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Chair

Mr. Joe Preston

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• (1905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): Members, we are ready to start. We're a little late and I apologize to our witnesses, we had votes in the House that ran a little late and that meant we ran over here. Some of us ran on a bus, but we ran over here and we will now get started.

Again, we're here televised in public and with some video on the fair elections act, Bill C-23. Our witnesses in the first hour tonight are from Raising the Roof, Carolann Barr; and from RainCity Housing and Support Society, Leslie Remund; from the Ethiopian Association, Mr. Beyene.

Is that correct? Did I get your name pretty close to right?

Mr. Wosen Yitna Beyene (President, Ethiopian Association in GTA and Surrounding Regions): That's right, that's good, yes.

The Chair: You're from the GTA, from Toronto and surrounding area? Super.

Normally, we start with a short opening statement if you have it, five minutes or less.

Mr. Beyene, we'll start with you since you're on video. We always do that in case we lose the connection, then you've at least got your input in.

So if you'd like to start with an opening statement, we'll let you do so.

Mr. Wosen Yitna Beyene: Thank you very much, Chairman

Good evening, everybody.

My quick presentation this evening will focus basically on one major element of the bill itself, Bill C-23. I will focus on civic participation in the electoral process and particularly refer to the experience of Ethiopians in Toronto. This is all based on my observations and my engagement within the community.

My role in the community is president of the association. I'll just give you a quick briefing about the association. It has been serving Ethiopians and other newcomers for the last 34 years. It was established in 1980, and we have been providing services for settlement, crisis, for seniors, for youth, HIV/AIDS, and all other types of community initiatives within the community. Although our capacity has been significantly reduced recently, that's part of our mandate and focus, the community service we provide, and again, we are not limited to providing service to Ethiopians. We provide

service to all other eligible newcomers as well, based on the specific program or service we offer.

To give you a quick profile of the Ethiopian community, although we don't have a very clear number, we estimate that about 50,000 Ethiopians reside in Toronto and the GTA. Some of the challenges in the community, based on some of the research, are the huge unemployment and underemployment in the community and some barriers in terms of access to services and programs in very specific areas.

The community is relatively new to Canada, here for the last 30 to 40 years. As a community, although we are trying to address the specific needs of the community, there is a huge gap, and there are a lot of areas that still need to be addressed, one being the active participation of community members—Ethiopians—in the electoral process of different levels of government in Canada, the municipal, provincial, and federal governments.

So on this line, I will just quickly go through my presentation about the bill itself. I would like just to quote the remarks given by the Chief Electoral Officer to this committee, I believe, the Standing Committee on Procedures and House Affairs on March 6:

It is essential to understand that the main challenge for our electoral democracy is not voter fraud, but voter participation. I do not believe that if we eliminate vouching and the VIC as proof of address we will have in any way improved the integrity of the voting process. However, we will...have taken away the ability of many qualified electors to vote.

So with this quotation from the Chief Electoral Officer, I would like to emphasize the key wording about voter participation. I will quickly go through my points: one, how we can engage a community like the Ethiopian Association to be actively involved with voting and the whole electoral process; two, the community engagement that we already have—we engage our community members—could be an opportunity to disseminate and educate the community members with civic education about the Canadian political arena; and three, how we can encourage voters. I don't have concrete data or figures to use here, but from my understanding and observation, I would assume not that many Ethiopians really vote, again, because of factors like social exclusion or inclusion elements, employment, time spent with the family, and time spent at work in support of families.

These are generic features that we hear of in other ethnocultural groups or ethno-specific groups, but again, this is true also in the Ethiopian community. So we need to have a strategy here, along with Bill C-23, which I understand has quite a broader scope than what I'm trying to present here.

•(1910)

But in the participation of our community, the community engagement work can really be done through another organization like the Ethiopian Association in partnership with the electoral office and other relevant organizations. For example, Canada's democracy week in September could be an opportunity where we can educate our community members in the electoral process.

I was involved in training with the Maytree Foundation here in Toronto. It started in 2011 to educate community members on how the different levels of government work. That type of model is also very important in tapping into the existing resources.

I know there are a lot of documents and resources in civic education but there also needs to be access in appropriate language and cultural ways because one of the elements here is the experience of new Canadians. For example, Ethiopians in their home country or in the country of origin and their political culture...political participation has oftentimes a negative impact on the participation of these new Canadians in the Canadian political system. Their experience may not have been a positive one. That will leave them in a situation where they always behave indifferently to the political system. They think their voice wouldn't make a difference or generally they are more reluctant to be part of any political engagement.

The education process has to be customized in a way to address the uniqueness of each community, and each voter as an individual or as part of a group or community. It is at that level that an organization like the Ethiopian Association could be a resource or a potential partner with other existing resources to disseminate education.

Again, first-time voters are also an issue. We need to work at the early stages in engaging parents and young voters within the community to get this education and awareness. That's actually another element. We know that parents and schools are playing a very significant role in the decision-making of their young children in the voting process. So we need to spend resources and effort in educating parents because it will have a compound effect. Although children can get some basic civic education in the schools, which also has an effect in educating their parents, we need to work at both ends to make it really significant and meaningful.

I am aware of the time so this would be my opening remarks.

Thank you very much.

•(1915)

The Chair: Super. Thank you very much.

We'll go to Ms. Barr, for five minutes or less if you could, please.

Ms. Carolann Barr (Executive Director, Raising the Roof): Thank you, everybody.

My name is Carolann Barr. I'm the executive director of Raising the Roof. We're a national charity focused on long-term solutions to homelessness. We do that through partnerships with front-line agencies, research, and public education.

I want to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for inviting me today to speak on Bill

C-23 to amend the Canada Elections Act. There has been lots in the news, and I was watching some of you being interviewed by Evan Solomon just a little while ago. A lot of what I'm going to speak about, I think, is what a lot of people are saying around this issue. I'm going to focus my comments around my expertise around working with vulnerable populations, and specifically the homeless.

I have over 20 years of experience working in this sector, working in front-line agencies, managing programs. I'm in different health and social service sector environments. I've worked with a diverse group of people—youth, adults—who are facing different issues, from mental health to addictions to homelessness to poverty. Really, I have devoted my career to helping reduce barriers that people who are disadvantaged face.

In fact, I was part of the original consultations; I remembered that as I was being invited here. I believe it was in early 2000. It was by Elections Canada and it was round table discussions about how to help people who were struggling with accessing their identification for various reasons, and how to help them vote. So I'm very pleased to be here today.

Elections Canada accepts the voter identification cards as proof of residence in specific locations, such as long-term care facilities, on campuses for students, and it really is a common-sense initiative that has worked. Certainly, I feel very proud to live in a country where you can support your neighbour in this way to help them vote.

Ensuring that all Canadians can exercise their right to vote is what makes the voting process a legitimate process. As we all know, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, section 3, guarantees that all citizens have the right to be involved in the election of their governments and the right to vote in federal, provincial, and municipal elections.

Bill C-23 proposes to get rid of the cards and disallow them as proof of identity or residence. This would certainly have a serious repercussion, potentially, and infringe on the rights of individuals under the charter. Some groups of electors, as I've mentioned, seniors, students, first nations, people who have recently moved, the homeless... There's a recent report that estimates there are 200,000 homeless people in Canada. We know many of them struggle to keep their ID and maintain their ID.

The government claims that eliminating the cards will cut down on electoral fraud. I think we heard you talk about that, Wosen, and it certainly is much more of an issue around voter participation. My understanding is that there really isn't clear evidence about fraud. My question, then, is: why, if this is working, is this being put forward at this point?

At Raising the Roof we work closely with our partner agencies and work directly with the homeless. From my experience in working with these agencies, I know that we all feel that individuals who face losing their housing should not be further marginalized by being unable to exercise their right to vote. We need to ensure that the voter information card is maintained as proof of identity.

The bill also revokes vouching. We know that 120,000 people in the 2011 election relied on that to vote. So it was a significant amount of people. Also, considering the number of homeless, we know it's significant. The Chief Electoral Officer has indicated that there was a 90% accuracy rate in evaluating these. So we don't want to, as the chief is saying, take away the last safety net for those who do not have the necessary documents.

● (1920)

I'll just quickly talk about homelessness.

Homeless Canadians were denied the right to vote, but measures were put in place over the years whereby they could use a shelter as an address. In terms of where we've come today with the voter information card and vouching, I'm really hoping the government will listen to everyone's comments and keep this in place.

