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Mr. Ed Komarnicki

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

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC)): Good morning everyone. We will start our meeting. I see Mr. Cuzner is not here, but we'll commence notwithstanding and he'll probably arrive in due course.

We have with us Department of Human Resources and Skills Development officials, and we're dealing with the study of exploring employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. We certainly look forward to hearing from you. We have with us Yves Gingras, senior director, economic policy directorate; Monika Bertrand, director, youth and labour market programs for persons with disabilities; and Sylvie Dubé, policy director, office for disability issues.

I'm sure you'll take us through some very essential elements of what this study may entail.

Go ahead, Yves.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Gingras (Senior Director, Economic Policy Directorate, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for inviting Human Resources and Skills Development Canada to today's hearings. We are very pleased to be here this morning to discuss employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

I will begin by speaking to the current situation of persons with disabilities and the current labour market conditions in Canada. Then, I will provide an overview of HRSDC's programs.

[English]

It is estimated that currently more than three million working-age Canadians have a disability. Disability is much more common among older Canadians. As Canada's population ages, we can expect the number of people in the workplace who are confronting disabilities to grow. Canada's labour force growth will continue to slow down in the next years as a result of demographic changes. Therefore, further efforts to assist persons with disabilities in finding and keeping jobs will help address skill shortages and support economic growth.

At present, about one-third of employers report problems finding workers with the right skills, and shortages in some regions and

sectors already exist. There are more than 240,000 job vacancies in Canada as of November 2012. Vacancies have been an ongoing upward trend in the last year, with close to 10,000 more vacancies reported by employers in November 2012 compared to a year earlier. Not surprisingly, growth in jobs that go unfilled was strongest in the prairie provinces.

People with disabilities represent an untapped pool of qualified labour and, while their situation has improved over time, their employment rate remains low compared to that of other Canadians. For example, in 2010 it was about 51%, compared to 75% for persons without disabilities. There are approximately 800,000 individuals with disabilities in Canada who are not currently employed yet are capable of working. Almost half of them have some post-secondary education.

Moreover, the average total income for persons with a disability is about \$27,000, compared to nearly \$38,000 for those without a disability. Women with disabilities earn even less, an average of about \$22,000, compared to \$31,000 for men with disabilities.

Education has a huge impact on levelling the playing field for persons with disabilities, and while it has been on the rise, it still lags behind those without disabilities. An estimated 14% of working-age adults with disabilities have a university degree, compared to 24% for those without disabilities.

Improving labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities is a priority for the government. However, the federal government is only one of many partners that have an impact on their labour market outcomes. Employers in the private sector have an important role to play in employing Canadians with disabilities.

[Translation]

The recent report of the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities showed that, while there are several private sector successes in Canada in the employment of persons with disabilities, many businesses still have misconceptions about how to hire persons with disabilities and what it costs to accommodate them in the workplace.

The panel found a proven business case for hiring persons with disabilities. Often, accommodation costs are low and returns on these small investments can be very high. The report calls for employer leadership and employer-driven approaches to improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities.

[English]

Our department also supports the inclusion of people with disabilities in the economy through several targeted programs.

Labour market agreements for persons with disabilities make up the government's single largest source of support to help persons with disabilities enter and stay in the labour market. Through these agreements, the government transfers \$218 million annually to the provinces, delivering close to 300,000 interventions.

The opportunities fund for persons with disabilities provides \$30 million each year to assist individuals who have little or no labour force attachment to prepare for, obtain, and keep employment, or become self-employed. In 2011-12 approximately 5,400 clients were served, 1,400 found employment, 300 returned to school, and 3,300 enhanced their employability.

Economic action plan 2012 invested an additional \$30 million over three years in the fund to help more persons with disabilities get work experience with small and medium-sized businesses and ensure that employers are aware of the invaluable contribution people with disabilities can make.

In addition to these targeted programs, we also help persons with disabilities enter the labour market through the labour market agreements and the youth employment strategy.

Through the labour market agreements, the government transfers \$500 million annually to provinces and territories, providing approximately 400,000 interventions in 2009-10. The interventions assist Canadians who are under-represented in the labour force in enhancing employability and skills. This includes persons with disabilities.

The youth employment strategy provides over \$300 million annually, which in 2011-12 supported about 60,000 young Canadians, including those with disabilities. In particular, the skills link component is targeted to youth facing barriers to employment, including youth with disabilities.

The Canada pension plan disability program, which is the largest federal income security program for working-age people with disabilities, supports labour market re-entry by providing beneficiaries support in their efforts to re-engage in paid employment through a variety of program and policy measures.

