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Mr. Leon Benoit

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. We'll start the meeting.

We're here today, at first until about 5 o'clock, to deal with the issue of Service Canada. This is our second meeting on that issue. At that time we will break. I understand we have bells at 5:15. If that is the case, we'll break at 5 o'clock so we have 15 minutes to deal with two or three issues that the committee should deal with.

I'll introduce Ms. Flumian. I'll allow her to introduce the other witnesses we have with us today to give us more information and to answer our questions on the issue of Service Canada. We, of course, are dealing with Service Canada within a more in-depth study of the estimates, something that is within the mandate of this committee. We feel a responsibility on this committee to do that.

We will get right to the witnesses for today. If you have an opening statement, Ms. Flumian, please present it. If anyone else does, just introduce them and, please, go ahead.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for having us back once again as you continue your study of the Service Canada initiative.

We do consider this, as I said last time, a very important opportunity to continue the dialogue you began with us at the last meeting.

[Translation]

At our last visit, on April 19, we had the opportunity to present our vision of Service Canada. We are delighted once again to have the opportunity to discuss Service Canada and to answer your questions.

[English]

Today I have representatives of three core organizations that are forming part of this new initiative of Service Canada. I have colleagues with me from Human Resources and Skills Development, from Social Development Canada, and from Public Works and Government Services. I also have a colleague from the Treasury Board. All of us will be pleased to provide you with further information on the roles these departments are playing and the architecture they are providing in this initiative.

However, before I begin with them, we thought it would be useful to give you again a brief introduction of the service transformation in Canada. Therefore, the first thing I would like to do is turn to Helen

McDonald, who is the chief information officer at the Treasury Board Secretariat, to talk about the initiatives that have led us to Service Canada.

Ms. Helen McDonald (Chief Information Officer, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good afternoon. I'm Helen McDonald and I'm the acting chief information officer for the Government of Canada Treasury Board Secretariat. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today to give you a quick overview of three of the key antecedents for Service Canada: the Service Canada pilots, Government On-Line, and the service improvement initiative.

First are the Service Canada pilots. In 1999 Treasury Board mandated the Service Canada initiative to build a new service face for the Government of Canada, offering citizens choice of access across three integrated one-stop portals: the telephone at 1 800 O-Canada, the Internet at Canada.gc.ca, and an in-person network of Service Canada access centres, which included 122 centres across the country, many of which were in the offices of Human Resources Development Canada, as it was known then.

[Translation]

The core network of HRDC Service Canada access centres offered pathfinding services for federal programs. The evaluation proved that the concept was well received but the concept, as implemented, was too limited. Canadians want more than simply one-stop pathfinding services. They want one-stop convenient access to all relevant government services, with as much service as possible at the first point of contact.

[English]

Second is the Government On-Line initiative.

[Translation]

Government On-line was launched by the 1999 Speech from the Throne, which called for the government to become a model user of information technology and the Internet to connect to citizens.

[English]

Government On-Line aimed to provide Canadians with online access to improve citizen focus services any time, anywhere, and in the official language of their choice. The target was to move the most commonly used government services onto the Internet by the end of 2005.

The funding for this initiative accelerated electronic service delivery and supported the redesign of the main government portal, the Canada Site. It was also used to develop citizen-focused websites that cut across program and jurisdictional lines. In effect, we began to look at the web face of the government as a whole, and from the perspective of the client.

The third antecedent was the service improvement initiative. Launched in 2000, it called for a significant improvement in citizen satisfaction with federal services by 2005. Departments and agencies were required to publish service quality standards, to measure client satisfaction, and to report on the results. The focus was on improving service quality on all channels, not simply the electronic channel.

The Service Canada pilots, Government On-Line, and the service improvement initiative have made finding government services easier and have given Canadians new choices. We need to deepen this work to allow Canadians to complete more of their business with government in one stop.

[Translation]

Citizens want us to simplify their experience and to be more accessible. As a government, we are also looking to improve the efficiency of our operations. Service Canada responds to these pressures.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your time this afternoon. I would be pleased to take any questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there other presentations to come?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: There are short ones from each of our foundation partners, Mr. Chair.

Donna Wood will speak to public access programs. Donna is currently the director general of public access programs for Public Works and Government Services Canada, and they will be a foundation piece of what is Service Canada as well.

Donna.

[Translation]

Ms. Donna Wood (Director General, Public Access Programs, Department of Public Works and Government Services): Good day.

Thank you for this invitation.

•(1540)

[English]

In order for you to really understand where we're going with service delivery, I thought it might be helpful for you to hear some practical examples of service delivery that is working well today.

Technology and process have been key enablers for 1 800 O-Canada and the Canada Site, but a couple of basic rules of thumb are what really keep us on track. We have to remember citizens have a right to information and services, that citizen satisfaction is critical, and that citizens have two perspectives: they're both user and taxpayer.

The Canada Site and 1 800 O-Canada are two strong services that we will use as foundation pieces to establish Service Canada. Both have a proud history of receiving annual international recognition as world-class leaders delivering both quality and value. Our plan is to build on these practices, standards, and the citizen-centric approach that we've built on so far.

1 800 O-Canada and the Canada Site are all about helping people find the information they need and providing assistance when necessary. The most important thing is that we know how all the pieces fit together. We provide comprehensive, relevant information, whether it's about finding the nearest in-person centre, ordering a booklet on the green project, or learning about programs for students and youth.

When we deliver services, our rules of thumb help us ensure that we focus on being respectful of legislation and citizens' rights, ensuring awareness and accessibility, designing services for ease of use, and offering a choice of channels.

We're continuously asking, listening, and learning what citizens want. We use a wide range of methodologies to help us understand needs and allow us to improve service delivery on an ongoing basis. That would include public opinion research, usability testing, client satisfaction surveys, and participating at fairs and exhibitions.

We measure our performance and publish our standards. We respond to inquiries quickly and efficiently. Citizens can expect our service to be consistent and easily accessed. We respond to citizens with courtesy and professionalism. If we don't have an answer, we do the research and get back to the citizen within a day. We're always thorough in defining the needs of the citizen and providing as complete an answer as possible.

The Canada Site, originally launched in 1995, has led the way in implementing Common Look and Feel for federal websites and introducing the Government On-Line approach to organizing information and linking to services. The work done for the online environment has allowed us to establish horizontal governance models to evolve service delivery on all channels in a strategic, coordinated approach, collaborating across departments, sharing our experiences and assets, and making unified investments.

1 800 O-Canada, established in the early 1980s as Reference Canada, has evolved over time to become the primary point of contact for the Government of Canada, on the channel still most popular with Canadians. The hallmark of this organization is its world-class client satisfaction results, which have been over 80% for the last four years.

The cornerstone of the organization is its ability to collect, organize, and update information in a way that cross-references and links related programs. The future of the organization lies in the expansion of the service to offer general inquiry services for all federal organizations and developing partnerships with other levels of government, in cooperation and as part of the Service Canada family.

The growth of both services has been quite significant over the last five years. 1 800 O-Canada has more than tripled the number of programs it tracks and provides information on, and the average talk time has almost doubled, as we have more information to offer each caller. The Canada Site's traffic has almost doubled, and e-mail is growing exponentially.

Training individuals to answer these queries includes 12 weeks of formal training, plus constant, ongoing training as information and techniques are updated. We've been very successful in finding the right kind of helpful people by recruiting individuals with specific competencies and skills, such as communication skills, tact, diplomacy, the ability to handle stress, and the ability to multi-task.

We're making service delivery decisions with a citizen-centric eye, ensuring, as I said earlier, ease of access, offering accurate and comprehensive relevant information, and using taxpayers' money responsibly. If we do our jobs well, we'll get the results we want and provide the kinds of services citizens have the right to expect.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wood.