People don't have ID because they're struggling with issues, not because they don't want to follow the rules. I think it's really important that we not revert to a time when the most marginalized in our society were denied the right to vote. People who are otherwise disadvantaged have already lost a great deal, and they should not lose their charter right to vote.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barr.

Ms. Remund, five minutes or less for you, if we can, please.

Ms. Leslie Remund (Associate Director, RainCity Housing and Support Society): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Committee members, thank you.

Thank you for inviting RainCity Housing and Support Society to speak to the committee. I'm Leslie Remund. I have worked for RainCity Housing for 18 years. I'm currently in the role of associate director, responsible for the day-to-day operations of our programs.

Here's a little bit about our organization.

RainCity Housing is a service delivery organization, incorporated in 1990. We offer a wide range of housing and support services to the people in Vancouver. We have over 500 supported housing units, 100 emergency shelter beds, and a variety of specialized support programs, including outreach and clinical health services. Our primary operations are located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, one of the most vibrant and yet poorest neighbourhoods in Canada.

I'm going to talk a bit about the community, because that's what I have to offer here.

The Downtown Eastside of Vancouver is unique in its concentration of low-income housing, most of which is operated by non-profit organizations like ours. The overwhelming majority of the 18,000 residents live below the poverty line. Eighty-eight per cent of our community members are renters. In terms of housing security, one-third of those live in single-room occupancy hotels, one-third live in non-market rental suites, and 6% live in community care facilities. We have over 1,600 people who are homeless, living either in shelters or on the streets in Vancouver.

As mentioned, single-room occupancy hotels comprise a substantial stock of low-income rentals. These units are small rooms, most often with communal bathing and shared cooking facilities. It is

an intimate environment, with strong internal communities, yet these hotels often lack the security afforded to those who live in their own apartments. In the emergency shelter system, many people share a common large space with mats on the floor and little privacy.

We have a significant seniors population, making up over 21% of our community, and urban first nations peoples, who constitute 10% of our community.

RainCity Housing and Support Society has issue with two aspects of Bill C-23, the fair elections bill. These are the removal of vouching and the removal of the use of voter identification cards as a means to verify a person's address. My following statement will focus on the practicalities of voter identification for our community members, as this is the grounds for which we have expertise.

There are currently 38.... I've been hearing 35. But I went to the website and counted. So I might be off a few.

The Chair: We had 39.

Ms. Leslie Remund: I went on the elections website. Math is not my strong suit. Social work is more my deal.

The Chair: Don't go by me.

Ms. Leslie Remund: Okay.

We currently have 38 or 39 authorized documents listed by Elections Canada. While this may appear to be substantial, it is deceiving. As I examined the list through the lens of our community, the number of real options for our citizens is substantially lower.

Many of the listed authorized identifications are attached to housing, education, property ownership, or access to conventional public services. Drivers' licences; Canadian passports; fishing, trapping, or hunting licences; utility bills; vehicle ownership and insurance; residential lease; mortgage documents; pension plan statements of contribution; insurance policies; property tax assessment notices; outdoor wildlife cards or licences; firearms licences; and employee cards are not compatible with poverty and for those who have little economic or social mobility.

The use of cheque-cashing services rather than banks is commonplace in low-income communities as the requirements to show valid ID are replaced with other systems of verification. The use of cheque-cashing stores means that the person will not have a debit card, bank card, or a bank statement.

Other listed authorized identification are neither relevant nor attainable, in our experience. ID related to education—student ID cards, correspondence issued by a school, college, or university; or Canadian Blood Services cards, as I have never known a blood drive to happen in our community; or liquor identification cards, which are non-existent in our province.

Some listed pieces of identification have been modernized and no longer carry a person's name on the card, such as our public library cards that contain only a bar code now and a signature.

Expecting citizens in our community to obtain and retain these forms of ID is unreasonable.

As I stated earlier, RainCity Housing and Support Society works with the reality of a person's current situation. Our work is not abstract; it is practical. People arrive at our services with few or no possessions. Large amounts of our front-line staff efforts go toward helping people secure necessary resources, including ID.

We have collectively put thousands of hours into applying and securing identification for people. The process is most often neither quick nor simple. To get an ID, you often need an ID. The starting place is a birth certificate. Birth certificates depend on the financial resources to pay for the fee, knowledge of your mother's maiden name, and your parents' places of birth. The wait time, depending on the province of birth, can be four to six weeks or longer. These are real barriers for the people we work with.

The unique circumstances of our community led the Province of B.C. elections body to add identification options before our last provincial election. In February 2013, prior to our provincial election, Elections B.C. approved the use of prescription labels on medication bottles as an acceptable form of authorized identification for our community alone. This is recognition by our provincial government that the citizens of our community require special consideration to protect their inherent right to vote. We expect no less from our federal government.

Deficits in communities are offset by their strengths. One of the strengths of our community and other low-income communities is the reliance we have on one another. This is where vouching has its strength—one citizen helping another. We believe that vouching should be retained unless or until some other acceptable method can be found to ensure that all Canadians have the right to vote.

A core mission of RainCity Housing and Support Society is to promote the social inclusion of our people, recognizing that most of the people we work with are and have been excluded from participating equally in society. The right to vote is a fundamental right of citizenship and we ask that voter registration be broadened rather than narrowed.

Thank you for your time.

• (1925)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move forward with questioning.

I have Mr. Richards, first. Let's do a seven-minute round and see what we have left.

Mr. Richards, go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Thank you.

I appreciate both of you being here and also you, Mr. Beyene, by video conference.

I would like to focus on you, Ms. Barr, and Ms. Remund.

You both have organizations that deal with homeless or those who are nearly in that situation. When we look at these issues that you're here to talk about today I think everyone in this room would share the goal that we all want to make, which is that every Canadian who seeks to vote has the opportunity to vote. I think we also share the goal of seeking to ensure that those votes are seen by all Canadians to be done in a fair process. Some of the concerns that have come in about the vouching, for example.... I also think it's important that we ensure that we are giving everyone who wants to vote the opportunity to do that.

I'd like to go through some possibilities with you and ask some questions about the process you've used in the past to help those clients you serve to be able to use their right to vote. I understand that vouching is one of the things you have used in the past.

First, let me ask, because when I was doing a little bit of research into this I discovered that in many cases shelters will in fact serve their resident with more than just providing a roof over their head.... Obviously, you're doing a lot more for them. You're trying to help them find a way to get back on their feet. That's something you should be commended for.

One of the things you do is to try to help them get to a situation where they have some ID and proof of who they are because they require it for a lot of things. Even to be able to help find employment and these kinds of things.... What I have been told by many of the provincial governments is that in many cases shelters will help someone get a birth certificate. That's the first and most basic form of ID that allow for some of the other IDs to be had. You did mention, Ms. Remund, the 39 pieces of ID. It is 39. There's a number of them that must be used. Some of them can prove identity and others can prove address. Some can prove all of course. So there are number of options.

You did go through some that wouldn't apply. You're absolutely right that in many of the cases that you indicated, for the clients you talk about it wouldn't probably apply. Certainly, the service that shelters do provide for getting the birth certificate for someone, that would obviously provide the first piece of ID that's required. They would then require something to prove the address.

I assume that you're aware that one of those pieces that can be used as identity to prove address is an attestation of residence from a shelter or a soup kitchen. Obviously, if you were able to provide that in addition to the service you already provide for obtaining a birth certificate, it would give the necessary two pieces of ID. The reason I point that out is because I think the vouching process would be a far simpler way for you to be able to help clients...to serve in the vouching process. The reason for the vouching process, as I'm sure you're aware what's required there, is someone who lives in the same poll can only vouch once for an individual. Obviously that becomes, I would assume, complicated for you because if you had, say, employees vouching, they would have to live in the poll where the shelter is located. Second, you can only vouch for one person per employee. I'm aware of some volunteer programs that exist to do that, however those probably are in a bit of a grey area because we don't know in fact whether there is that relationship. On Elections Canada's website the examples they use is a neighbour or a roommate. Obviously, that shows an ongoing relationship with somebody to prove who they are.

I'm curious about your thoughts because of the fact that many shelters do provide that birth certificate and are paying for that for them. Also, there's the availability of the attestation of residence. Whether that is something you feel might better facilitate enabling you to help your clients to be able to vote in an election...

What are your thoughts on that?

• (1930)

Ms. Carolann Barr: I've been involved with ID clinics in different services in and around the Toronto area. I certainly think, yes, getting ID and getting help to get clients to get ID is always a focus. We know it's very important for them to start to stabilize their lives and hopefully look at some opportunities to get housing.