• (1110)

[Translation]

The government has also moved on a number of other fronts. In 2010, it ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It provides Canada Student Grants and related supports to students with permanent disabilities. It provides funding to the Mental Health Commission of Canada to develop Canada's first National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. The government also funds stakeholder efforts to improve inclusion of Canadians with disabilities through the Social Development Partnerships Program. It funds improvements to the built environment through the Enabling Accessibility Fund, with over 800 projects funded so far.

In conclusion, people with disabilities represent a valuable source of potential labour, and we want to give them every opportunity to get the development and training they need to join the workforce. HRSDC continues to be mindful of the critical need to address labour market challenges of persons with disabilities. We look forward to seeing the results of your work and any recommendations for future policy directions.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

If no one else is making a presentation, we'll go to Madame Perreault.

Welcome back to the committee. It's good to see you here again.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am delighted to have the officials from the department here, and I am very glad to be a part of this discussion.

Before coming here, I read a lot about all the various studies that had been done. I couldn't tell whether there had been any follow-up as far as those studies go. But it is still evident that things have improved slightly. I sincerely hope that what we do here will lead to a big step forward.

Earlier, you mentioned the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities, a fund designed to help employers and organizations create projects that will help people with disabilities enter the labour market.

Is there any follow-up with those who have participated in these projects? The goal of the projects is to help people with disabilities. But is there any kind of follow-up once the projects are complete?

[English]

Ms. Monika Bertrand (Director, Youth and Labour Market Programs for Persons with Disabilities, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): Thank you for your question.

For the opportunities fund, yes, there is certainly a follow-up that is being done on persons with disabilities to do a regular reporting on the data that Yves just presented in terms of how many found employment and how many returned to school. For 2011-12 there is a follow-up shortly after the intervention with service providers and individuals, but really the big follow-up is the evaluation. Every five years our programs are evaluated. The last evaluation that we had was from 2008. We're currently in the process of launching a new evaluation. That really gives a good sense of what the outcomes are of the people who followed the various interventions.

So, yes, they are being followed, and we do learn from that.

• (1115)

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Are those performance indicators available?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: Yes, they are public.

Ms. Manon Perreault: Okay.

I have been told that people with episodic illnesses have trouble accessing the fund, because they don't have a permanent disability.

Should the fund requirements be more flexible in those cases? People with multiple sclerosis come to mind, for instance.

[English]

Ms. Monika Bertrand: The opportunities fund is a very specific fund. The clientele of the opportunities fund is persons with disabilities who have very little or next to no labour market attachment. When we are talking about episodic disabilities, absolutely they are part of the group of clientele of persons with disabilities who require certain interventions to get them into the labour market. They are considered just as other persons with disabilities in terms of the clientele. I don't see any difference between a person with a physical disability, a mental disability, or a learning disability. It's all about a person identifying himself or herself as having a disability. That's really what the eligibility requirement is.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Very well.

I gather, then, the idea is also to educate employers and give them more support. Am I wrong?

[English]

Ms. Monika Bertrand: No, you're not wrong. The opportunities fund does have an employer awareness component in it. We actually added that after the 2008 evaluation. One of the shortcomings that came out was that, first of all, the awareness of the program wasn't great, but then also the awareness of the abilities of persons with disabilities wasn't well known, so there was an employer awareness component added to the terms and conditions of the program just because of that fact.

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: For the opportunities fund to work well, you need the participation of employers and organizations. In the case of people with disabilities, it is often said that workplace accommodations are also necessary.

Since the opportunities fund is for employers, does it enable them to obtain financial assistance?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: To obtain what? Sorry, but I'm having trouble hearing you.

Ms. Manon Perreault: The opportunities fund is for employers, so does it give them access to financial support to introduce the necessary workplace accommodations?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Manon Perreault: And that's through the opportunities fund?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: Exactly.

[English]

Eligible expenses are included under the opportunities fund. First of all there's wage subsidy, for example. Wage subsidy is always

important to give an individual a chance to show their abilities to an employer, so we provide wage subsidies. We provide workplace accommodation funding, so if somebody needs special computer software or if somebody needs the work station adapted, that is all part of the opportunities fund's eligible expenses. We also provide support for job coaching, for example.

The Chair: Madame Perreault, your time is up.

We'll move now to Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

It's a rather exciting day for me personally because, as you may know, yesterday for private member's business I submitted my motion which deals with this very subject because of the importance not only to the community of persons with disabilities, but also to communities in general.

This is an area where I think there's much going on, as you've put forward today. I really think, too, that it can be a non-partisan effort to up the game, especially in the area of the private sector, to help companies realize the great asset that persons with disabilities can provide to their business. The business case was made, as you know, in the report that was just tabled. For those of us who've taken a look at that report, there are some shining examples in the country. So I preface my questions with that.

In terms of upping that game, and for all members of Parliament to be able to get on the same page, what are some of the innovations you've noticed in the time you've been working on this file? What has actually been happening in terms of the private sector? There has been some progress, as mentioned in your opening remarks, but can you give us some first-hand examples?