Is there one more presentation?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Mr. Chair, we're hoping that each of my colleagues up here could speak for two minutes about the various roles they perform, if that's okay. We'll keep them to the two minutes.

The next presenter will be Donna Achimov, who's the assistant deputy minister for service delivery at Social Development Canada. She will speak about multi-channel integration that is currently taking place.

• (1545)

[Translation]

Ms. Donna Achimov (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery, Department of Social Development): Hello and thank you.

My name is Donna Achimov and I am Acting Assistant Deputy Minister for Service Delivery, at Social Development Canada. As such, I am responsible for service delivery on behalf of my department, one of the founders of the Service Canada initiative.

[English]

My team represents many of the front-line staff who provide services to Canadians on a daily basis, such as the delivery of the Canada Pension Plan and the old age security benefits. We have a network of 23 call centres that answer more than 50 million calls a year, which is close to 80% of all the calls made to the Government of Canada. The Canadians Gateway, which is part of the Canada Site, is also an area where we provide online services and information on benefits to Canadians. In addition, we maintain the integrity of the social insurance numbers and the social insurance register.

Our department has been engaged for a number of years in providing improved services for Canadians. It was this context that resulted in HRDC's transformation of services to Canadians, which included the modernizing services for Canadians initiative. At the

same time, Treasury Board Secretariat and others have been analyzing the service delivery infrastructure across government and assessing how to make more of it more responsive to citizens.

By the end of 2004, we had achieved a number of key milestones. More than 170 of our individual departmental websites have consolidated into one easy-to-use website for citizens. Likewise, my team started transforming 23 independent call centres, representing income security programs, employment insurance, and student loans. This resulted in more calls and standardized hours of service across the country, and we did all of this through better management rather than new resources.

During all these changes, one thing has remained paramount: our commitment to ensuring continuity of service to Canadians. During the current transition, Canadians continue to count on receiving timely information and benefits.

Thank you very much. Merci.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just to demonstrate that you can work at Service Canada without being a female, we have Mr. Nixon with us today. Mr. Charles Nixon is the assistant deputy minister for employment insurance operations at Human Resources and Skills Development. I think he'll say a few words about the EI program and some of the changes we've made there.

Mr. Charles Nixon (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment Insurance Operations, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): Thank you for providing this opportunity for me to discuss the EI program and the work being undertaken to provide services to Canadians on the Internet.

[Translation]

Employment Insurance has been a key element of Canada's social safety net for the past 60 years. The EI program is delivered through 320 in-person sites of which 105 process claims.

In 2004-05, 2.9 million Canadians received \$12.8 billion in benefits at a time when they needed assistance the most; 84 per cent of recipients were served within 28 days of filing a claim for benefits.

[English]

We know these benefits are important to Canadians, so we believe we need to get things right the first time; that is, we need to ensure that the right client receives the right benefit at the right time. We recognized a few years ago that with growing complexities of EI, with resource issues, and with different approaches being taken by the regions, we had to take action. What we wanted were sustainable improvements, not short-term solutions.

As well, citizens expect and deserve timeliness, fairness, knowledge, competence, and results when dealing with the Government of Canada programs and services. In fact, Canadians are asking the government to provide better, faster, and more convenient services on the Internet.

We have responded. In keeping with the Government On-Line initiative, we've been investing in service transformation through the development of award-winning web-based tools. By opening up the Internet service channel, we are providing opportunities for all our partners to interact with us over the web 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. In fact, in 2002 we introduced Internet services for citizens to apply for employment insurance benefits on the Internet using a tool called Appli-web. This includes interactive fact-finding technology to tailor questions to an applicant's circumstances and to reduce callbacks. In 2004-05 we received 85% of our initial applications via this Appli-web tool, totalling 1.85 million claims, with about 50% received from our offices and the remaining 50% from other virtual sites.

We are also reducing the paper burden for employers by giving them the opportunity to transmit employment information, the record of employment, securely over the Internet. In fact, in 2004-05 we received 560,000 records of employment electronically. As well, in 2004-05 we enabled Canadians to submit their biweekly claimant reports over the Internet, and we received about 22%, or 4 million reports, in this fashion. Client satisfaction surveys show that 99% of all clients who submitted their biweekly reports over the Internet prefer it to the telephone service.

We will also be offering additional new tools in the future. Claimants will be able to review their EI information online, eliminating the need for them to call to get it. Also, those who wish to appeal a decision will be able to do so on the Internet. As well, medical practitioners will be able to send medical certificates securely over the Internet.

• (1550)

[Translation]

The work that we are doing to modernize and transform the way in which we provide services to Canadians is in step with the direction of the government with the Service Canada initiative.

In essence, it is the next logical step to our transformation and it will build upon successes achieved to date.

[English]

We continue to validate and monitor our service to Canadians on an ongoing basis to make sure we are fulfilling our commitments to Canadians, to ensure they receive quality programs and services, not only for EI but for other government services as well, when, where, and how they want it.

[Translation]

Our primary objective is excellent service to Canadians. By increasing our Web-based tools Canadians who choose to interact with us online will have access to high-quality, easy and flexible EI services.

At the same time, the government will gain efficiencies thereby enabling us to invest in improving front-head service for clients.

[English]

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Last but not least,

[Translation]

I would like to introduce Nicole Barbeau, Assistant Deputy Minister at Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Quebec Region.

Ms. Nicole Barbeau (Assistant Deputy Minister, Quebec Region, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am here to present Service Canada's in-person services and answer any questions you may have.

Quebec currently has 460 service officers in 78 Service Canada centres trained to provide information on all Government of Canada programs and services. In order to broaden the range of services for Canadians and add the necessary resources, we are currently developing a regional staffing and training plan with our union partner. This plan includes transferring employees who process employment insurance claims to front-line services.

To test this initiative, we have set up a prototype Service Canada centre in Verdun—an area of Montreal. We began by identifying the community's characteristics and the organizations serving the area to determine how we would work together. This approach was designed to address the community's needs, and employees were trained to meet these needs.

The Verdun centre now offers services for all citizens—not strictly employment insurance and income security program clients. Citizens who visit the centre are greeted by officers who identify their needs and their ability to use automated services. Citizens may be directed to the self-service area, where they can personally research the information they need or transact with the government over the Internet or by telephone. As you will see in the photos, several computers have been made available to citizens.

Citizens who are unable to search for services themselves will be assisted by an officer, meaning that an officer will search for the information or teach citizens how to go about it. This element is particularly important as it gives citizens an opportunity to learn the technology and enhances their ability to use it. Officers are constantly on duty in the service area to answer questions and help citizens, regardless of the department or program in question. For instance, in the spring, we organized income tax clinics for seniors with the Canada Revenue Agency. These clinics were very successful.

We are also in the process of setting up itinerant services in resource regions outside of Montreal, allowing us to extend our current service network to 97 remote communities that will be served by Service Canada officers. The same approach will also be developed in the other regions across the country. Montreal is also home to the Café Jeunesse, a specialized Service Canada centre created for young people between the ages of 15 and 35. The services are adapted for them in line with the new knowledge economy. The kit provided to you includes the flyer describing Café Jeunesse services. Over 20,000 young people received services during the past year. This type of service could be offered in all of Canada's major urban centres where there is a significant number of young people.

To summarize, there are more than 320 physical offices across the country which offer a wide range of government services, while others will be specialized to talk to specific citizens' groups; more and more services are provided outside our offices to meet the needs of remote communities and the Canadians who live there; and finally, officers ensure the convergence of the various service delivery channels and provide assistance by creating links with in-person, telephone and Internet services.

The overall approach will allow us to broaden the range of Government of Canada services to citizens. It will also allow us to meet their needs and expectations with respect to the government services they receive.

Thank you.

• (1555)

[English]

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you all very much for your presentations.