I know that those programs are always in jeopardy of shutting down. On the one hand, yes, it's a good first step and it's important. But there is limited funding. I was talking to an organization the other day who was telling me the importance of their ID clinic, not just for homeless in the community, but for other people who maybe had a fire in their house and lost their ID. It can apply to a lot of different people. Of course, the funding for that program is in jeopardy. While someone is working on getting their ID, whether it's through an ID clinic or having some—

• (1935)

Mr. Blake Richards: But I'm certain that, for a program like that, there would be a lot of support among the community. I think you would find there would be many civic-minded people who would be more than inclined to support something like that, not only to allow someone the right to vote, but there are so many reasons why that basic idea is necessary. I'm sure you'd find much support—

Ms. Carolann Barr: I know. It hasn't been federal money, but it has been provincial money for those programs. I know from working in the sector for 20 years that they're always in jeopardy of shutting down. So, yes, I agree. Getting ID is important. It's always a responsibility of a social service worker to get people that kind of help and get them on track.

Mr. Blake Richards: I haven't much time, so I'm going to interrupt you. I apologize for that.

The other thing is the attestation of residence. Is that something you feel you could provide to your clients as a service? Is that something you would find difficult to provide?

Ms. Leslie Remund: We have provided those. You have to understand that, when a person comes in, we're triaging a multiplicity of issues with that person. What we have to do is prioritize, often. We're adequately staffed, but the work is extremely challenging. We have a triaging process, and often people aren't staying long enough—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm going to interrupt once again. Would you find, though, that this attestation—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: —especially if you have a form, might be an easier process than running a volunteer program to find people to volunteer to vouch?

The Chair: I'm invisible again.

Thank you, Mr. Richards.

We'll get very quick answers from our witnesses, because we're not going to make our second round if we don't meet—

Ms. Leslie Remund: I don't think one is better than another. I think we need as many as possible.

The Chair: Super. Thank you.

Ms. Carolann Barr: I would agree.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Christopherson, and I think you're splitting your time, but you'll tell me when.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

In fact, I'll be asking the initial question and then passing it off to my colleagues.

The Chair: That's great.

Mr. David Christopherson: I join with my colleagues in thanking all of you for being here tonight. It means a lot. This is an important piece of Canadian business, and it really matters that you're here. So thank you very much.

If I might, I'll swing over to Mr. Beyene. Sir, we appreciate very much your presentation. I have to say at the outset that I'm very fortunate that I've been to your beautiful country twice. The last time I was there, I was in Addis Ababa, and I was there for the 50th anniversary of the African Union and the grand opening of its new headquarters. It's a beautiful country. In your area of the GTA and surrounding areas in Hamilton, we have a very small Ethiopian community, but very vibrant, and very interested in playing the full citizen role.

My question to you is this, sir. Under the proposed legislation, the Chief Electoral Officer would no longer be responsible for the broader education programs and the broader education of Canadians, not on matters of where you vote and how you vote and the ID, but on what our electoral system is and how it works. They work with communities, different groups in society, and the purpose of course is to allow, in the case of your presentation, those from Ethiopia, for whom Canada is a new country, to participate. The bill restricts the Chief Electoral Officer from doing that, and leaves it to the political parties, who say that they're educating people anyway, and it's in their best interest.

We in the NDP are concerned that this is too narrow a focus. Political parties are all about electing people, and we think the Chief Electoral Officer should continue the work of educating the broader community and working with communities. I just wondered if you would expand on that, on how important it is for your community to have that kind of education as to what our system is and the thinking behind it, and that the Chief Electoral Officer should continue to play the role he's playing, rather than cutting out the Chief Electoral Officer and only relying on political parties.

Just what are your thoughts on that, sir?

Mr. Wosen Yitna Beyene: Thank you very much.

Again, thank you for the remark about my country of origin.

This is a very critical question in terms of who will be continuing to educate new Canadians and all other Canadians to be actively involved and meaningfully participate in the electoral process. From my reading, until now the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada have been doing quite a significant amount of educational processes and educational work, to the extent that I have seen a budget of about \$1.6 million for educational work in the year 2012-13. They have been making educational materials in different languages. They have been partnering with community organizations that have been working along these lines, and doing a lot of promotion and advertising in various media to educate the community. These are all critical things to really create meaningful participation for newcomers.

Again, from my learning about Elections Canada, the parents in the school play a significant and meaningful role in terms of supporting their young voters, young children, in the voting and the democratic process. Based on the data, about 46% of youth are getting this education in the schools, and also the parents. This has been part of the process through Elections Canada and the authority that is given to the Chief Electoral Officer.

● (1940)

Mr. David Christopherson: Very good.

Mr. Wosen Yitna Beyene: So that will create a huge void. My question would again go back to the committee. If not the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Canada, who will be doing that? Will there be a commitment in terms of putting resources back in place to make these educational processes happen?

Community organizations like the Ethiopian Association could be a good partner in terms of the context and the customization of these educational processes, making it very appropriate in the language, culture, and more importantly, in really dealing with the political

culture and political experience of new Canadians to build on their country of origin.

As you all know, most countries, say, in Africa have a very troubled political process, and election and voting is quite a strange or new concept per se for some people. So there should be a huge educational process.

Mr. David Christopherson: Excellent. Thank you so very much, sir.

The Chair: Just under two minutes, thank you.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Exactly.

Mr. Beyene, thank you so much for coming, I think you've done an excellent job briefing us all on the importance of public education and outreach in new immigrant communities..

I wanted to turn to Ms. Barr and Ms. Remund.

You've both emphasized something I thought was really quite important; you both used an expression very similar or identical to the idea of one citizen helping another. The idea of dignity that evokes was really quite striking to me. I think it's quite important, also, when Mr. Richards was maybe suggesting that there are some kinds of limitations on who can vouch for whom. There are no limitations at all in section 143, other than being a co-citizen in your polling division.

So I'm wondering if you could speak a little more to the whole question of the dignity of voting for the people you work with, and why somehow or other we should not be losing sight of that.

Ms. Leslie Remund: The people we work with face oppressive circumstances daily in their lives. Poverty is constantly seeking and searching to get your needs met. One of the beauties of the community I talk about is, when one person has groceries, for example, what you'll see in the Downtown Eastside is that they'll share those groceries with their neighbour. It's so someone is not poor and hungry; they both have something.

I think when there's a natural deficit in the community, something steps into that, and that's really the human spirit of kindness. One of the things I see that people are fighting for in our community is agency. I think there's nothing more that gives you agency in society than placing a vote. I will say there are political buttons in our community of all parties. There's political discussion that happens. It's an equalizing factor for us all. It's one of the very few things that's not based on economics or status in our society. Placing that vote and having a say is the one place that we are all equal.

An hon. member: Hear, hear!

● (1945)

The Chair: Mr. Scott, thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Simms for seven minutes, please.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Thank you.

Thanks for coming here and thanks for joining us through video conference.

One of you said—and I apologize for forgetting who—to get an ID, you need an ID, which are words I have not heard here yet, and actually it's a valid point. Quite frankly, I think it's the most salient way to say this.

When you hear about 38, 39, or it could be 100 pieces of ID, once you get past the basic few, it becomes further out of reach for the average citizen, certainly for those who are impoverished. There are examples that you gave: leases; mortgages; the bills, provided they come through the mail. The basic stuff now comes down to a health card, and unfortunately, it does not contain the address, which makes it that much more problematic. Let's assume they can get the attestation that's being discussed here. How difficult do you think that is to get?

Ms. Leslie Remund: I don't know that the attestation itself is that difficult. We talked about cultural norms. I think the other thing we have to talk about is community norms. We have seniors in our community who have been going to the same cheque-cashing place for 30 years, to the same bar—that's actually their living room because they live in a little hotel room.

Identifications in our communities are also often because there's history: "I've known you this long", right? We have doctors who don't ask for the care card because they've served that person for 20 years.

So I'm not sure if I'm answering your question. I think what I'm trying to say is in the absence of identification, people have created other norms and those norms are alive and strong in our community. Certainly we don't have a lot of people ask for attestations. We willingly provide attestations.

But not all of the people in poverty are living in a shelter either. So I think that's the other thing. There are a lot of people in our community who are what I would call under-housed. So they're sharing small places, or they're living in the single-room occupancy hotels that I'd talked about. So not all poor, homeless, or precariously housed people have that option for the attestation. Did I answer your question?

Mr. Scott Simms: But it's not a normal thing? Let's put it that way. You don't see this happening too often?

Ms. Leslie Remund: No.

Mr. Scott Simms: And it's a new practice that will have to be introduced.