• (1120)

Ms. Monika Bertrand: I can start from the program policy perspective in terms of the importance of employers. I was mentioning that employer awareness activities are very important. It came out in 2008, and was confirmed again by the panel, that employer awareness is very important. In budget 2012, additional funding was provided to the opportunities fund. It has that hook that it also include work experience in small and medium-sized enterprises, but also an employer awareness component has to be part of a project. We thought it was very important to demystify employing a person with disabilities.

So, we have started. With the 2008 evaluation, we have worked more and more on employer awareness. We launched a national call for proposals a couple of years ago with priority given to employer awareness activities. In budget 2012 there is very clearly a focus on work experience with SMEs, which is a big part of raising employer awareness of the capabilities of persons with disabilities, coupled with awareness activities, sharing of best practices, etc.

Mr. Yves Gingras: I could complement this by adding that through our work, and also the work of the recent panel, we are aware, and we heard from employers, about new technologies that lower the cost of accommodation and the openness in the workplace to accommodate existing employees. This is something that came out strongly in the last consultations with the panel. Employers, once they have someone who's in the workplace, even if they don't have explicit policies, will often find ways to accommodate someone having difficulty. It could be episodic; it could be all sorts of disabilities. This accommodation, whether it's formal or informal, is done, and now there are all sorts of ways to do it. Technology lowers the cost, as well, of accommodation. This is new. What we heard, though, is that when it comes to engaging a conversation from someone from outside, to bring them in the labour market, this seems to be the area where there remains more barriers.

Mr. Phil McColeman: From that I take it there has been government funding for new initiatives to move this awareness forward in the eyes of Canadians in general, but especially among Canadians who have their own business, and not only small and medium-sized businesses, but large businesses across the country as well.

It struck me that there are some champions out there nationally who are leading the way, so to speak, right now. On that corporate leadership example, the examples that exist out there, I want to ask you about the potential that you see. I'm overusing it perhaps by saying "upping the game" here, but that's what my motion strikes to do, not only make the government very aware that there are more steps to be taken and prescriptive things to be done, but also, more so even, the private sector needs to step up to the plate here. What are your thoughts in terms of the potential for that?

The Chair: Mr. McColeman's time will be up in a few moments, but go ahead and answer his question.

Ms. Monika Bertrand: I see great potential. Again, I'm talking from the program policy area. We're sort of the thinkers. We always look ahead in terms of how we can make our programs better and more efficient and more effective. Certainly, everything we've heard now confirms the idea that we need to get employers a lot more engaged. And yes, there are champions out there.

As I said, in December we did the call for proposals for the additional budget 2012 funding. It will be interesting to see who the service providers partnered with. There was mandatory partnering for employee awareness, and we know there are champions out there that are very eager to work with service providers. There is great potential. I cannot give you any concrete examples of what kinds of ideas we're developing, but it's certainly front and centre in the policy work.

•(1125)

Mr. Yves Gingras: I'd like to add here that as I said in the introduction, there are more and more jobs that go vacant. Employers are looking to grow their businesses, and that's going to continue as the economy recovers from the last recession. Put that together with the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of persons with disabilities that have a post-secondary education and are trained to take the skilled jobs that are available for them and you see the great potential for employers. We know about good practices. If the word is spread about the business case to hire persons with

disabilities who are well educated, there's a huge potential for employers and for the economy to grow.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that we'll turn to Mr. Sullivan.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

This is going to be a good study, I hope. There have been a number of other studies in the past. I noticed your presentation didn't include whether that number has changed since 1981, when we had the first study on improving the lot of people with disabilities in the workforce.

There have been many recommendations over the years. Is there appreciable change in the representation? We're at 51%, which doesn't seem to be fairly successful, in my view. How does that compare to the United States, which has the Americans with Disabilities Act?

Mr. Yves Gingras: What I'd like to offer in terms of facts here is that the situation for persons with disabilities in the Canadian labour market improved tremendously up to the last recession in 2008. We saw good trends, better employment rates, increases in the number of people pursuing studies. This is all positive; people are bringing higher levels of skills to the workplace. Through the recession, however, these are people that were more marginalized and they paid a high price from the recession.

From this we see that when there's economic growth, it really helps with the integration of persons with disabilities. Unfortunately, we don't always have the data we need to look at recent years, but with the data we have we see that things are picking up. Things have been pretty good. We had a difficult time through the recession, but the long-term trend is that in Canada something is happening. Persons with disabilities are making their way in the labour market. Their conditions are improving. We see that with various studies that are available.

In the United States as well there are improvements. I could not give you specific statistics, but we see in both countries that the situation of persons with disabilities improving.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: But you haven't presented any data on that.