We'll go directly to questions. We have about an hour in total for questions, starting with Mr. Preston for seven minutes.

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much for coming and visiting us today, and thank you so much for all the paper.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: It's our pleasure to serve.

Mr. Joe Preston: We got to learn the essence of Service Canada at the last visit, and I thank you for that. It's been most helpful.

I think we around the table shared some of the experiences we've had so far with 1 800 O-Canada and some of the services that are already offered.

How informed do you believe the public is at this moment about where we're headed with Service Canada? Service Canada has now moved out of the pilot project stage and into reality. It's something that's really starting to happen and it's what you've all explained fairly quickly—300-and-some sites across Canada for EI applications and for other things. What are we doing right now to tell the public we're doing this?

Ms. Donna Achimov: We are currently in the process of developing our communication strategies. We are launching and

doing things in a step process. We are leveraging current information in terms of supporting the web and using our call centres. We've avoided doing a massive launch with fanfare, because we just wanted operations to continue rolling out as is. We do recognize that we need to have public awareness and information campaigns, and we are working very closely with a number of government departments to let people know.

Specifically, we've just opened seven new passport intake offices up in the Yukon and elsewhere in the north, we've issued press releases to the local communities, and we've done some local advertising to let people know about the services that are available. But we're taking a very measured and step-by-step approach in terms of just delivering good service, and we've shied away, to be very honest, from very proactive and flashy advertising.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: I might add that there are some aspects of what we are still doing that require us to pull together different organizations and different organizational cultures to try to instill a sense of the standardization for how we're going to serve citizens across the country. That goes from the hours of services and the way we operate to the way in which we will serve citizens.

We're in the process, the government having made an announcement on this initiative in the budget, of collecting those pieces as quickly as we can and working the bugs out of them so, when we actually go to launch, we don't raise expectations for citizens we can't meet.

Mr. Joe Preston: You mentioned going to launch. When do you foresee that? Give me an approximate date; I won't hold you to it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We are progressively putting together the plans we have on all the dimensions people have spoken of today. We're also working with partner departments—there are actually 12 of them—and we are trying to understand just how we're going to be putting these pieces together. We're at the stage where on some aspects our rollout plans are well along and in some other cases we're just starting to put the pieces together. I am not at the stage where we can give you a date yet.

• (1600)

Mr. Joe Preston: You have a plan and you're working towards it. You see it happening.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We're working towards a plan, yes.

Mr. Joe Preston: You'll pardon us if some of our constituency offices start sharing the good news earlier than you do.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We understand that may very well be a possibility as we try to relieve some of the pressures you're currently facing from people calling you when they can't get through to us, yes.

Mr. Joe Preston: As I said, we're using it actively now, at least 1 800 O-Canada and the online services, through the constituency offices. But we're finding it's just as easy to sometimes give that information to the constituent and help them through it too.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Yes, and we're ready to take on some of that for you. We're just not ready with all of our consolidated services. The seamless nature of what we spoke of at our last meeting will still take us a little bit of time to put together.

I might add that rather than deciding what we're going to be doing to announce this to Canadians in putting together the service offerings we're actually working on, we have done lots of focus group testing with out client groups to ensure, as we go forward, that we're doing something that not just sounds good to us but actually works for the citizens we're out there trying to deal with. In terms of the unemployed, youth, seniors, and various client groupings across the land, we have been actively, over the course of the last two years, doing a lot of that investigation to make sure as we go forward....

Of course, we're doing it across the country, because there are variations on how people want their service and so on and so forth. Rural and remote, all those parts of the country that may be underserved now—we're now working to tailor our offerings to those Canadians.

Mr. Joe Preston: Obviously, it's a kind of tri-pronged approach. You're online, you're on the telephone, and you have in-person centres. The telephone seems to be up and running to capacity in the call centres you have. Are you still struggling to handle the capacity of calls you're getting, or are you sitting there waiting for calls to catch up to the capacity you've developed?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We have lots of capacity, and we have even more calls than we have capacity for.

Mr. Joe Preston: So you have to continue to build?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Yes, and part of our continuous improvement initiatives over the last year—and I think we spoke a little about this at our last appearance—is that with the same resources we had last year, simply by managing our call centres in a different fashion, we have been actually able to take one million more calls than we did a year ago on the basis of that different management. Primarily, rather than treating our 23 call centres we manage across the three departments as individual centres, we started to manage them as a totality across the enterprise. Therefore, the economies, the best practices, the learning, and the being able to load-level during those high call times have led us to being able to manage in a better fashion.

Clearly, Canadians' preferred channel is the telephone. We're conscious of that and we're conscious, as we're providing those services, about making sure we continue to grow that capacity. The addition of 1 800 O-Canada is a tremendous asset to us in terms of the foundational work they have already done in the training and in the way they've organized their material, the way that material is available, as you well know, for people to access. If they know their way through that, that can go a long way in serving the needs of a lot of the callers we're currently getting.

Mr. Joe Preston: I believe in Ms. McDonald's opening remarks we heard that the target was to move the most commonly used

government services onto the Internet by the end of 2005. Will we meet that target?

Ms. Helen McDonald: From what I understand—and Public Works is tracking this—the majority of the services are on now to some extent, but some of them have not reached the level of functionality they are targeting for the end of 2005. There's a bit of a watch list for a few stragglers.

Mr. Joe Preston: Okay. But as we're doing it, are we finding new ones that should be there, or is that part of it? Is it an ongoing setup?

Ms. Helen McDonald: The focus is less on finding new ones that should be there, and making sure those go up in a way that takes advantage of where we can be common, and where we can share learning with each another.

Mr. Joe Preston: You also stated that departments and agencies are required to publish service quality standards to measure client satisfaction. Has that been done? Is that available to us?

Ms. Helen McDonald: The publication is either on their website or through their departmental performance reports. I regret to say you can't necessarily find the one and the other, but when you look at the two of them, when last measured, based on the 2003-04 DPR, 63% of our core departments have service standards published, which is not as good as it should be.

● (1605)

Mr. Joe Preston: We spoke about EI online. I think some 85% of claims are now coming in online. That seems to be a really high number to me. Are they coming in online from out of your own centres?

Mr. Charles Nixon: As I mentioned in my remarks, about half of that 85% is coming to us from virtual sites, whether it's somebody's basement, their son's house, CAP sites, or the like. A significant number of those people are choosing not to come to our office. It's more convenient for them to go to some other site or their own computer system and apply that way.

The other half are coming to our offices and using the systems application, the Appli-web, to fill out their applications. Hopefully our staff are assisting them in discovering how to use this tool, if it's the first time they've used it. If not, perhaps they have some facility with filling it out.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Preston. You're well into overtime there.

Madam Thibault is next, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ladies and gentleman, thank you for being here today.

The documents which you distributed, particularly those provided by Ms. Achimov and Ms. Barbeau, employ expressions with which I am fairly familiar, such as “working to create better ways to deliver service”, and “to provide assistance in the transition towards self-service”. This approach is absolutely appropriate in dealing with some Canadians. However, I would like to know what you are doing for those who cannot use self-service systems because they are illiterate, for example. You are more familiar than I am with the various statistics on illiteracy in Canada. I do not have the statistics with me, but I do know that the numbers are fairly significant.

I do not need an answer from everybody, but perhaps Ms. Barbeau, or somebody else, would like to comment. I would like to know to what degree you are concerned by this issue. In light of this situation, how are you able to forecast savings of \$2.55 billion? Are you going to be making the savings at the expense of those who, for various reasons, cannot use self-service systems? That is my first question.