Ms. Leslie Remund: And it has some complications to it, where you have to be verified at the election. I can't just write a letter and hand it to someone; there's a verification process. A certain person at the shelter has to sign it.

Mr. Scott Simms: Right.

When I deal with seniors, one of the things they lean on heavily is the voter information card. It is quite possibly one of the most famous things we use, and it almost seems to me now that with the new rules and the way they are, I don't even know if Elections Canada can really communicate to the point where they can tell people, "By the way, you can't use that anymore".

So I don't know what kind of a public campaign will be in place to do that, but you're familiar with that obviously because you both

mentioned it. But it is something that the population, the people you deal with, rely on heavily when they go to vote.

Ms. Leslie Remund: Yes. Most of the people who I know who are voting are using the voter identification card. It's a common practice because they don't have ID.

Mr. Scott Simms: That's correct, obviously. But what's the most common identification card that people would have that you deal with?

Ms. Leslie Remund: I wouldn't have the answer to that.

Mr. Scott Simms: Can I venture to guess, say, the health card?

Ms. Leslie Remund: I wouldn't venture to guess the health card.

Mr. Scott Simms: Okay.

Ms. Leslie Remund: The community has created a lot of its own ID mechanisms. We have a life skills centre that has a life skills card, so there are community-formulated identifications that people use more than government-issued ID, frankly.

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes. So I guess to say that vouching plays a very important role come election time for the people you deal with in order for them to vote...this is an essential part.

Ms. Leslie Remund: Yes. It's one of the things that we talk about, come election time, the ability to vouch for your neighbour.

Mr. Scott Simms: Would you say there's widespread abuse?

Ms. Leslie Remund: I don't know if there's widespread abuse. I can't see the rationale for abuse. I certainly have never heard of anyone wanting to run from the homeless shelter to a poll to pretend to be somebody else. They have quite a bit going on already. It doesn't seem reasonable to me in our context.

• (1950)

Ms. Carolann Barr: Yes.

Mr. Scott Simms: Go ahead, Ms. Barr.

Ms. Carolann Barr: Yes, I would add to that. It's just that people have so much going on that there is not the agenda to commit fraud. It's a big deal to be able to get to a polling station and vote. And I think when we're talking about this too, it's important for folks to be able to vote for who they think is going to help them with some of the issues they're facing as well. For them not to have that opportunity or a range of opportunities—again, I think it's important we get the ID and get that in place and have funding and programs to do that. But while that's happening, we also need to have some kind of mechanism.

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Beyene, sorry. I didn't mean to exclude you here in this conversation.

Anything you've heard thus far that you'd like to add to?

Mr. Wosen Yitna Beyene: I was trying to be very specific in terms of the civic engagement and the civic education part. But again, voting to me seems also very critical. That's one of the ways to empower even new Canadians, by avoiding barriers to and challenges of freely participating in the electoral process. Again, that context is that voting is like a privilege, and it's an honour for me. When I first came to Canada, 15 years ago, and then I got my citizenship and I went to vote, that was the first time that I voted in my life. So that's a very honoured experience. And if there are situations that will hinder that process, I think that's also another question in the electoral process.

The Chair: Mr. Simms, you're over seven minutes. I do apologize.

Mr. Scott Simms: Sorry.

The Chair: Just because I'm Canadian I guess I apologize.

We've got time I think if we do a one minute ask and answer kind of thing.

I've got Mr. O'Toole.

You're next for one minute. Go.

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Okay, thank you all. Thank you very much and Ms. Barr, I feel like I should have my toque on. I've admired the work of Raising the Roof.

I'm going to make a quick statement and then get your comment. Building on what my colleague Mr. Richards said, your participation in 2000 or 2001 with Elections Canada actually led to the 39 pieces, so thank you for getting us there. There's a lot of talk about disenfranchisement but as it works now this form could be used by all the groups you mentioned, seniors, students, first nations, homeless, because the document prepared with your assistance and others' has documentation on here that will satisfy the residency requirements for those potentially disenfranchised groups.

So in the case of homelessness the letter, as we said, from the shelter administrator... If band councils, shelters, schools, seniors residences, the day an election was called using a form provided by Elections Canada, printed that off, then all you'd need is a government check stub or a government benefit statement.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. O'Toole.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: All of it's satisfied. Could your group produce those on the first day of the election and provide it for your members?

The Chair: I know I've been cutting back on my food but I don't think I'm invisible yet. When I do mention your name you should probably stop and we'll move on to Ms. Latendresse.

One minute, so try to ask and answer in that time and we'll get as much as we can.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): I will be really quick.

I am going to continue along the same lines as Mr. O'Toole. Do you think it is reasonable for the government to ask homeless shelters and soup kitchens to provide all this paperwork? Organizations like that already have a huge amount of responsibility to carry

and work to do. They are helping people who are at such a disadvantage. Do you believe that the government is using resources wisely by asking those organizations to now be wholly and completely responsible for making sure that their people can vote?

[English]

Ms. Leslie Remund: I think the only people who think about elections weeks and months ahead of time are politicians, frankly.

Ms. Carolann Barr: I do think shelters are under-resourced with staff who may have little experience who are dealing with high crisis situations. It is a lot to ask of them especially when there are not the resources put to help people get the ID or help them get to the voting stations. So it is a lot to ask.

● (1955)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Reid, one minute, asked and answered, if we could please.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): I just wanted to ask Ms. Remund something, please. British Columbia at the provincial level has vouching, so that raises a question for me. I gather vouching does not allow... Vouching is the sort of thing where you don't have to live in the same poll, as I understand it. Nonetheless, I gather that this does not mean that everybody can come in and vote. Some people still need some kind of physical identification. I assume this based on the fact that British Columbia said you can bring in a prescription bottle. Can you just expand on that a little bit?

Ms. Leslie Remund: The prescription bottle piece?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. But first of all, why vouching? Clearly even when it's made very general it doesn't seem to actually resolve all problems, and then the problem the prescription bottle resolves.

Ms. Leslie Remund: There are lots of problems to getting out the vote in low-income communities, especially given the high needs of that community to start with. Our position is that vouching is not the solution, nor is the voter identification card a solution to something. But when you look at the list of all those options and what is realistic in the hands of the people we know... I went through the list and among them there were eight or nine that I've regularly seen people having versions of in my 18-year career. So our issue is that taking two more reasonable options away from people limits the ability to vote in our community. That's why the prescription bottle... We didn't expect everyone was going to go with the prescription bottle, but it was one more realistic option that people had in their hands.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to stop right there, and we'll suspend for a couple of minutes.

We'll thank our guests. Thank you very much for your help tonight and for the information you were able to share with us.

We will suspend for just a couple of minutes while we change to our next panel.

- (1955) _____ (Pause) _____
- (2000)

The Chair: We'll come back to order, please. We'll go to our second hour. We have two guests on video conference from Vancouver, British Columbia, tonight. We have Wanda Mulholland, a community development coordinator for the Burnaby Task Force on Homelessness, and we have Nathan Allen from the Portland Hotel Society.

Welcome to you both.

Then we have Abram Oudshoorn from the great city of London and the London Homeless Coalition.

We welcome you all. We're going to start with opening statements from our guests on video conference. I always like to do that, and then if we lose the connection or something, we at least have your opening statements in.

Ms. Mulholland, would you like to start off for us tonight?

Ms. Wanda Mulholland (Community Development Coordinator, Burnaby Task Force on Homelessness): Thank you very much.

Thank you for the opportunity to present a submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs regarding Bill C-23, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act.

I specifically wish to speak to the importance of vouching in the election process.

My name is Wanda Mulholland. I am the community development coordinator for the Burnaby Task Force on Homelessness, which was formed in January 2005. The task force is non-partisan and comprises representatives from government agencies, the health authority, RCMP, social service and community organizations, business improvement associations, housing providers, faith communities, and concerned citizens, who are all committed to working together to identify and address issues of homelessness in the city of Burnaby.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 25, section (1) states:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

I speak on behalf of Burnaby citizens who live in extreme poverty and homelessness. These Canadian citizens do not benefit from many of the basic rights proclaimed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We know that poverty is the leading cause of homelessness. Twenty per cent of the homeless are visible on the street. The other

80% are the hidden homeless, staying temporarily with friends or on a couch.

Many of the men and women living in poverty are employed—the working poor—or are students or citizens living on low income. All are living in temporary and unsuitable locations, facing challenges regarding safety, adequate sleep, clothing, food, access to medical care, and access to suitable housing.