In terms of income support systems in Canada, Canada pension plan disability and employment insurance, I'm aware that persons with disabilities take longer to re-enter the workforce after having been laid off, because it's just more difficult for persons with disabilities—it just is, in general. The new regulations that the minister has brought out forcing people to accept work with significantly lower wages and in different locations doesn't take into account persons with disabilities. Is that a failing of this regulation?

Mr. Yves Gingras: I would like to bring to your attention the efforts the department is making to improve the information that we make available for unemployed individuals so they know where the jobs are. We're helping make that connection with the employers. That includes people with disabilities.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: But my question is, persons with disabilities are hamstrung by that seven-week and 18-week rule. If it takes them longer to reacquire employment, they are more likely to face a reduction in their income and a reduction in their available job search outside their field than other Canadians, persons without disabilities. Is this something that needs addressing?

• (1130)

Mr. Yves Gingras: I would offer that the department is helping because we are looking at personal situations and we're trying to help people find the jobs that are available. We are improving our systems to help make that connection. That helps persons with disabilities as well.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: You mentioned in your brief the UN convention to which Canada is a signatory which was ratified on March 11, 2010. As we all know, on March 11, 2012, the government was supposed to bring forward a report on how Canada has fared under this UN convention in the first two years. There's been no report yet. Do we know what's wrong and what's happened, where the report is, and why we're waiting?

Ms. Sylvie Dubé (Policy Director, Office for Disability Issues, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): The HRSDC ODI is coordinating the response at the federal government level, and Canadian Heritage is the department responsible for coordinating all of Canada's responses. My understanding is that it's in its final stages, but I couldn't give you an exact date of when it's going to be ready or tabled.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: In your brief, you also talked about—maybe you can clear it up, I'm a little confused about the numbers—labour market agreements for persons with disabilities being \$218 million, and then on the next page, through labour market agreements, \$500 million. Are they two different projects? Are they two different amounts? Why are they both there?

The Chair: The time is up, but we'll let you answer the question.

Ms. Monika Bertrand: Yes, labour market agreements for persons with disabilities are distinct from labour market agreements. The labour market agreements for persons with disabilities are the ones dedicated to the transfer to the provinces for persons with disabilities. Labour market agreements, they do support under-represented groups. They do support low-skilled employed. They do support unemployed who are not on EI. But it is not a targeted transfer to persons with disabilities. There are some differences, and those are two different transfers.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now move to Mr. Daniel

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, witnesses, for being here.

Forgive my ignorance, but let me begin by just asking, is there a clear definition of disabilities? I ask this in the sense that it's obvious when somebody has a physical disability, but in my riding I've got people who are deaf, who from the outside appearance have no difference at all, but have tremendous trouble trying to find a job. I have people who have come to me saying they're dyslexic.

Where do you draw the line in terms of what a disability is? Do you have some guidelines that you are using to define what a disability is?

Ms. Sylvie Dubé: What I can say, generally speaking though, is there is not one definition of disability. Most folks use the UN definition of disability, which is those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis.

What has happened is in the past it moved from more of a medical definition of disability to more of a societal one, and disability now is broader in the sense that a person can think of themselves as disabled as to the barriers that they have to face in employment or inclusion in other spheres of their daily activities. For different programs, whether they be federal, provincial or municipal, there are different criteria, so different definitions of disability.

The short answer is no, there is not one definition for disability.

Mr. Joe Daniel: Are there any comments from the others?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: From the program perspective, we do have certain criteria, but when it comes to disability, it's the person self-identifying as having a disability.

• (1135)

Mr. Joe Daniel: Thank you.

When we're talking about barriers and things like that do you feel there's any additional non-monetary initiatives that could be undertaken to address existing barriers to persons with disabilities?

Mr. Yves Gingras: If we look at the panel's report that was just tabled, I think there's a strong message about some leaders in the field having good practices. We have programs already looking at doing some outreach and doing some employer awareness so that they are aware of the business case to hire and to accommodate persons with disabilities. Employers are looking for people with the best abilities. They're looking for qualified people, and they are there. We have a huge potential. This issue of awareness is already part of some of our programming. That is certainly something that the department can explore in reinforcing.

Mr. Joe Daniel: What is HRDC hearing from stakeholders about key issues and challenges for persons with disabilities?

Mr. Yves Gingras: We do research in this area, but the latest report from the panel, I think, provides us with a number of strong messages. We could talk about various ranges of disabilities and whether people face mobility issues and pain issues, but when it comes to getting the job, this seems to be the most difficult challenge faced by persons with disabilities. Once they have a job, employers will often find ways to accommodate them.

