborough, I'm wondering whether you're aware, even anecdotally, of situations like this, that have occurred either in Peterborough or in one of the neighbouring ridings, perhaps Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, where there were...given that Fleming almost straddles the line.

Are you aware of situations where bona fide community organizations have done this for many years and then all of a sudden lost their money but don't understand why?

Mr. Walter Johnstone: I'm not, personally, but speaking to the jurisdiction question, when we look at candidates for the water taxi, for example, their place of residence isn't generally one of the criteria we look at.

Accessibility to be able to come to work is a criterion that we look at, but whether they're living at home with their parents, within commuting distance, and it happens to be across a boundary line doesn't really enter into our judgment.

• (1220)

Mr. Barry Devolin: I have one other quick question, if I have time.

In terms of the application process and the deadlines, one of the ideas that has been put forward is that in the program we should just push all the dates back 30 days, that everything should happen 30 days sooner so that everyone has an answer 30 days sooner. Does that sound reasonable to you? Do you think it should be more or less? I'd like a quick answer from all three.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: Yes, I think 30 days would be fine for us, for an organization like ours.

Mr. Walter Johnstone: It's the same for the water taxi. It would allow us a bigger pool to draw from.

Mr. David Hare: Again, I don't see any major problem with pushing the application deadline back 30 days—or forward 30 days, it would be.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): All right. It seems we've come to a natural conclusion. I'll just give one opportunity: does any member at the table have one supplementary question before we adjourn today?

Mr. Lessard, please proceed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: I would like to give each of our guests the opportunity to comment on their situation and on the prospects of this program. Our meeting is coming to an end. Thus I am asking you to use what little time is left to add things, to give a more complete view or to mention new elements.

[*English*]

Mr. Walter Johnstone: I would commend the program to you and just reinforce the comments as to how important that program is, not just to the students in our community but also to the communities as a whole, and that the changes to the program, whether they're well-intentioned improvements or otherwise, be communicated to the communities at the earliest possible time. But you're working with what I would say is a very successful program, and those changes should be of a minor nature.

Mrs. Dawn Berry Merriam: I would echo everything that Walter has said just now. The other thing I'd emphasize is the role this program plays in helping young people get meaningful experience and probably set their course towards a profession that they might not have, had they not had the experience.

Mr. David Hare: In closing, just to reiterate, while the program has been quite successful, there are a number of areas where there is definitely room for improvement, to provide a more valuable experience for students, and again, for the organization or the employer. Obviously I appreciate the discussion and the questions today, raising issues that I wasn't aware of that definitely look like they need to be addressed.

So I wish the committee good luck in its review of this, and I look forward to hearing what recommendations come out of it, because I'm interested in knowing.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Forseth): Thank you.

It looks like our proceedings have come to a conclusion today. Eventually our committee will be producing a report, and that report will be available on the committee website.

Also, if you want to follow the proceedings, eventually the transcripts of all the hearings will be available on the committee website, as well, under the committee section of www.parl.gc.ca.

Thank you very much for your presentations today in helping us at the committee.

The meeting is adjourned.

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