Each person has his or her own life circumstance that led to homelessness. Some of the influencing factors include loss of employment, fire, illness, traumatic incident, disability, family issues, mental illness, drug addiction, or combinations thereof.

Many people who are currently homeless have led what others would consider to be productive lives until something caused their life to unravel. These are people who held careers that included firefighter, teacher, business owner, successful university student, published author, loving parent. Many have, through homelessness, lost their families, their community, and their sense of self-worth.

At every turn the homeless are ostracized from mainstream society. People living in poverty have obstacles in utilizing public transportation because they do not have the funds for the transit fare. People living in poverty are prevented from using washrooms in businesses because those facilities are only for paying customers. People living in extreme poverty are isolated and rejected because they often do not conform to society's expectations of hygiene, appearance, and behaviour. People living in poverty are often fearful for their own safety because they do not have the security of a home to protect themselves from the vengeance of others.

People who are homeless frequently are without identification with which to access medical or government services. The lack of identification also impedes a person's ability to vote. In municipal, provincial, and federal elections, the Burnaby Task Force on Homelessness has worked with a member agency to offer assistance to marginalized people interested in voting. We have offered the use of attestation forms to vouch for a person who is without all of the proper identification required for voting.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that

every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein.

Removing the option of vouching prevents marginalized people from exercising their right to vote as Canadian citizens. It is yet another way of ostracizing people from the rights of citizens in mainstream society because they are poor.

On behalf of Canadian citizens all across the country who are living in extreme poverty and homelessness, including citizens from Burnaby, British Columbia, the Burnaby Task Force on Homelessness recommends that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs view the proposed amendments to the Elections Act as unconstitutional and undemocratic, and as a significant infringement on the basic rights of many vulnerable Canadian citizens.

• (2005)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mulholland.

We'll go to Mr. Allen now for an opening statement, if you could, please.

Mr. Nathan Allen (Manager, Pigeon Park Savings, Portland Hotel Society): Thank you.

Thank you to the committee for allowing this time to provide some on-the-street information about some of the challenges faced by low-income Canadians in providing identification credentials.

I've been a resident of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside for more than 12 years. Most of that time I've worked as a manager of Pigeon Park Savings Credit Union, which is also branch 48 of Vancouver City Savings Credit Union and run in partnership with the PHS Community Services Society. Pigeon Park Savings opened more than 10 years ago to provide financial services to low-income residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, containing within it the subdistricts of Gastown, Chinatown, and Strathcona.

The Downtown Eastside is Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood and was once a work camp with a high concentration of hundreds of units in what are now called single-room occupancy hotels or SROs. These rooms are 10 feet by 10 feet with shared bathrooms on each floor, about six-storey buildings, and 100 years ago SRO hotels provided working men a place to stay between jobs in the forest. Some might be familiar with the Canadian country music legend Ian Tyson's song *Summer Wages*, which is about life in Vancouver at that time.

Over the years of course that resource-based work moved farther away from the cities, services and businesses left the Downtown Eastside, and these hotels became home to Vancouver's poorest residents. Vancouver, with an important shipping port, major airport, and close proximity to the United States, saw an increasing availability of illicit narcotics, and these drugs flooded into the Downtown Eastside, where alcoholism was already endemic. Initially these narcotics were opiates like heroin, and now for the last 20 years or so there's a high prevalence of crack cocaine and more recently crystal methamphetamine.

While this influx of narcotics on the street increased, police engaged in a containment strategy of herding drug dealing and prostitution out of other more affluent areas of Vancouver and concentrating the drug and sex trades in the Downtown Eastside. At the same time, governments moved toward the deinstitutionalization of mental health services, without providing sufficient alternative resources in communities, resulting in an influx of unsupported mentally ill people into the Downtown Eastside. Also, the legacy of policies of residential schools is keenly felt in the neighbourhood,

where for example nearly one in four homeless people identify as aboriginal. They're 2% of the population.

Meanwhile, senior levels of government got out of the business of building housing, and increased development pressure in downtown Vancouver has driven up housing costs, further decreasing affordable housing stock. Additionally, as Vancouver does not have the freezing cold winters of the rest of Canada, it also does not have the same shelter infrastructure as eastern Canadian cities do.

What does this have to do with voting?

Because of all that I just referenced, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside has an exceptionally high number of eligible voters who do not have the identification necessary to participate in a Canadian election.

Pigeon Park Savings has served the Downtown Eastside community since 2004. The bank was a necessary intervention, as it is very difficult for low-income citizens to obtain financial services. The biggest challenge in doing so is producing the adequate identification required to open an account. This adequate identification is the same as is required to vote.

How do we open accounts for people without ID? As in the Elections Act we rely on vouching. We rely on vouching from neighbours, financial assistance workers, housing providers, clinical workers, including doctors and nurses, and so on. In over 10 years of operations, having opened accounts for more than 10,000 individuals, we have never had one case of fraud as a result of a falsified identity.

Why is finding adequate identification a problem?

The number one reason is cost. Photo identification such as a B.C. ID card or driver's licence costs at least \$40, and for someone living on income assistance of around \$200 a month that cost is out of reach for many people, and effectively acts as a poll tax on citizens.

Insecure housing and homelessness make it very difficult for people to hold onto their possessions as well, and depressingly, people who are found asleep outdoors will often have their pockets picked, or if living in insecure housing like those SROs available to very poor Downtown Eastside residents, their rooms are often robbed.

Finally, mental health and addictions remain in a crisis situation in Vancouver. My experience working with people who struggle with mental illness is that it is often a challenge to navigate bureaucracies like those required to acquire identification documents. Also, for individuals struggling with acute mental health issues, it is difficult to keep documents, as they are often misplaced or lost.

In conclusion, I can only state from my experience that voters living on the margins of our society—people who I believe should be voting, as public policy directly affects them—require another mechanism to exercise their right to vote. For thousands of very vulnerable citizens, producing the credentials required may be impossible.

I urge the committee to think about the tens of thousands of homeless Canadian voters when amending laws governing our elections, and consider ways to ensure all eligible voters have access to our democratic system.

Thank you again.

• (2010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Allen.

Mr. Oudshoorn, your opening statement, if you would, please....

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn (Chair, London Homeless Coalition): I also extend my thanks to the committee for having me here today.

I present to you today on behalf of the London Homeless Coalition and the London Community Advocates Network; however, my comments also draw heavily on my experience working front-line as a nurse with people experiencing homelessness at the London Intercommunity Health Centre and on my current position as an assistant professor in the Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing, where my research and teaching focus on the intersections of poverty, housing, and health.

There are two brief pictures I hope to paint for you, to in some small way bring you the realities, as the other witnesses have, of Canadian citizens experiencing homelessness. These are obtaining identification and then a picture of what happens on typical election day in London, Ontario.

Maintaining and obtaining identification is one of the key challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness in terms of barriers to exiting homelessness and exiting poverty in general. Both qualitative and quantitative research studies have continually highlighted the rapid decline of possessing current and accurate identification starting from the date of first homelessness. That is to say, the longer one is homeless, the exponentially less likely one is to have current and accurate identification. This particularly impacts those living with a mental health challenge as well as women fleeing domestic violence.

How is identification lost? Unfortunately, as others have said, it's frequently stolen along with one's personal possessions. It's also lost in the chaos of people's lives. At times it's left behind if a person is unable to return to a shelter where their belongings are temporarily stored or if women fleeing violence are unable to go back and access their possessions.

Once identification is lost, as has been mentioned, the process to replace it is laborious, expensive, and long. Individuals often have to start right back at connecting with their community of birth to obtain a birth certificate, then wait four to eight weeks for this to come in before accessing the next piece of identification. This process is also a challenge as one requires a permanent address throughout the process for where that ID is going to. Fortunately, many agencies that serve people who are homeless are well-equipped and used to serving as a permanent address on a temporary basis. Unfortunately, due again to the chaos in people's lives, the process of replacing lost identification is often interrupted. There are many times when pieces of ID, after being ordered, end up sitting unclaimed as the person enters a new cycle of distress. Therefore, on any given day a significant number of people experiencing homelessness in Canada find themselves without identification.

This is a challenge, but historically in London we've been able to rise to that challenge. Health and social service agencies in London mobilize every election day to ensure, as much as possible, that citizens who want to vote are able to in spite of their housing status and identification challenges. This community-wide mobilization focuses firstly on ensuring that individuals are using an agency for their permanent address and are thus able to obtain the voter ID card. For those who have not received that or if it's gone to a different place, the next level of mobilization is with the provisions under 143 (3) of the Canada Elections Act, known colloquially as the vouching system.