Finding a job for persons with disabilities remains quite a challenge in Canada. We've heard from the panel that while the employer has a strong incentive to find people with the best abilities, they often don't know where to go to tap into the existing pool of persons with disabilities. They don't know where to find partners, the community partners, for example. When they have a recruitment process many realize this is not adapted for persons with disabilities. Often the print is too small, or there are some pictures people can't understand. The processes are not well adapted to allow persons with disabilities to enter into the recruitment process.

We also heard strongly from many employers that this discussion between the prospect, the candidate, and the employer is a difficult one on both sides. Persons with disabilities often will be reluctant to declare that they have a disability. It's not always visible. When it's a mental health issue, the fear of being stigmatized is even more important on the part of the individual. The employer as well is afraid of asking the questions necessary to define exactly what the situation is and also to determine what type of accommodation would be needed. Therefore there is the fear of entering into complex processes or having a huge cost of accommodation for a potential employee. That difficult discussion remains a major issue. We hear it is especially the case when it has to do with mental health issues.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Daniel, your time is up.

We will now move to Mr. Cuzner.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I have two questions. I should probably know the answer to the first one, but I don't. As a federal agency, or really right across the federal spectrum, is there a target or a number of employees—we have 350,000 public servants—or a percentage that we aspire to have recognized as persons with disabilities?

Mr. Yves Gingras: If I understand correctly, you're asking as a major employer.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Yes, exactly.

Mr. Yves Gingras: I'm not aware that there are any quotas, but I think the Employment Equity Act is quite clear that any employer under the federal jurisdiction has to make efforts to accommodate. So it is encouraging employers. It's not like imposing a quota. I'm sure the Public Service Commission or Treasury Board would have statistics on how many people with disabilities we have in the public sector. There's no prescription on the numbers.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: There's no internal advocacy agent for persons with disabilities within that federal jurisdiction. The question should probably be directed to the Public Service Commission, I would think. Right? Are you aware of any?

• (1140)

Ms. Sylvie Dubé: It's the Treasury Board Secretariat that set the guidelines, but also under the labour program they do have the employment equity report that they put out almost on a yearly basis. Unfortunately, I don't have it in front of me so I don't know what the exact figures are. We could send it to you if you'd like.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Okay. That would be helpful. As the federal government, we would want to lead.

Just for clarification, on the LMDAs, labour market development agreements, there is a separate deal altogether. Is there any reference to persons with disabilities within the bilaterals, within the LMDAs, or is a separate deal negotiated?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: LMDAs are a separate transfer, an EI part II transfer. They are supported out of the EI account, and no, there is no dedicated funding or dedicated pot for persons with disabilities. There are just the general eligibility criteria for clients.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: But in the one specifically for the transfer for disabilities, there are targets within those agreements, I would think.

Ms. Monika Bertrand: No, there are no targets within the agreements. The LMAPDs, labour market agreements for persons with disabilities, give a lot of flexibility to the provinces. The provinces get their share of funding, and the idea is that they decide where they would like to invest their funding for persons with disabilities.

There are five priority areas that they have to respect, and they are set out in the multilateral framework that they all signed onto in 2004, except for Quebec, but there are no targets. Provinces can set targets but we, the federal government, do not set targets for them.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Are there provinces that have set targets?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: I'm not aware of that. We're talking about 300 different programs. It's one of those transfers that cut across several departments. It cuts across several responsible ministers, so with regard to targets, I'm not aware that there are—

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I'm just getting back to the fact that if you can measure it, then you can fix it. I'm trying to get a sense of where the opportunities to measure are and if they are within the bilaterals or whatever it might be, if it's just following five principles, then it's a bit tougher. I guess it would come down to the individual provinces after the transfer is made.

Ms. Monika Bertrand: Absolutely. Of course, there are the indicators that the provinces report on publicly. They have their annual reports that they have to publish for their citizens, so it depends on what they like to report to their citizens or what they think is important for their citizens to know about regarding how they spend their funding. That's about it.

Then we have evaluations we use to see how effective these programs are.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Thank you, Mr. Cuzner.

We'll now move to Ms. Leitch.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much for taking the time to be here today to talk to us as we start this new and important study.

One of the items that was brought up earlier this morning was Mr. McColeman's motion. One of the key components of that, to my mind, is the examination of the expert panel and the findings with respect to employers and the advantages of private sector led initiatives. You've had a couple of comments with regard to the reluctance on behalf of some private sector initiatives.

I wonder if you could provide us your perspective, from the programs that you've implemented, on efforts to deal with private sector employers to encourage them to allow individuals with a wide range of disabilities to participate. What have you noticed as being key issues or key challenges that either private sector employers have spoken to you about or, if they have not articulated them, you have witnessed over the course of implementing your programs in which private sector individuals are involved?

Ms. Monika Bertrand: There have been stakeholder consultations with employers. What is very much confirmed in the panel report is the idea that workplace accommodation is very expensive. We know that it is not. The majority of workplace accommodation costs range between \$500 and \$700. It's small amounts. That was one very big concern that employers voiced. We heard that repeatedly through the consultations.