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: I can assure you that service is, of course, a primary concern for us. As I said earlier, we assist citizens in their transactions. As you know, a certain percentage of the population is illiterate; when this is the case, we can, for example, fill out the person's application for employment insurance. That is no problem. However, we really do try to encourage people to try using the Internet. We take the time to show them how it works, so that it will be easier for them the next time.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Yes, but not everybody can go to a major urban centre, Ms. Barbeau, and I am not just referring to Montreal. I come from one of Quebec's most beautiful regions. Not everybody in my riding, Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, is able to go to Rimouski or other service centres. How do you intend on providing service to people in small communities, without their being penalized in any way? There are, of course, other beautiful communities elsewhere than in my region.

I know that you offer online service, and I know that people can receive assistance in using the Internet if they go to your centre. But what about those who cannot go to your centre, and who do not have access to the Internet? You are fully aware of the fact that, in the regions, not everybody has access to the Internet. I am not talking about broadband, there are still several regions which do not even have narrow-band Internet service. What is being done to ensure equality, to ensure that they have access to service of the same quality?

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: In Quebec, as in the rest of the country, we have installed additional service points. We go to where there is a need, we go to where Canadians are living.

For example, in your region, we are going to set up some more mobile service points. Subject to population requirements, we will go to the region once a week or once a month, and provide the same services from our mobile service points that we offer in our office.

● (1610)

Ms. Louise Thibault: And by doing this, you are going to save \$2.55 billion. That sounds great, I will be following your progress with a great deal of interest. I must say, however, that I was astonished to learn that you planned to make savings on this front. We should meet up again in a year's time to discuss your savings.

My second question relates to human resources; I would like to discuss skills transfer and how your employees will acquire new skills. What will be the cost of skills upgrading? What will your attrition rate be? Will some people be unable to carry out these tasks and, therefore, have to leave their jobs? While I have no reason to think that it will not be the case, could you confirm that all of your employees are capable of taking on a new role and being trained in a different skill set? If they are, there will be no attrition, no job losses, and everything will go smoothly.

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: We are working on a plan for human resources. Of course, there are several parts to this plan. One part deals with those employees who, in any case, will be leaving the organization during the coming years. Some employees already have the skills needed for carrying out these new tasks. For such employees, we, together with the union, are working on a plan that would enable us to make the needed transfers as the situation requires. Of course, once employment insurance has been fully automated, all the transfers will probably have been done.

There are also employees who do not have the needed skills. We have a training and development plan to provide them with these skills.

Ms. Louise Thibault: You should be taking care of everyone. Generally, all your people should be fairly well...

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: I made the rounds of the 79 centres in Quebec and met all the employees, and let me tell you that people are very keen on the idea of offering much more elaborate services on behalf of the government.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Mr. Nixon, on the first page of your document, you give the number of applications that were dealt with and you say “In 2004-2005, 2.9 million Canadians received...”. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer employment insurance beneficiaries, due to the criteria. I do not have an exact figure, but this is not the figure that matters. It is the percentage that is rather high. I do not want to open a debate on this, but I want to know one thing. Now that there are far fewer employment insurance beneficiaries, where did you place the human resources that previously dealt with them?

Mr. Charles Nixon: In 2004-05, we had the same resources as in 2002-03. I said in my comments that in the past there were issues with resources, and this is why we felt that service delivery needed improvement.

Ms. Louise Thibault: So this is mainly due to a decrease in your resources.

Mr. Charles Nixon: No.

Ms. Louise Thibault: You still have the same resources even though the overall number of beneficiaries has gone down.

Mr. Charles Nixon: Yes, but the program is becoming increasingly complicated. Procedures involve more steps, and so on.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Are procedures becoming more complicated for you, or for the beneficiaries, or for both?

Mr. Charles Nixon: Processing applications is more complicated. The policy requires added steps in our procedures to improve the delivery of services to Canadians.

Ms. Louise Thibault: You said that 84 per cent of beneficiaries were served within 28 days. I would like to know how long the process can take when delays are incurred.

Mr. Charles Nixon: In some cases, there is quite a long delay. Sometimes, it is because of a missing piece of information. In some cases, it has to come from the employer.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Do you think that things will be better with a new system, and that this should become the standard procedure?

Mr. Charles Nixon: Yes, I think that with automation, we should be able to work more quickly and to deliver services more promptly. We are currently analyzing the 16 per cent of cases that were not processed in due time, or within 28 days. We must get a better grasp of the reasons why problems arise, in order to improve the service this year.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Of course, you know that for someone who is broke, this is a very long delay.

• (1615)

Mr. Charles Nixon: I know it is, but in my opinion, our service delivery has never been so good. The use of electronic tools has greatly reduced the time it takes to deliver benefits.

Previously, an application for benefits involved an exchange through the mail. Even with cards, we had to make this exchange. Today, electronic tools and direct deposits have resulted in a reduction of 10 days in the time it takes for the benefits to be in the beneficiaries' bank account. It is much more efficient than before.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Merci, Madam Thibault.

Mr. Boshcoff is next, for nine minutes.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you very much.

At our previous meeting we talked about two areas: the impact on smaller communities and essentially decentralization versus centralization; and accessibility and disability issues. Now we have representatives from a number of organizations.

In reiterating the question, and the question of communicating the issue across governmental lines, you have a community somewhere under 200,000, which leads to several thousand communities of that size in our country. Some get some services now, and some don't. Is the task of this exercise to ensure greater uniformity and distribution of the capability of all those services to all those communities that don't have them now?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We have been working with our colleagues at the Treasury Board on this very issue over the course of the last two to three years. We're doing an analysis of services that are currently available across every community in Canada for the 12

departments that are intended to be part of the service delivery network.

It is our intent to provide better and broader access in terms of these federal services. Sometimes we will do that through our own offices. Sometimes we will do that through partnerships with other departments that are better placed than we are. Sometimes we will do that through partnerships with provincial governments and with municipal governments. In very rural and remote areas, we will sometimes partner with third parties.

For example, we are currently looking at northern Canada on how we might service native communities in a better fashion, generally through a relationship with the band office, where we would go in on a regular basis. We wouldn't have a permanent office there, but we'd go in on a regular basis, along with the other federal departments that would be providing heavy services to those communities.

We are currently trying to establish what the rollout strategy would look like, based on an analysis of where services currently exist and where areas are underserved. We would then figure out what we could do on our own, what we could legitimately do with other service points that already exist, and what we could do through third-party service providers.

We're conscious of the costs associated with that. We're conscious of the notion that if people already exist to provide core services, we would be adding to those services, because our notion is also a one-stop notion.

That is the plan we're currently working on, based on the analysis the Treasury Board has done over the course of the last few years that speaks to the federal departments. We are working with provincial jurisdictions through regional councils and federal councils across the country. We've now had discussions with every jurisdiction across the country. Some are closer to the vision that we have, and some are coming along. We're having that discussion across the entire country, so that when we're ready to present our rollout strategy to you for comments, it will have all of the aspects that you've talked about encompassed within it.

• (1620)

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: Okay. We know this is probably something that's viewed with trepidation, in that it could be a giant exercise in attrition that smaller communities may have concerns about, or it could be the ultimate in human satisfaction, where you would actually end up talking to someone who lives and breathes.

Again, there is an infrastructure that exists throughout Canada. Some people may see it as excessive or wasteful, but nonetheless, it exists. My concern is that there be some maintenance of the facilities and capabilities throughout the domain, as opposed to bringing it all back to larger metropolitan areas.

How are you going to be protected from the gravitational pull?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: On that very point, again, we have done a lot of work on understanding that the beauty of technology is such that even if we wanted to centralize, there really is no need to centralize. As the proposed Service Canada goes forward, it will be what its name implies, which is an organization that is supposed to serve Canadians, wherever they are.

Most of them do reside across the country as a result of that. Therefore, in terms of the work that we're doing, we would also look to build on the expertise that's available with our staff across the country. Some of those services can probably be provided in many locations across the country.