As you are aware, under this section of the act, those with proper identification are able to vouch for another citizen within their polling area. Part of what we do is first make sure that the agencies serving the homeless know how it works—so, workers across health and social service agencies are made aware of these provisions and people self-identify who live within polling areas where many people who are homeless are located.

When a person experiencing homelessness but without identification enters an agency and expresses an interest in voting—often the agencies have a sign that says, “Ask us how you can vote”—they are connected with someone who can vouch for them, whether it's someone who works in the agency or another person who's homeless who's also said that they would like to vote. They will be accompanied by someone who can vouch for them at the polling station. This is made simpler in our community because one or more of the serving agencies use our polling stations and it makes it a little easier for everyone in terms of the walking.

So this gives you a bit of a picture of what we do.

To this statement I would like to add a bit of a clarification on the letter of attestation because this is something that, unlike the previous witnesses, we do use quite frequently within London. Unfortunately, the wording is that the person ordinarily resides and receives services at such-and-such agency. That works well for some people. If people have been in a shelter for a while, that works. For others, whether they're sleeping rough, transient from city to city, couch surfing and their address is changing, or whether they're recently admitted into social housing so their housing status is changing, that doesn't work. Although we do use the letter of attestation quite a bit, it still leaves a big gap, which is where the vouching fills in.

• (2015)

Under Bill C-23 the provisions of subsection 143(3) are removed. This will present a very real challenge to people experiencing homelessness across Canada and disenfranchise them from a significant part of the democratic process. Unfortunately, a full identification replacement is simply not achievable on time, in most cases. As hard as we try, it just often isn't there on time, and the agencies do try their best. This means that if Bill C-23 proceeds as written, a particular subset of the population would be adversely impacted. In any policy analysis, when a particular subset is affected, that is a red flag.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're moving well on time.

I'll go to Mr. Reid, for seven minutes please.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll start with you, Mr. Oudshoorn.

You talked about the attestation forms and your use of them. I gather that if someone goes in to vote with an attestation form, they also require another piece of identification. That form on its own is not sufficient. Is that correct?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: I would have to defer to a social worker to answer that question.

Mr. Scott Reid: The reason I ask is I was basing it on what the Chief Electoral Officer puts out on his website about what you need to have. He says that an original document with name and address is required, but it's in a category that says "Show two pieces of authorized identification. Both pieces must have your name and one must also have your address".

I gather that this is one of the two and it's the one with the address.

The reason I ask is, that piece of identification, if we treat it as unique, one that would serve on its own, would it be helpful? I gather you're not actually able to answer that question.

• (2020)

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: One thing I do know from my colleagues who provide the direct service, the social workers, is that it's that "ordinarily reside and receive services from" that's the bigger issue. They do give out the letters of attestation as people request them. But they can do it only if they are able.

For example, if someone comes to the Intercommunity Health Centre, which provides a lot of the services, the centre doesn't necessarily know where that person ordinarily resides. So it would be dependent upon a shelter. It could be a shelter where the person may have just come in that night or it could be a shelter that provides a nightly service, like a managed alcohol drop-in or recovery situation where people come and go.

Again, it's the "ordinarily reside" that becomes an issue. That letter is helpful for some but not all.

Mr. Scott Reid: I was about to interrupt you. I hate it when people do that, so I'm glad you finished because now I don't have to interrupt you.

Wouldn't that be a problem with vouching anyway? If a person is in a sense "in flux" as to where they reside that very day, then finding someone who resides in the same poll to vouch for them becomes an issue, I would think.

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: It's different then because...say I'm the nurse at a health centre and someone I know walks in. I've seen them and I know their name. If it matches up with their file of providing services and they happen to live in the poll that I live in, then that is a requirement that is met.

I think what you'll see in these situations is that each part of the system, whether it's the vouching or the letter of attestation, has a bit of a different scenario for the individual, and the current suite of options provides the most ability for everyone to vote.

Mr. Scott Reid: As you can see, one thing I'm trying to figure out is whether that letter of attestation can be adjusted and made more useful.

I don't know if you know the answer to this question. If you do, I'll keep on asking you questions. But if you don't, I'll turn to one of the other witnesses.

Does Elections Canada provide a standard blank form?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: Yes, it does.

Mr. Scott Reid: Then they do have one and that's what you use.

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: We print it off, and there is a section for the individual to fill out and a section for the service agency provider to fill out.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right, and they keep a list of the authorized signatures of people who have worked at the shelters, is that how it operates?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: That's a detail I would not know.

Mr. Scott Reid: Maybe I can ask Ms. Mulholland, then.

You had said, and I actually wrote it down, that, "We've offered the use of attestation forms to vouch for persons who have no ID".

I want to ask you about something in that quote. But first, I'll ask about the forms you're using. As I was asking Mr. Oudshoorn, do you know the answer to that?

Ms. Wanda Mulholland: Yes, the forms we've used have been provided by Elections Canada. The way we've been instructed to use them, through our member agency, is that the address on those forms would be the address of the agency, for people who are of no fixed address. That's how we've been able to identify that we know the person, that this is their address, and that it fits within that catchment.

Mr. Scott Reid: So you don't actually know their address, in the sense that they are of no fixed address. But essentially you know they're local and likely to be within that poll or couple of polls, that sort of thing.

Ms. Wanda Mulholland: Burnaby is very large geographically. There are lots of parks, and a number of our homeless folks live in camps in the parks. It would be impossible to identify an address other than the agency.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, I got that.

We have offered the use of attestation forms to vouch for persons who have no ID. The way you phrased it, I assume you didn't mean that literally because attestation forms are one thing and vouching is a separate thing. I assume you can issue an attestation form for a number of different people. You don't have to live in the same poll. However, you must be someone who is in a responsible position at a soup kitchen or a shelter, or one of a limited number of agencies.

Those are actually two separate things that you were talking about, I assume. Is that right?

Ms. Wanda Mulholland: Yes.

The person who has filled out those forms has been the supervisor at the homeless outreach program exclusively.

Mr. Scott Reid: Alright, that's helpful to me.

Mr. Allen, you mentioned how you have people vouch for individuals to establish an account at Pigeon Park Savings. I'm assuming that this is not quite the same as the vouching that is used by Elections Canada. I could be wrong; it might be exactly the same.

I'm guessing that the individual who is doing the vouching is effectively doing something more like the attestation. Would that be true, or am I wrong?

• (2025)

Mr. Nathan Allen: Well, I mean it's a case-by-case basis. However, I have personally opened accounts where a person moves into a new housing project and there's a neighbour who's had an account with us for awhile, similar to a voter who has voted for awhile and is already on the voters list. They say, "He doesn't have ID right now, but he needs to open an account, and I can vouch for him". I do open that account. We haven't experienced any fraud as a result of that practice.

That accessibility has meant a great deal to a lot of people in the neighbourhood.

Mr. Scott Reid: I can imagine.

They're putting money in, though. I assume they don't come in and say, "I'll vouch for someone so he can now take money out".

Is that right?

Mr. Nathan Allen: Of course, there's no money in the account until they put money in.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right, okay.

I'm not sure how much I can pursue that because I'm still having some trouble getting the mental picture.

Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have zero time left.

Mr. Scott Reid: Well, I won't get to ask that question then.

Thank you very much. You've been helpful.

The Chair: We'll go to Madame Latendresse for seven minutes, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by thanking the witnesses for being here today.

I would like to thank you especially for the work that you are doing in general. You are helping the most disadvantaged people in our society. Without people like you, they would have absolutely nothing. You have my sincere thanks.

We are currently examining changes that are going to be made to the Canada Elections Act. Among other things, people will no longer be able to use the voter information card or be able to be vouched for in order to vote, and that is a problem. It is true that not a lot of people used those systems. We know that a great majority of Canadians have a driver's license and that is all you need in order to vote. In reality, however, those two measures were the safety net that made sure that every Canadian citizen had the right to vote. It is a basic right under our Constitution.

The people you are representing today are those we are discussing here. Those whom, basically, society has forgotten. But they still have the right to vote. The vouching system and the new system using the voter information card are two measures that made sure that no one was left by the wayside.

I have here figures showing that, depending on the way in which you calculate the number, we presently have between 300,000 and 900,000 people in Canada considered homeless or with no fixed address. That number is very high. I would not have believed that it could be so high. It is people like you who have to run around to provide the documentation those people need in order to be able to vote. What you are doing already is super. But this measure gives homeless shelters and soup kitchens the entire responsibility of providing the documentation. In my opinion, that is putting an enormous burden on resources that are already overused. You do not have a lot of time and energy to be able to spend on it.