The other concern that was raised had to do with the kind of legislation that is in place and how it could be tied to having an employee with a disability. Do they suddenly have responsibilities toward that individual that they do not want to have? There's a whole idea of misconceptions regarding what it means to have a person with a disability.

From the program perspective, that's what we have heard, and that's what we are trying to do with the various funding interventions and options that we offer through the opportunities fund.

Maybe, Sylvie, you can elaborate a bit more with regard to the consultations.

• (1145)

Ms. Sylvie Dubé: The panel heard from quite a wide spectrum. They consulted across the country with employers, all sizes of businesses from all sectors, but you can certainly put them under different themes.

There were questions along the same lines as Monika's. In addition there were questions such as what does it mean for them to integrate into the culture of the company. Will it slow the company's productivity? Where do they go if they want to hire a person with a disability? What tools do they have if they need help to assist the person, whether it's physical or whether it's coaching? There were all these spheres of questioning.

The interesting thing that came out of some of those consultations was the fact that most employers were quite willing and interested in finding out more and in being able to address it, either because of shortages in their company or their spheres of activities. Also, they saw the benefit of hiring persons with disabilities, to have them on their staff, and integrate them into the company. Those were some of the questions that came out and some of the concerns that were addressed.

They were also able to identify some good practices that some companies have come up with. Some are leaders, and there was a lot of discussion about enterprise and how leadership must come from the top. Some of the businesses, some of the private sector companies, need to have a champion at the top. Then it goes down from there.

There are lots of barriers, but also lots of good practices.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: One of the other components of the motion that has been put forward to the House is to establish a significant focus on young people. One of the items Mr. McColeman speaks about in his motion is increasing the involvement of young individuals with disabilities and how we do that.

What are the components of the youth employment strategy or other programming that's available through human resources? It may have been identified in the report.

I was wondering if you could comment on that, but also in relationship to what partnerships you already have as established relationships that have been able to augment employment among young people who have disabilities.

The Chair: We'll conclude with the response.

Ms. Monika Bertrand: The issue of youth is so consistent across all the research we have studied. We know that integrating people early on in the labour market while they are still in high school, be it persons with disabilities or Canadians in general, has huge benefits later on but especially for persons with disabilities or youth with barriers to employment. It could be any barrier. A disability is just another barrier to employment. It's definitely something we look at very closely, how we can best do that through our youth employment strategy or through the opportunities fund, something dedicated.

One program that does address this issue is skills link, the stream under the youth employment strategy, YES. It's a \$100 million program that helps youth with multiple barriers to employment either get into the labour market or go back to school. So yes, we've had some good experiences with that program. We have good outcomes. Youth with disabilities account for about 17% of skills link clients.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Does anyone else wish to comment? If not, we'll move to Ms. Charlton.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm going to split my time with Madame Boutin-Sweet.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I have two quick questions. I'll ask both at the front end and leave you the time to respond.

The first one is that my colleague is quite right in that we've been studying this since 1981, in a formal way, anyway. All committees in the past have been able to put partisanship aside on this issue. They've made some really solid recommendations. I think it would be in our interest not to waste time in this committee by revisiting work that's already been done. So I wonder if you could provide us with a report card on the recommendations that have been made in the past and tell us which ones have already been implemented, so that we don't go back over old work.

My second question is.... I suppose it's a question, but it will start with a comment. If we want to be serious about having a comprehensive economic strategy to deal with challenges experienced by people with disabilities, I don't think it's good enough to just talk about the training and assistance that we're providing. It would be really helpful if we could also broaden that conversation to talk about systemic barriers to that participation. I'm thinking about things such as access to housing, access to transportation, income supports, and all of the broader range of issues that, obviously, would have an impact on somebody's participation both in the economy and in society. I wonder if there's a point person, either in your department or at HRSDC, who coordinates with other ministries to develop that comprehensive approach, and if we could perhaps get that person to appear before the committee.

I'll just leave it at that.

Mr. Yves Gingras: On your first question about the report card for what was recommended in the past and where we stand, this is something we would have to do. I'd be happy to take that back to the department to try to do what we can and then have it sent to you.

In terms of an economic strategy addressing systemic barriers, I would say that we have a number of targeted programs in the department, including transfers that directly target the needs of persons with disabilities. So our programs do address some of the needs.

The transfers that are provided to provinces are quite flexible and allow them to develop a multitude of programs that are handled from health departments to employment departments and education departments. There are a lot of approaches that are there to support, such as housing, transportation, and income support. This is covered by an array of programs that goes beyond the federal government; it goes into the provincial sphere of activities. We address many types of needs through a variety of programs.