The old style, we would say, would have been to centralize or decentralize. With technology, Canadians don't actually need to know where we're located. We have a duty and a responsibility to understand the important balance of the population and the needs across this country and to therefore model ourselves accordingly.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: The segue to my questions on accessibility will be bridged with the aspect of linguistic diversity and addressing the multiplicity of languages that we're expected to respond to. Perhaps you could give a quick summary on that point.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Well, again this is an area where we understand that we have to always uphold the duality of the official languages policy of the country, so all of the services, where they're required in those official languages, will be provided in both official languages. And as I said last time, we are looking at expanding, in the very first tranche of what we're doing, minority language offerings to either French or English communities across the country. So let me say that up front, so that nobody misunderstands what I'm about to say next.

We are also looking at the success other countries have had, then, in offering services in other languages, and we know that we already have capability, for example, on the telephones. We have large call centre operations in places like Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, where just a survey of our own staff tells us that we have great potential in terms of other language offerings that would serve Canadians. So we are currently looking at the capabilities we have and what training it would take in a programmatic sense to get those individuals up to speed in terms of the programs we could offer in other languages.

One of the areas we've learned about from a place like Australia, for example, which we would look to see if we could roll out relatively quickly, would be minority language offerings for our seniors, those who have the toughest time learning either of Canada's official languages, so that we could help them apply for the various programming that would be available to them and so on. The same is probably true of the kinds of partnerships we would make in northern Canada, where aboriginal languages are very important in terms of being able to get in there and serve that population as well.

So we are constantly looking for opportunities based on our current staff, and of course, thinking about the kind of hiring we would do in the future that would allow us to reflect the needs of the citizens of Canada and the kind of service we're providing.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: This program has won international awards for its website. Is this the one?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We have many awards sitting at this table. I think from the work that 1 800 O-Canada has done to the work that much of Charles's branch is responsible for, we have won many GTEC gold awards, bronze awards, silver awards—but many, many gold ones, yes.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: You didn't bring any of them with you ?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We didn't, but we'd be happy on our next visit to share our medals with you. And we hope to keep winning many more as we break new ground in service delivery for Canadians.

Mr. Ken Boshcoff: So that kind of gives us, as parliamentarians, a benchmark in terms of where our programming and design stand worldwide. I think that's probably a good place to understand that we're not questioning you based on a bargain basement approach, that we have really some substantial intelligence here. And that leads me to a chance for you to explain the accessibility, electronically, by website or by program, through the various means, the various categories, of the disabled community to ensure that we are not only North American leaders but world leaders in understanding that there are many different approaches to disabled accessibility.

• (1625)

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Yes. Perhaps I can get Donna Achimov to say a few words, and I would also say that in setting these standards we're setting, as I said earlier, we're going to be constantly doing focus group testing and checking those Canadians we serve, the disabled community as well. The one thing we have learned about service organizations is that they create an appetite for even better service, so we want to get to the forefront and then stay at the forefront.

Donna.

The Chair: Could I ask you to keep your answer as short as possible, as concise as possible, as Mr. Boshcoff's time is up.

Ms. Donna Achimov: Yes.

In terms of designing all of our services, our preoccupation has always been to keep in mind disabled Canadians. So let me assure you—and my colleague Donna Wood, who's responsible for the Canada Site—that all of the design criteria have in mind alternative formats—and for people who are supporting those with disabilities. Not only do we have an aggressive approach to not launch anything on our website that isn't aggressively tested in alternative formats, but we also are putting out our publications, for example, in larger print for those people who have visual impairments and in Braille, as alternative formats.

We're now pleased with the number of our partner departments where we can aggregate and pull together meaningful information that is in support of people with disabilities.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Achimov.

Mr. Lauzon, seven minutes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the witnesses.

Ms. Flumian, the last time you were here, I expressed some concerns about the training of the front-end people, the people who are going to answer these inquiries, the point of first contact. We didn't have a whole lot of time to explore that, and I don't think we're going to have enough time, or a lot of time, in five minutes.

But let's say a client were to phone in and have an inquiry. First of all, if you're going to have, say, 12 or 15 or 25 departments or whatever it is you're going to ultimately have, how are these clerks going to be knowledgeable in all those aspects?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: I'm going to ask Madam Wood to answer the question.

Ms. Donna Wood: Perhaps I'll just explain how we do it currently with 1 800 O-Canada. We're providing information on over 3,600 programs. It's not the content we train on as the primary source; it's how to use the tools. So as you get the question, you hear what the person is asking, you probe, you ask, you ensure you understand, and then, through keywords and through searching, you get the information. The information is organized in a way that makes the linkages to related programs, so you can provide the full answer. The same strategy applies on the web services as well.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: In other words, someone phones in, and if I'm the inquiry clerk, if you're asking about an EI program, I call up EI on my screen. If you ask about an appeal process, I, as the clerk, go through the process.

Ms. Donna Wood: Absolutely. Our attention at 1 800 O-Canada is to have the general information and provide as much as we can about understanding the program. As soon as it gets to personal or very specific information, we do a hand-off to our colleagues in the EI centres, where they have the actual person's individual files.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Okay, let's say you're going through these 3,600 different programs. You're going to hand off a great number of these. How are you going to know, for example, just where to hand them off to?

Ms. Donna Wood: We have a team of people who spend a lot of time just checking the facts on those details. There's a team of about 45 people who do nothing but validate and verify that information across those programs. We have really strong linkages with the departments, the agencies, and even some of the provincial governments to make sure we have the right pieces.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: To be honest with you, I'm skeptical. Mr. Nixon and I discussed this the last time with regard to the EI telecentres. I have some experience with EI telecentres, and although there are statistics you could use to argue that 86% or 73% of the calls are answered, there is some conflicting data that suggest that—

• (1630)

Ms. Donna Wood: It would be fair to say not all government call centres perform at the same level today.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: That's right.

Ms. Donna Wood: Part of our strategy is to make those improvements, and that's what we're really focusing on, making sure

we get those kinds of improvements and that for the right type of question we're giving the right level of service.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: If I phone right now, what are the chances of my getting directly into one of the call centres for Service Canada ?

Ms. Donna Wood: Are you speaking about the 1 800 O-Canada piece?

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Yes.

Ms. Donna Wood: Then you're looking at 85% of the time getting answered within three rings.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Okay, and what percentage of calls would be abandoned?

Ms. Donna Wood: Our service target is 5%, and we're running about 3% on average.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Then 3% of people abandon their calls. How many calls do you have in a day?

Ms. Donna Wood: We have about 1.2 million to 1.4 million a year. My math isn't very good. That would be 3,500 to 5,000 a day, depending on the day of the week.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: How many of those calls that get through get referred somewhere else?

Ms. Donna Wood: I would say probably we're able to answer the specific question for about 50%. I'm guessing a little bit here, based on some experience. For the other 50% we would be explaining to the person the other programs they'd be looking for information on. We'd prepare them for that call and say this is the kind of information they will need when they get to Revenue Canada, to the employment office, and make sure they understand they have choices of channel, the kinds of information they're able to receive, and what they'd require to provide information in that exchange.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Service Canada has been going since 1999, I think I read. There was a pilot project in 1999?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: That's on information issues, not the phone capability, not the kinds of things we're talking about today.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: You have six years of experience now.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Are you going to answer calls that are strictly federal? Do you foresee answering provincial agencies or even municipal—

Ms. Donna Wood: I expect we'll be doing a little of everything. Predominantly we're going to focus on having the detailed information on federal programs. We're working very closely already with our provincial counterparts to make sure we're exchanging the right kind of information, with the level of detail that they're comfortable with our providing on their behalf, and vice versa. We're already doing those kinds of exchanges of information.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: How do you ascertain these figures you gave me, about 3% of abandoned calls? Do you have some studies, some figures?