Could I hear your comments and thoughts on the matter?

Ms. Mulholland, you can answer first, if you like.

[English]

Ms. Wanda Mulholland: We're committed to assisting the people who are in need. There has never been any concern on our part about the time that it takes because our priority is to provide an opportunity for people to vote if they wish.

The idea that this might be removed is of great concern to us.

Mr. Nathan Allen: I could add to that.

Some days, working in the neighbourhood, it's really hectic. There are a lot of things going on. If we're wanting, on election day, to help someone to vote—people who are disabled, in wheelchairs, have trouble with mobility issues, to find the individual in their poll to walk with them, to be the voucher for that individual—to organize all of that takes a lot out of the day but that's still the only opportunity that person would have to vote.

All of these things are good. The application forms are good. What all of the political parties do in terms of trying to make sure their own supporters have credentials ahead of election day is a good thing that happens. But for folks who are exceptionally marginalized, without that other mechanism that allows someone to vouch for them, effectively they do not have the right to vote.

I appreciate what you say. We're happy to try to enfranchise as many people as possible, but it is a lot of work and we wish we had more individuals to help people vote. We would probably increase the homeless vote as a result, but we can only do so much on election day and we go flat out.

The people I work with who attempt to help people in any way they can—whether it be with transportation or help finding credentials or through finding an individual to vouch for people—go from eight until eight and we're always disappointed that we haven't gotten to everybody. We never will get to everybody.

• (2030)

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: I might highlight that these agencies have limited budgets and they have a lot of important decisions that they have to make in use of those budgets. Ultimately, all of the homeless serving agencies want to end homelessness, which means providing people with safe, secure, permanent, and affordable housing. However, they provide other services along the way and many will actually have an ID fund that will fund part of the replacement fees of this identification.

The more time, energy, and resources that go into identification, the less time, energy, and resources we have to truly end homelessness by providing people with the housing supports that they need.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse: I am going to give the rest of my time to my colleague.

[*English*]

Mr. David Christopherson: I'd like to pick up a little, if I could, on the voter information card. The government gets very upset when we say voter identification card because that's what we think it should be.

You've got a lot of experience with that. I even heard, maybe on the previous panel, forgive me if that's the case, but someone gave testimony and said the amount—I think it was one of you—of work it takes to get the voter identification card because that, with vouching, could get you a ballot and you'd be allowed to vote.

The Chief Electoral Officer is allowed to designate whatever ID, except the law is now going to prohibit the voter identification card from being used as a piece of ID. How is that going to impact the people you're trying to help on election day? The fact that those voter identification cards, if they've gone through all the hoops of getting them and they're lucky enough to have them, aren't even going to be ID at the polling station? How many Canadians stand to be turned away because this document won't be recognized as ID in your view?

Mr. Nathan Allen: That's almost the most depressing thing because you're talking about someone who went out of their way already to register to vote or they've voted in the past. They're an active Canadian citizen, but for whatever reason they don't have identification on election day. Likely a lot of people will assume that card will allow them to vote and it will just be the most depressing situation where someone takes that time, goes to vote, and then something that allowed them to vote in the past no longer allows them to vote. It's depressing. I don't want to see that happen.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: If I may.

The Chair: A quick answer, sure.

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: I'll just paint a picture of individuals who we see this with often. It might be some who do maintain some kind of permanent address. We see this for example with people in cyclical experiences of poverty where there may be a familial home, but they themselves are experiencing homelessness, they've lost all their identification and are able to come and go from the familial home at times and to retain or obtain that voter ID card.

I would say it's a significant portion of people experiencing both homelessness, but also poverty in general, who will be unable to vote because of being unable to use that card.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. David Christopherson: They said they wanted lots of people to vote, and we're hearing they're not going to be able to.

The Chair: Mr. Simms, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you for joining us.

Thank you for joining us from British Columbia as well.

I want to go to Mr. Allen first, because I was very taken aback by what you had said about how it works at Pigeon Park Savings. I'm going to quote from what you said:

How do we open accounts for people without ID? As in the Elections Act, we rely on vouching. We rely on vouching from neighbours, financial assistance workers, housing providers, clinical workers including doctors and nurses, and so on.

This is where it's very important:

In over 10 years of operations, having opened accounts for more than 10,000 individuals, we have never had one case of fraud as a result of a falsified identity.

Mr. Allen, that's a pretty strong statement and we're talking about banking; we're not talking about a constitutional right, which is section 3 of our charter, when we talk about voting.

Our previous witnesses talked about not really seeing an incentive to commit fraud. But for some reason in this debate that we're having here, there is always this nefarious assumption that is tagged along with vouching, as if it's something we should be suspicious of as opposed to encouraging people to vote. Would you agree with that?

• (2035)

Mr. Nathan Allen: Yes absolutely. As I was saying before, if someone has an account with us and we know their account history, similar to someone being on the voter list, I believe that is enough trust for me to allow an account to open and for that person to deposit cheques, to deposit cash, to have money transfers go into the account and then to receive an ATM card and continue to have financial services.

We have to have this rule at Pigeon Park Savings Bank because otherwise we wouldn't have any account holders. Initially almost all of our accounts come from people who are very disenfranchised, homeless individuals who have experienced financial exclusion from other institutions, which have very strict identification requirements of having current ID, similar to what the rules would be if Bill C-23 is able to pass.

We have files on thousands of people. We do what we can to help people find identification, but as was mentioned by the other panellists, it does take a lot of effort to find someone's birth certificate, find someone's SIN card, find the money required to buy a B.C. identification card. So for people with mental health issues, it's very challenging to have the patience to do that. As you can imagine, people with addiction issues have other concerns as well.

I don't want to argue that some folks don't deserve the right to vote. I think that someone who is a mentally ill drug addict who's homeless still deserves the right to vote, even if some people don't think they are deserving of anything. I believe they can and should participate in the democratic process. Without much conversation saying what's at stake in some elections, people are very mobilized around things, and to deny them that franchise I find depressing. It's a great injustice when you see it at a systemic level where, in the Downtown Eastside, it's a high concentration of poor people.

Already I think the rules are very restrictive for people, with a lot of hoops to jump through in order to vote. To deny even the hoop to jump through to vote is a tragedy.

Mr. Scott Simms: This is disenfranchising on a major scale to you. This is going to be a real noticeable difference in this next election if this legislation is carried through in its current form. Is that correct?

Mr. Nathan Allen: I believe so, yes.

Mr. Scott Simms: Okay.

Mr. Oudshoorn, I'm going to ask you to comment on what I just asked about vouching. But there is something else you said that actually caught my attention. You said there was a big gap with the attestation. We have heard a lot that attestation is going to be the cure for most ills when it comes to vouching. Can you elaborate a bit more on that big gap you're talking about?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: Sure. When you look at the terminology "ordinarily reside" and you look at the definition of homelessness, those two don't usually go hand in hand. Because of the services we're able to provide with shelters, for some that works. But for the majority, they're homeless because they have lost the place where they "ordinarily reside".

Mr. Scott Simms: Sorry, Ms. Mulholland, I didn't mean to exclude you. Do you have any comment on what's been discussed?

Ms. Wanda Mulholland: I'll just add that the idea of people being excluded from voting in their own country because of poverty and the complications connected with it is very discouraging. It does a disservice to everyone I work with.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you very much.

Do I have time or not?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half, Mr. Simms.

• (2040)

Mr. Scott Simms: Oh, goodness.

The Chair: There are others who would take it.

Mr. Scott Simms: Your generosity knows no bounds.

One of the issues we haven't discussed too much in this conversation is that we're now restricting Elections Canada to only provide the perfunctory information about where to vote and when to vote, which is fine. But the role of enticing and inspiring people to vote, to communicate, and to gather information will be hindered. Is that something that concerns you as well, Mr. Oudshoorn?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: Yes. Obviously people need to be aware of what's going on. I think one of the things, though, that stands to be mentioned to this committee is that, in my experience, people experiencing homelessness are quite aware. One of the things we do see is very high uptake of consumption of local news, so you see lots of access to newspapers in soup kitchens and shelters.

I would suggest that people experiencing homelessness are actually quite political and quite informed. These issues are very pertinent to them. It's their livelihood that is often at hand when we compare different policies from different parties. I believe, obviously, that the advertisement around elections is an important piece, but perhaps not for the population that I'm most familiar with.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Simms.

We'll go to Mr. O'Toole for four minutes, please.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for your work and for your appearance here.