I'm not saying there are not gaps, but it is a complex area where there are so many programs available, including wage subsidies. I could go on and on.

Ms. Chris Charlton: But the reality is that if you're transferring money, and it could go to all of those things, then it could also go to none of them and end up in some very loosey-goosey program that perhaps doesn't deliver, which goes to Mr. Cuzner's point: where is the accountability; where is the bang for the buck?

Anyway, I'm going to leave it at that.

The Chair: You certainly chipped into the time of Ms. Boutin-Sweet. The loosey-goosey part is what took you longer.

Ms. Monika Bertrand: [*Inaudible—Editor*] an annual plan to the Government of Canada to set out where they plan on spending the money we send to them, and it has to be within the five priority areas. We do have a pretty good sense of where that money goes. Plus, we get an expenditure account where we actually look at where the money has gone. They have their plan, and we actually see how the money was spent. Also, they do an annual report for the public, so there is reporting. We do have a sense of where the money goes.

• (1155)

The Chair: Madame Boutin-Sweet, you have about a minute.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to discuss programs that encourage employers to hire people.

You talked about the opportunities fund and labour market agreements. Last week, I spoke to a father in my riding. His adult son has a disability as a result of a head injury. The son got a job with an employer that had access to the funding needed for him to join that workplace. After six months, however, when the funding vanished, so did the job. That is incredibly devastating to someone who has had to put their life back on track. All of a sudden, it all falls apart. And that isn't the only workplace where government money is used to hire cheap labour.

What does your department do to prevent that kind of abuse?

Mr. Yves Gingras: You are referring to wage subsidy programs. We offer that support through our programs. The provinces and territories also have similar programs, designed to help people enter or re-enter the labour market. The issue you just raised is precisely one of the criticisms of these types of programs. The panel mentioned it in its report. We are aware of those criticisms and we are studying the report, which I think has highlighted the problem. We are examining the report to come up with options and make recommendations that will take us in the right direction. The department is focused on the issue, and we will be making recommendations to our minister.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Your time is up.

We'll move to Mr. Mayes.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I ask a question, I'd like to follow up on what Madam Charlton said with regard to past studies. I've always found that the best way to get the recommendations from past studies is to have the library analysts put all of them together.

Ms. Chris Charlton: It's not the recommendations, but how many of them have been implemented. I think only the department would know that.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Okay. You just want the ones that are implemented. It would be interesting to know what the recommendations are from past studies. We could go through them, see what they are, and maybe find some commonality in some of the reports.

I have a question for the department. One of the things you mentioned in your opening presentation was the Canada pension plan disability program, which is the largest federal income security program for working-age people with disabilities.

With that program, if a person has a disability to the point where to have some skills training would be a challenge and they were to go into an entry-level job at minimum wage, is there a clawback to the income support they receive? If a person who is collecting that income support finds a job that pays minimum wage, what happens to that support? Is it clawed back or not?

Mr. Yves Gingras: I'm not sure about your question. I'll have to take it back to the department. We'll get back to you.

There are efforts under CPPD to allow people to earn and keep what they earn so that they are facilitated for integration into the labour market. We provide opportunities for people to keep what they earn, but I'll get back to you with all the details about how this works.

Mr. Colin Mayes: I have a personal interest because I have a sister with a disability. This was 25 years ago, but she was only allowed to make \$40 a week or else she was going to have a clawback on her pension. She worked for \$1 an hour, and if she made any more than that, she got clawed back. I would be interested to know what the policy is now or if there is a policy.

One of the other challenges she had was that she had a savings account. I was a young lad and I recall that she was saving for a new TV. As soon as they found out that she had money in a savings account, they cut off her pension until she used up her savings account. Is that still a policy?

Those types of things, I think, are very important as far as funding goes. We've worked as a government to help people over the welfare wall by allowing them a certain amount of income, and it might be a good thing for people with more severe disabilities, who maybe cannot enter the labour market where they're going to find a higher level of income. I'd be interested in that information if you could supply that too.

• (1200)

Mr. Yves Gingras: Yes. On this one, we'll supply it to you. There are clawbacks. We'll give you the details of how they work.

This in fact raises issues about people being afraid. One of the barriers for persons with disabilities is being afraid of losing their benefits, so this is tied to your question.

Mr. Colin Mayes: That's right.

Mr. Yves Gingras: We'll get you the details on this.

Mr. Colin Mayes: I understand that we have to balance the interest of having somebody wanting to go to work, like we are doing with EI in making sure there's an incentive to look for a job and for better opportunities. But also, we have to make sure that the ones who can't do it are taken care of. We are doing that in EI on this, and we probably want to do it with benefits for people who are on CPP disability.

Ms. Sylvie Dubé: I'm sorry, I don't have all the details, but I know that for CPPD there is no asset test. It may have been a provincial income support program that your sister was with.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Yes, you're probably correct about that, because I—

Ms. Sylvie Dubé: I don't think it would have been CPPD.