Ms. Donna Wood: We have a lot of studies. We have a computerized management information system that tracks the incoming call traffic and tells us the actual distribution of calls that have been abandoned.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: So you have some supporting statistics?

Ms. Donna Wood: Absolutely, about 20 years' worth.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: Well, you probably have six that I'm interested in.

Ms. Donna Wood: I think we could do the six.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: It doesn't have to necessarily be six, but it'd be interesting to.... As I said, with a much lower volume of calls—I think Mr. Nixon can speak to this—I think you would be very pleased if for your EI telecentres your abandonment rate was only 3%.

Ms. Donna Wood: Yes.

Mr. Guy Lauzon: What are you doing that's so much better than the EI telecentres?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: This is exactly why the 1 800 O-Canada and public access programming are key to the foundation of Service Canada and this initiative. They are the best practice for the Government of Canada. Through the experience they have attained and the leadership they've shown in developing staff, the training modules, the relationships with other departments and other levels of government, we will learn from those best practices, and we are beginning to apply them already across the 23 call centres we run currently.

Charles, do you want to add?

Mr. Charles Nixon: Yes.

From the other perspective, we also want to make sure that if people want to get information in another way, we can provide that too. We're looking, as I mentioned in my remarks, at providing information on the web so that individuals can access where their situation stands. Can they look at when they're going to have been adjudicated, or when their next cheque is going to come? How much is it? What were the deductions? Can they change their direct deposit, etc.? This we can do, hopefully in the very near future.

We know, from analysis of the call centre information, that many of the calls we get are simply, where is my cheque, when is going to come, how much is it? If we can provide some of that information to those people who are online already, and they have an access point such that they can take it any time of the day or night, that will also alleviate some of the pressure on our call centres and allow us to address more calls.

•(1635)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.)): Thank you.

Mr. Godbout.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Godbout (Ottawa—Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am curious about one of your initiatives, the Café Jeunesse. I find it very interesting. I see that there is one in Montreal. I have a simple question: when will we have one in Orléans? This is a direct question.

Oftentimes, services are offered for youth in downtown areas, whereas young people are migrating more and more to the suburbs while disposing of limited means of transport, money, etc. Service Canada wants to get closer to communities. How will you go about extending this service to other communities? Maybe the one on Émery street, in Montreal is not the only one. In any case, I am enthusiastic about this project. I am anxious to announce that we will have one in our region as well.

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: First, let me tell you that the Café Jeunesse is in the Latin Quarter, in Montreal, right in the middle of several universities, CEGEPs, etc. This centre is suited to the needs of youth in this environment.

Of course, we are currently looking into the possibility of opening other centres like the Café Jeunesse. I am taking Café Jeunesse as an example, but this may also involve centres for the elderly, with services more focused on special age groups.

Mr. Marc Godbout: We need this kind of thing in my riding as well.

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: This is a part of our overall plan. Just now, I also mentioned itinerant services. We are reviewing the location of this service, for instance, in the Quebec region. We are also working on this in other parts of Canada. There will be multi-service centres as well as more specialized centres for the needs of certain groups in the population.

[*English*]

Mr. Marc Godbout: This may be to Ms. Flumian. Did you say there were no specific moneys in the budget for Service Canada? Did I understand that right?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: No, I think I just said it was in the budget that the plan to move this initiative to the next stage was announced.

Mr. Marc Godbout: Within that budget, the global aspect of Service Canada, are there any infrastructure moneys to build some of these centres—or rent, whichever direction Public Works is going in its orientation? I have not seen any centre announced anywhere in Canada.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: You have not yet, because as I was saying earlier, we are finishing up the research that tells us what areas of the country are serviced, what areas of the country are underserved, and where it would make sense to establish centres. Unfortunately, Café jeunesse is the only one we have across the country. The office in Verdun is the only one we have across the country. There are a couple of things that we only have one of, and until we have an opportunity to do more of them, I might encourage, Mr. Chair, that some site visits would be in order for this committee. If you want to understand and live and breathe what we mean by the Service Canada concept, Café jeunesse and our office in Verdun would be two excellent examples of what we've tried to do across the country.

Part of the budgeting for how we are going to manage this transformation is in the story of the transformation itself. Because of the numbers Mr. Nixon spoke of concerning automation of employment insurance and other programs we offer, we are freeing up resources at what I'll call the back end of our operation, the processing end, where we actually don't see Canadians or go out and serve people. Part of the transformation is in the savings that will be achieved in those back end services, taking some of those savings for other government priorities, and allowing some of those savings—about half a billion dollars' worth over five years—to be used for reinvestment in what Service Canada is going to become.

That's the story that's in the budget documents and that's the way this is intended to be funded. But before we move on making those elements, we want to make sure we have the right research about where the population is underserved, so that as we move forward we're making the right decisions with those dollars.

• (1640)

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Godbout: This brings me to my next question, Mr. Chairman.

I met some people from the Public Service Alliance of Canada. They seem to be favourable to the Service Canada initiative. I imagine that you must have done some work to raise their awareness of this project. Are there any departments or services with which you had problems?

We hear that some services of the Canada Revenue Agency, that used to be available to the public, have been abolished. I am worried for senior citizens and those who have problems with understanding fiscal jargon. Things like this could potentially undermine Service Canada, which is an excellent project. We should make sure that no services are cut, because the unions and the public might not accept this in the same way.

I do not know whether you are aware of the situation with regard to the Canada Revenue Agency.

[English]

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: I would make two points. One, for the past two years, we have been working with all of our bargaining agents on the transformation we're talking about. It's complicated, it's complex, and we have to work with our bargaining agents because they represent our employees. We thought right from the beginning it was a better idea to have them with us. They need to understand the

challenges we face, because they're the same challenges they face. They too began as public servants and became union leaders at a later point in their lives.

We have been very lucky with the leadership we've been dealing with, and you're right, they are favourably disposed towards the transformation. We will no doubt have bumps along the road in our relationship, but so far, so good. We have established six or seven transition committees across the department and have invited all of our seven bargaining agents to participate in them. They have all given us names for participation and they will be with us as part of this process. So far, our relationship has been very good.

On the issue of CRA and the changes they are proposing, they are making those changes for their own business reasons. I assure you that we are in constant discussion and negotiation with CRA, so if they have made the business decision, for their own good reasons, that they will no longer be offering in-person service, then we will be filling in the gaps where they withdraw that service. We are holding discussions with them.

Again, I hate to go back to my favourite example, but I will. In our office in Verdun, we are offering services performed by CRA staff and through secure terminals that you access with your own password if you want to come into the office. We provide printers there for people to be able to download their own personal information and upload it to CRA. We provide phone lines for them to access staff. And as Nicole mentioned in her opening remarks, earlier this spring, around tax season, we also ran workshops for seniors to explain to them the various issues around filling out their forms and all the associated issues.

CRA is close to the top of our list of departments in terms of being able to take on services that they will be withdrawing for their own business reasons.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Godbout.

Now for the five minute round, starting with Mr. Preston.

Mr. Joe Preston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You mentioned some coordination of service between other levels of government. Are you in negotiations with them? I believe we talked about this a little bit during your last visit here. Will they end up paying their share?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Yes, we are in negotiations with quite a few, and I'd be happy to provide the clerk of the committee with a list of the many that are going on across the country. We are instructing all our regional executives to see what is available out there. I spoke last time of our discussions with Ontario about the location of services here in Ottawa and of the other discussions that are going on across the country.

Who will pay the cost? It depends on who is hosting the service. In some cases, we will be locating in offices they currently have leases for. In other cases, they might be locating in our offices. There will be cases where we jointly enter into arrangements, and therefore in each of those cases the arrangements might be slightly different. In some cases our staff will be in their locations, and therefore we will be paying for our staff, and in some cases their staff will be in our locations. What we're looking at is a variety of services.