I would suggest that the issue here, really, is voter participation. Elections Canada, in a 2007 study, identified homelessness as one of the areas where there's a significant barrier. They described it as one of three groups of persons with special needs impacting voter participation.

What you're saying, and what our previous witnesses said is that so much is going on, turnout is extremely low. But we've also heard from expert witnesses in both Canada and the U.S. who have said that voter participation has very little to do with identification or administration barriers and more with a variety of socio-economic and other aspects.

Mr. Simms said there's a nefarious assumption associated with vouching. The Neufeld report from Elections Canada said that 46% to 80% of vouching transactions have errors or are done incorrectly.

Finally, Mr. Oudshoorn and Mr. Allen have both talked about how challenging it is to work within vouching. Mr. Allen, you said it takes a lot of the day. Mr. Oudshoorn said that when a person experiencing homelessness but without identification enters an agency and expresses an interest in voting, they are connected with someone who can vouch for them. So this connecting people with vouchers, as Mr. Reid said, seems extremely difficult, much more than the burden of doing an attestation.

I've heard here the concerns about using attestations and whether one is ordinarily residing within a polling area. What if Elections Canada were to simplify a one-page attestation and make it much more simple for someone to qualify as ordinarily a resident, even if they haven't been seen in the shelter in some time? Would it not be easier for groups like yours on the front lines to use these simplified attestations to encourage more participation rather than matching vouchers on election day with T-shirts? I'd like your thoughts on that, please.

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: I would agree. The vouching process is more effort than the letter of attestation. Currently, it fills in a gap when the letter of attestation doesn't work, so when someone comes in and we can't provide that, we can work with the vouching. A change to the letter of attestation would make it easier. So, for example, if all that was required was proof that this person receives

services regularly rather than ordinarily resides, then that would definitely make the letter of attestation easier to use. But in the current structure with the letter of attestation not working for everyone, then the vouching does definitely fill in for that.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: My colleague Ms. Latendresse said that using the attestations is an enormous burden, but if we simplify it then what I'm getting from you is that it could actually be easier, less of a burden, than pairing up vouching people.

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: I would highlight that it is just a one-pager right now. The form itself is fairly simple. It just asks who I am, where I work, who this person is, where he works, and where he ordinarily resides and receives services. It would require a change of the language to make it more effective.

● (2045)

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Allen or Ms. Mulholland, do you have any thoughts? If we simplified this, would it make it easier to raise participation rates?

Mr. Nathan Allen: I think doing anything to increase participation rates is a good thing. I don't think it's either/or though. I don't know why it needs to be exclusive so that we'd do vouching or we'd do attestation. Having both in place is probably for the best.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: If I can speak to that, I think participation—

The Chair: You could if you had more time, but you don't, so we're going to move on to Mr. Scott for four minutes.

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

What I would say to Mr. O'Toole's question is that if he and the government side were willing to engage in a discussion on redefining what "address" means in the act, so that the letter of attestation...for people who are only receiving services and can't, in a reasonable sense, be said to reside there—then sure, why not? Let's do that.

At the same time, as Mr. Allen said, why not keep vouching as the final safety net and not get rid of the voter information cards? They do come from an intersection of databases that have not been shown to be liable to produce fraud.

Professor Oudshoorn, I'd like to just compliment you and your colleagues in London for what you do. The description of citizens helping citizens and the way you do it is absolutely inspiring, and I guess all I would do is echo Madame Alexandrine Latendresse's comments that the idea of adding extra burdens by getting rid of vouching, without anything that would be a sure replacement, does not make sense.

Mr. Allen, you used another amazing metaphor. You said there are already lots of hoops to jump through and that taking the hoop away is just too much to accept. I thought that was an amazingly accurate and poignant image, so thank you for that.

I did want to ask you just a little bit more, because Mr. Reid started on this, and he asked some very good questions on the bank account opening. I just want to point out an irony here. At some level, vouching to open a bank account—and you said that in 10,000 or so cases there has been no instance of fraud as a result that you know of. In the end, you're a bank, and presumably if paper forms of the bank statement were available, those could turn into proof of address within the current system, if you had a second piece of ID, which people may not. So why not allow vouching in the first place if that which produces a valid address in the system is vouching?

An hon. member: Hear, hear!

Mr. Craig Scott: It just strikes me that we're going around in circles. We're not trusting people, and the example you have brought to the table just shows that if we trust people... Where is the evidence? Do you see any evidence that people are more likely to commit fraud on voting day than they were when they opened bank accounts with you?

Mr. Nathan Allen: You mentioned results that I knew of. As manager, I know there has not been any case of falsified identification. I can imagine that if someone stole someone's cheque out of a mailbox and wanted to get someone to vouch for them and open an account and cash the cheque...but that doesn't happen. If we have an account holder vouch for someone else, similar to how someone on the voters list would vouch for someone else, just that simple qualification has allowed thousands of people to achieve a bank account or, in the case of elections, to vote. I've never experienced a single case of false ID, ever, in the 10 years we have been working in the neighbourhood.

Mr. Craig Scott: Thank you.

Ms. Mulholland, would you like to add anything at all? I think I have only about 30 seconds.

Ms. Wanda Mulholland: I would just like to add that it is about trusting people and providing mechanisms for people to participate. It's also about recognizing that people shouldn't be punished because of poverty, and it's because of poverty that there are the issues around identification. Having the two of those things together in a society that is democratic is crucial in order to be supportive of all our citizens.

● (2050)

Mr. Craig Scott: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Scott.

We'll go to Mr. O'Toole for four minutes, please.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to continue on my last line of questioning because I think it's important, and I would refer any of you to the *Electoral Participation of Persons with Special Needs* report from Elections Canada, in 2007. That identifies areas of recommendations, including mobile polls and assistance. Many Canadians may not realize, but electoral reforms in 2000 actually provided that shelters

could be used to satisfy the residency provision. Before that, that didn't exist. Ms. Barr, who was here before, from Raising the Roof, was one of several participants in round tables with Elections Canada, and perhaps you were as well.

That led to our famous list of 39 pieces of identification, and the attestation letter is one of those. So thank you. Some of you might have participated like Ms. Barr did. But it's important for us to separate the challenges with vouching from voter participation. Vouching happens when there is no identification. Mr. Neufeld's study from the 2011 election and some byelections, including my own, showed that not only was there trouble administering it, but it led to a huge error rate—46% serious errors—which, in the opinion of courts, could overturn a result. My suggestion would be that the vouching errors that we're trying to eliminate here don't get to the voter participation challenges facing the homeless.

Ms. Mulholland, you said poverty should not be a barrier. Along the lines of what I was saying with attestation before, since 2000 to the attestation now, have you seen an increase among people using the shelters since the reforms in 2000? Have you seen more voter participation?

Ms. Wanda Mulholland: In Burnaby, we do not have any shelters, so we're not able to participate in the way that other municipalities can.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Any other thoughts on that? Have you seen the changes in 2000 through to the attestation? Has that led to increased voter turnout among the homeless or folks in shelters?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: I don't have the statistics available on that. One of the things I would highlight...because I know that came right from the homeless-serving sector to do that letter of attestation. It was before my time. I had more hair, fewer degrees, and wasn't in the sector yet. It was done in the context of also having the vouching. So putting in that additional opportunity for identification still had that other opportunity as well. When that was recommended, it wasn't recommended in the context of a no-vouching alternative.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: In your experience with the vouching, and you described the challenge connecting people, only one person—you, for instance—could vouch for one other person.

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: Yes.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: How do you identify those people, not the people who need the vouching, but the people who can provide it?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: Part of it is just making everyone aware it's election day. So, those signs, as I said, "Ask me how to vote", help people be aware of that. It's starting with all of the service providers knowing that that's going on and that vouching is an option for them. The second is having people maybe going together. If you're at a service agency that is not a polling station, and there are three or four people who have said they want to vote—some of them have ID, some don't, they know each other, and they've lived in shelters together—then people can vote together.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Wouldn't it be easier for your volunteers to have a pile of the attestations to just use when they recognize someone?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: If that was available, but again, it goes back to the wording of the attestation. You couldn't just hand out an attestation to whoever came through there.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Could you, if you recognize them as having been in the shelter?

Dr. Abram Oudshoorn: If you can attest that they've ordinarily resided, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to thank all of our witnesses. Thank you, Professor Oudshoorn, Ms. Mulholland, and Mr. Allen. Thank you for sharing with us tonight and thank you for the work you do, too. Thank you for being able to come tonight and help us out with this.

We are adjourned.

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