Mr. Colin Mayes: It was quite some time ago. I was just recalling it.

Ms. Sylvie Dubé: We'll get you a full answer.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Thank you very much.

The Chair: You have about a minute.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Okay.

Are there any programs right now that you can tell the committee about that are in the early stages of what we're looking at to try to get people with disabilities into the workforce?

Mr. Yves Gingras: What I can tell you as an official is that we are studying closely the report of the panel. The report was made public in January. We're looking at this closely and analyzing it, and we will be making recommendations.

It would be beyond my role to venture into that territory, but we are paying close attention. We'll be recommending policy options.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that presentation.

I know that during the course of questions and answers, you committed to a number of undertakings. Normally, if they're at all contentious, it would be up to the committee to decide whether those undertakings should be provided. But having seen no objection, you will provide those undertakings.

Once we have a look at them, we'll decide whether or not we might want you to come back to talk about them. It may not be, but we'll have a look. I know there were a number of them, and once we have a look at them, we'll decide.

Mr. Yves Gingras: Mr. Chair, I understand that the staff of Parliament will help with the report card on what was suggested and what was implemented over time. We will focus on clarifying the rules of clawback around CPPD and also clawbacks around pension programs.

The Chair: Well, I would suggest you go through the transcript to see exactly what was agreed to.

Mr. Yves Gingras: Yes.

The Chair: We'll expect it to come in, and then we'll decide from there.

Did you have a question before we leave?

Ms. Chris Charlton: No, this is just to clarify.

I think it's fair enough that the research staff can certainly pull together the recommendations. I'm not sure they would know which ones have been implemented, so I'm hoping we can collaborate just a little on that.

The Chair: Right. I think it will take a little bit of doing, but given that there was quite a bit of give and take there, I think we need to bring it to a place where we'll expect something back and we'll have a look at it and decide from there.

With that, thank you very much for presenting.

I'll suspend for a few moments, as we have some committee business to deal with.

Thank you very much.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1210)

The Chair: I'll call the meeting back to order.

I want to deal with a couple of things that were distributed, and I'll bring them to your attention.

First of all, there's a calendar setting out where we propose to go with the study. You'll see that March 28 is on a Thursday, but Thursday will be a Friday schedule because of the Easter break. There's a couple of things we can do. The issue is that question period will be at 11 o'clock and so is our committee. We could cancel it or move it to an earlier time, like 8:45 to 10:45.

We had a bit of difficulty making this panel work and we tried to accommodate the people for the 28th. That's the only issue that the clerk has brought to my attention. Given that Thursday will be a Friday, that question period will be at 11, and of course the House will adjourn at 2:30, I doubt we would want to go later, but we might want to go earlier. Or, we may want to cancel and reschedule.

Are there any thoughts?

Ms. Chris Charlton: I know it's not all about me, but if you go earlier, scrutiny of regulations meets at the same time, from 8:45 to 10:45, so I can't do both.

The Chair: Yes, Rodger.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: I'll draw on my past experience as a whip. When Thursday becomes a Friday, then Wednesday becomes a Thursday. People are going to want to be getting out on Wednesday night. That's just a fact.

I'm comfortable with cancelling that day—

The Chair: —and rescheduling.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: It gives the researchers an opportunity to get all the work done that they've been tasked with.

The Chair: Well, that's a fair point. I don't see any particular opposition to that idea. We'll cancel it. I know it's a bit awkward, but we'll have to try to reschedule that one for another meeting.

The other thing is the budget for this committee. I don't know if you've had a chance to review it.

Yes, Mr. Butt.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): I have a point of clarification on the schedule.

Is our break week not the week of March 11? Why is it showing committee meetings in the week of the 11th and not the week of the 18th? Those need to be reversed, right?

The Chair: You're probably in February.

Mr. Brad Butt: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm looking at February.

An hon. member: Wake up and smell the thing.

Mr. Brad Butt: I'll wake up and smell the thing, as Mr. Obhrai would say.

The Chair: All right.

Has everybody had an opportunity to look at the budget? Can we deal with it right now? If you do, I'd look for a motion to approve the budget with respect to this study, and the motion would read, "That a proposed budget in the amount of \$33,800, for the study of exploring employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, be adopted."

It is moved by Mr. McColeman and seconded by Mr. Daniel.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Now then, we'll move to the motions that were presented at the last meeting, which I said I would put forward to this meeting.

Yes, Mr. Daniel.

• (1215)

Mr. Joe Daniel: Can we go in camera for that?

The Chair: We could. You are moving that we go in camera.

An hon. member: I'd like a recorded vote.

The Chair: We'll have a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: We'll just take a moment to go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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