We are conscious of the fact that a lot of what we're proposing to do here does require some investment in technology. If we're making those investments anyway, it's a wonderfully cooperative gesture of government that makes us work better for citizens, as opposed to arguing about how to do it. If we know we're going to make the investment anyway, we'd like to bring along as many people as possible to provide that service.

• (1645)

Mr. Joe Preston: I agree with you to the extent that most of the good citizens of Canada don't rightly know a provincial issue from a federal one.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: There's one taxpayer; that's the way we look at it.

Mr. Joe Preston: That's right. Exactly.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: There are points at which we will have discussions about who pays for what. But some of these things are so core, so foundational, that we're going to have to invest in them anyway. The question is how to bring them on board.

Mr. Joe Preston: Our offices are often faced with not being able to help clients until we receive authorization from them in order to feed it on to a government agency to prove that we're who we say we are.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We have the same problem.

Mr. Joe Preston: Now that we've moved more services online or onto the telephone, the ability to do that may become harder. How do we protect privacy and security? How do we not make it so onerous that it can't be done?

Ms. Helen McDonald: I could say that it's one of the issues we're looking at, and not just for members of Parliament. We started looking at how we can help people—senior citizens, people who are ill and who have caregivers, lawyers who have power of attorney—how we position them in an electronic world so that we can have confidence that they are representing the client they say they are representing.

That's the work that Public Works, CRA, and I believe HRDC are engaged in, trying to look at what's called "privilege management", so we can have electronic credentials that can be linked to the person who has power of attorney so you can authorize him or her to do the work on your behalf.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: That's an issue for us on the phones as well. What we're trying to do is standardize those kinds of applications across all places. For us, dealing with a lot of elderly Canadians, those issues are real. Language issues are real, because then someone else is having to act for you. You know all about those.

We could come back. This is an area in which we are developing quite a lot of expertise. Number one, we have to understand how it applies to all channels. Number two, we're having to do it within the confines of the laws of Canada. We're doing it in consultation not only with Treasury Board, who's the keeper of privacy and security policy for the Government of Canada, but with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner, and ensuring that as we go about doing these things, we're doing them in a way that is in keeping with all the things I've just talked about.

It's a very complex area, but we'd be happy at some future time to come back and spend the entire time on that, if you'd like.

Mr. Joe Preston: All right.

Does the Veterans Affairs hotline currently in place come under Service Canada?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: We'll see how quickly we can move ahead to start incorporating those services. Right now we think we have our hands full with just the aspects we're talking about here.

Mr. Joe Preston: But it hasn't been one from the beginning. It's not one you're currently doing.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: No. The 50 million calls we take, plus the calls from 1 800 O-Canada, are probably enough to make improvements on for the time being as we go ahead. The veterans, at this point in time, are being served very well by the many award-winning things that Veterans Affairs itself has done in terms of dealing with its clientele.

Mr. Joe Preston: Okay. I've not had good use of the 1-800 number.

What are your full-time equivalents at Service Canada now, and what do you expect them to be next year and in the two subsequent years?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: As we look to configure what will be the Service Canada initiative, it's in the realm of about 21,000 people who will be delivering these services across these various foundations or departments.

Mr. Joe Preston: Is that where it is now?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Well, right now it's primarily between the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and Social Development Canada. So the initiative will be housed within those two, if you will.

I'm talking about the operational delivery arm of those two departments, all the regional staff; I'm talking about all the virtual operations, as in all the systems, all the call centre capability; and I'm talking about the corporate services required to support all that. So that's how you get to those numbers.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Preston.

Madam Thibault, for five minutes, followed by Mr. Szabo.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Many interesting questions are being raised, and this one interests me particularly.

In the framework of the partnerships, how are you going to ensure that your service criteria are adequate? It could take the form of co-operation involving another government with whom you would like to share things, for example. Let's take for instance accessibility for persons with reduced mobility. Today, this goes without saying. One could also cite bilingualism, which is an obligation on the part of the federal government. Some provinces do not always respect that. What are you going to do to encourage them to comply with this requirement under Canadian law?

Moreover, I would like you to discuss evaluation. While listening to everything you had to say to my colleagues and I, I was wondering what evaluation mechanism you have implemented? I imagine that this process is ongoing for all intents and purposes. After all, you have a success story that must be completed.

In concrete terms, how do you and your management team ensure that you are on the right track? At what point will you carry out global, ad hoc evaluations? I am not talking about simple cost analyses, but global evaluations that show what resources were utilized, among other things. Obviously, this has to be translated into numbers, percentages, and so forth. I am sure that you have already provided for evaluation during the planning stage. What steps have you taken for this to be done in actual fact?

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: To answer your question about service criteria, I must point out that they are transmitted to our officers when they are trained. Whether they are our own officers or officers who come from other departments, training and skills acquisition are exactly the same. As far as Service Canada is concerned, that is how we have trained our officers up until now.

With regard to evaluation, in the Quebec region we have established a service transformation office. My colleagues are doing the same in other regions of the country. This office is specifically responsible for translating our success into numbers and doing the necessary follow-up, not just in terms of services but also of costs, human resources utilized, etc. All that is managed within a very specific framework.

Ms. Louise Thibault: This will enable you to evaluate these things over time.

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: Exactly. Right now, we know precisely what our budget is, how many people are needed per program or service, etc.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Ms. Barbeau, we are talking about savings of \$2.5 billion. That is more than significant: it is astronomical. When you account for your achievements in this regard, your service transformation office will enable you to picture the situation one year from now, for example.

Ms. Nicole Barbeau: Indeed. Of course, we have a plan to accomplish this, and there will be very close follow-up.

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Merci, Madam Thibault.

Mr. Szabo for five minutes.

Mr. Szabo, you are there. Go ahead, for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Szabo: We have these overhead projectors, and it would really have been nice to bring in a system to go in online and do a couple of queries that would be relevant to the work.

I called up 1 800-0-Canada. The response was, "Hello, I'm Steven, blah, blah"—some nice things—and then "How can I help you?" I asked "Can I amend my income tax return online?" I've received that question before. "Do you mean fix?" he asked. I said okay. This went on about the semantics. I said I wanted to amend my income tax return, I wanted to change it. He said I meant fix. Then he asked what city and province I was in. I said Ottawa, Ontario. He asked what I wanted to do. I said I had another slip. He said, "Could you please hold on while I process the transaction", and he put me on hold.

I have to tell you, at that point I was frustrated. We deal with people. When they contact our office, obviously they have a difficulty. They probably made reasonable attempts, but by the time we get them, if they've been into that, they first of all want to tell us that the system is really a mess.

I'd really like to know how we are learning from things. Every member of Parliament has had someone say, I contacted the department, I contacted whoever, and they told me to go see my MP. We get absolutely no communication whatsoever from you. We have no advance notice. If we're an online world, I would think you could key in something. Couldn't you forward us a note to say that one of our constituents is going to come, and here are some of the details? That isn't there. That would be helpful, in the real world.

I know we would like everything to be rosy, and conceptually, online and by telephone, electronic and everything is just wonderful. But how are we learning from this? I can only assume, for example, that someone who is claiming EI for the first time is actually given something that says, in this process you will have questions and here's how you can get that. Is that package there for them? Are we training people to help themselves so that you reduce your calls, or are we just doing the same thing over and over again? Tell me that we're learning, that this is a cybernetic system in which there are synergies that we learn from, and that it becomes a better system and frees up more of the resources for people who really have problems.

• (1655)

Ms. Donna Wood: The good news is that we do get the occasional call. We don't do it 100% right, so we do get the opportunity to learn. I can guarantee my staff will hear about this call when I get back to the office.

One of the things we are doing is making sure that when we answer a call we do offer the other channels of choice as part of the information package. We ask if they would be interested in accessing this service—whatever it may be—in person or on the Internet, and we get a sense with the caller of what their capabilities are, or their accessibility is, and we work from there.

I have to admit the probing we intended to do at the front end, the semantics per se, shouldn't have gone the way you just described it, but it is an attempt on our part to make sure we understand the question. Different regions of the country ask questions in different ways, so we do try to make sure we're comprehending what the need is. But it's a learning process. There are 15,000 key words in each official language.

Mr. Paul Szabo: I'm sorry, I only have five minutes in total for both issues, so let me ask one last question.

We have access to 1 800 O-Canada internationally in some 20 other countries. What volume of our calls comes internationally and who decided that queries from international sources are more important than domestic queries, when virtually every one of these countries has an embassy?

Ms. Donna Wood: I have to admit that off the top of my head, I'm not sure what the percentage is. We'll follow up with that number for you.

There isn't actually a preference for international calls. We don't have queues on that particular service. Everybody's call is getting answered at the same level of importance.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Szabo.

I have some questions now, if I could.

You have a chart. On one of the documents I have in front of me anyway, there is a chart laying out the savings that are anticipated in the various departments to which you provide service. For example, under Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, you have projected savings for this fiscal year of \$25 million up to \$45 million by 2008-09, for a total savings over the five-year period of \$180 million.

First of all, I'd like to know what kinds of services are provided that would lead to a savings of \$45 million a year in the agriculture department alone. It seems like a tremendously high savings. Then you go to the CIDA—

• (1700)

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: I think there's some confusion here. Those are not our savings. Those are expenditure review committee savings that have nothing to do with the Service Canada initiative.

The Chair: My apologies.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: That's all right. I'm sure someone will be happy to come and answer that.

The Chair: I'll pursue that through another way.

You did say you're projecting savings of \$2.5 billion. That's what the number is here at the bottom of this chart I have. It is \$2.5 billion at Service Canada.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: It may be coincidental. Our numbers may be coincidental with the edition of the table you've just come up with.

The Chair: Yes, anyway, that \$2.5 billion savings is over a five-year period.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: How do we intend to achieve our savings?

The Chair: How are those savings going to be there? Explain them to me in a way that would lead me to understand how you're going to arrive at savings that great.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Slightly over half of our savings actually come from our program area—and I'm going to speak to those in detail, I'm just going to tell you what the nature of them is—and slightly under half of our savings come from we call operations.

Let me speak to the nature of what those are. In terms of the program area, we will be making changes to the way we risk-manage and to our error rate—

The Chair: Could you explain that? I'm trying to get a picture of how those savings are going to be arrived at.

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: On the program side we manage just under \$50 billion that is paid out under the income security program for CPP, OAS, and GIS. On the EI side we pay out, in a business cycle like this one, about \$13 billion in program dollars a year. This is for payments to individuals in both of those program areas.

The first issue is that a lot of this processing is currently done by data entry now, and it's done by data entry repeatedly, which is why some of the changes that Mr. Nixon was talking about in terms of automation are so important. We have error rates that are higher than they would be if you were automating that information directly, if it were being entered by employers directly to us, or if it were being done by individuals, either by telephone or in person.

The Chair: Okay, I would like some clarification. Are you saying that some of the savings there will come from reducing the number of payments that are made that shouldn't be made?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: That are made in error, that's correct. That's one of the areas.

The second area we're looking at is different risk management techniques that bring you to payments that are made for fraudulent reasons. We would have different flaggings in our systems and different risk management processes at the beginning, because nobody needs to pay out something in error and then spend a lot of effort and attention chasing it afterwards over multiple times and in multiple places. You make the error in payment, and then you have to set up a whole different administration to try to recover it. So in that case we are using different risk management techniques that allow us not to make the wrong payment to begin with.

A third area, which is also dependent on how we save program dollars, is the linkages that we would establish with vital statistics agencies at the provincial level across the country. I may have spoken a little about this last time. If I didn't, I'll just say a few words about it this time, about the importance of the linkages to vital events across this country.

For example, as I just said to you, we're paying out \$50 billion a year to relatively elderly Canadians. On average, we find out between two months and six months after a death has occurred that we should stop that payment, because we're totally dependent now on other agents to provide us with that information. The good news is, because we're Canadians, we generally get that money back, but it takes a whole bureaucracy just to chase down that money.

The importance of the linkage to the vital events registries across the country is that we would be notified as quickly as they are of a death in the family, and events of that nature.

• (1705)

The Chair: Okay.

In a case like that, would you then, as well as stopping the payments, notify whoever the executor of the estate is, or a family member, that there are other benefits available to them?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: Indeed. In those kinds of cases, we could probably figure out how to pay some of those death benefits semi-automatically because we would have that information. That information would be used to stop the payment of that particular benefit, but it would also be used to then trigger those payments in a more automatic fashion, also saving us in the administrative costs.

So those are the three big areas on the program side where we would derive some of those savings.

The Chair: Sorry, we're almost out of time here.

Do you have a site? Some of the other numbers I was looking at on some of the other tables...they have a site that gives more detail on the savings. Do you have a site available that would give us some real detail on these proposed savings?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: What was put up on budget day is about the only material that we have put online, but make any questions you may have available to us, through the clerk, and we'll provide you with that information. We have the five-year saving cycle and the reinvestment cycle that was presented in the budget documents.

The Chair: Okay, so you will get to the committee, in some fashion, the most detailed information you have on these proposed savings?

Ms. Maryantonett Flumian: That's correct.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I appreciate you all coming today. We look forward to speaking with you again. It's been very helpful, I think. We'll see where the committee takes us from here.

We'll suspend for a few seconds while we have the witnesses leave the table. Then I think we have very little business to deal with. The bells, I understand, are going to start ringing at 5:15 p.m.

We will carry on, then. We have a few items to deal with. I think they'll be quite quick.

The first item is the one that may require the most discussion, and that's Moya Greene's nomination. We heard from Ms. Greene, and also Mr. Feeney, the head of the nominating committee last time. Now we have to decide whether we need to hear more information on her appointment, or whether we want to go ahead.

We're not in camera. We're not going in camera; there are no plans to.

Mr. Joe Preston: I thought we said the last time we talked about an appointment that we would go in camera to do it.

The Chair: Okay. Did we do that?

So there is discussion on this, then. We'll want to go in camera to discuss this appointment, will we?

Mr. Joe Preston: I have no discussion. I'm just saying that the last time we talked about somebody's qualifications we went in camera to do so.

The Chair: I'm asking the committee now whether in fact there is a need for more discussion. Do we want to follow up on this in some fashion, or do we want to put in a committee report saying that we are approving the nomination?

Yes, Mr. Scarpaleggia.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Maybe the question of whether we go in camera or not is a bit academic. I think if we looked at the transcripts, the committee was pretty unanimous in praising Ms. Greene's qualifications. Why don't we simply give our stamp of approval to her candidacy and move on to other business?

The Chair: Madam Thibault.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Thibault: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As far as I am concerned, this is not academic. Even though we decided not to discuss it, someone can intervene, which will lead to another intervention, which can also lead to another and that brings about a whole discussion.

• (1710)

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: I agree, Ms. Thibault.

Ms. Louise Thibault: If we decide that this should be done in camera, it should take place in camera.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Fine, I agree.

Ms. Louise Thibault: I have no other comments to make today, but this is a question of principle.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Just for clarification, Madam Thibault, are you saying you want discussion and you want to go in camera, or you have really nothing else to say?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Thibault: I am saying that right now we should proceed in camera. That is not the case right now. So for now, I have nothing to contribute to any discussion on this issue.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is there anyone else? Mr. Scarpaleggia suggested we go ahead and just approve—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: It was simply to start the discussion. I agree with the principle set forth by Ms. Thibault. Let's go in camera and deal with the issue. That's all.

[*Meeting continues in camera*]

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