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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): The hearing will commence. Pursuant to Standing Order 108 (2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 25, the committee will resume its study on family reunification.

On our first witness panel today, we have Huda Bukhari, executive director, and Zena Al Hamdan, programs manager, from the Arab Community Centre of Toronto. Welcome back.

From the Canadian Alliance of Chinese Associations, we have Dianqi Wang, executive director, and Zaisun Ma, adviser, both by video conference from Vancouver, British Columbia.

Welcome to all the panellists. I now invite the witnesses from the Arab Community Centre to speak. You have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Huda Bukhari (Executive Director, Arab Community Centre of Toronto): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee, for inviting us to present today.

The Arab Community Centre is a federally funded settlement agency that provides assistance to newcomers of every Arab country and anyone who walks through our doors. We're not exclusive to Arabs. We provide settlement assistance, and family reunification is part of that.

The centre normally sees about 4,500 clients a year. This particular year—and thank you for the extra funding from IRCC—we're opening a second satellite office in Scarborough. I am very pleased to know that Salma Zahid is our MP in that area, so thank you. You're all invited to the opening some time toward the end of the month.

We have been providing, as you might imagine, quite a bit of settlement assistance to newcomer Syrians, who have been arriving since last December and prior to that.

Zena will be talking in detail about some of the family reunification issues that we are seeing within the client base.

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan (Programs Manager, Arab Community Centre of Toronto): With regard to the quota system, we're very happy to see that the quota is the highest it's been since 1910.

The first issue is with the super visa. While it provides a very swift entry to parents and grandparents for newcomers, the financial requirements are unrealistic and, in most cases, unattainable. Newcomers, on average, take about 10 years to achieve the level of an average Canadian. To do that for three consecutive years and to be able to submit an application, and then wait for that application to

be approved with a processing time of over two years, represent lost years to parents coming to the country and lost years for assisting in the settlement, stability, and contribution of these newcomers to the Canadian economy.

Most newcomers have to go to school to do an upgrading, and most of them have been admitted in skilled workers programs. Both parents will not be able to enter the labour market without that upgrading, which leaves.... If the family achieves the income necessary to pay the high cost of day care, which is a much higher threshold, it will make them ineligible for a lot of subsidies for day care. One member of the couple will have to stay home. That is a lot of lost contribution. Having the grandparents here would not only provide stability and family values and peace of mind for the newcomer family, but would also speed up the length of time it takes the newcomers to enter the labour market and contribute.

The first question most of our clients ask is “How do I bring my parents and my children who are over the age of 19?” Your responsibility toward your parents does not end at any age, and your responsibility toward your children does not end automatically at the age of 19. A lot of newcomers are faced with a situation where they will have to leave somebody over the age of 19 when they come to Canada. Having to wait the processing time will leave them even older, even if it's pushed.

The other issue is spousal sponsorship. The matter of processing time is one thing, but the other thing is the lens through which these applications are viewed and assessed. It's a very specific and very rigid sense of what constitutes a legitimate marriage. A lot of officers are not aware of premarital interactions between spouses in different cultures. We have seen a lot of clients whose spouses are actually not deemed credible because they did not know their exact date of birth; a lot of people in the Middle East do not celebrate birthdays after the age of 10. Or, they might not know the exact details of their spouse's job, or the full name of the first spouse. We have a lot of clients with that issue.

The last issue is the fees for these applications. They are very problematic for our clients, in general, as is the case for most newcomers. A citizenship fee of \$600 for a newcomer who is working minimum wage to be able to support their family is not something they can pay within a month, or within six months. A lot of them are not able to submit their applications because of the amount of money these require, not only to submit the application but also to translate the documents, and then the waiting time.

Thank you.

•(1545)

The Chair: I would now like Mr. Dianqi Wang to make his submission please. Seven minutes, please.

Mr. Dianqi Wang (Executive Director, Canadian Alliance of Chinese Associations) (Interpretation): I am the chairman of the Canadian Alliance of Chinese Associations. It was established—

The Chair: Just a moment, please. We seem to have an issue with the translation.

Okay. Please proceed.

Mr. Dianqi Wang (Interpretation): The association was established in the year 2008 and has 130 associations under its umbrella, all consisting of new immigrants from China. Even though we're only eight years old, we have led our new immigrants in actively participating in social and charitable activities. Whether for the earthquake in China, or typhoon in Taiwan, or the forest fire in Alberta, or fundraising for local community hospitals, we have contributed financial and human resources in substantial numbers. For the fire in Alberta alone, we have raised \$270,000 Canadian in donations. We have also made donations to help restore the historical town of Barkerville located in the north of British Columbia.

Another mission of ours is to express the concerns of our new immigrants. That that is why today we'd like to talk to you about the importance of family reunification with parents and grandparents. In the west, a family usually consists of only parents and their children, but in many other countries and traditions, a family includes parents and grandparents. For example, a Chinese family often consists of four generations, even five. We live together and take care of each other. This family model is also followed by new immigrants after they arrive in Canada, and it becomes even more important, because if you leave your parents behind, this results in a long-distance divide and can be detrimental to both the individual and the family emotionally and in their relationship.

The Chinese family model is good and beneficial for both the family and society. The most obvious benefit is that parents or grandparents can help with child care when both father and mother need to work. They can also help with household chores. Canadian society lacks child care resources and it can also be very expensive. The issues caused by this can be alleviated by parents or grandparents immigrating to Canada. The children can also learn their mother tongue and cultural traditions through their grandparents.

This not only enriches our multiculturalism but also helps Canada in international trade and global exchange in different sectors by cultivating talent that understands different cultures.

Canadian-born children in young families can enjoy care given by their grandparents, but this is unavailable for children of immigrants.

From an economic perspective, sponsored parents and grandparents will not cause burdens to taxpayers.

One thing that is neglected by many is that these immigrants, when they come to Canada, will bring their entire savings, wealth of knowledge, experience, and social networks to Canada. These resources are all brought in from foreign sources. Some grandparents are scholars, artists, writers, teachers, or engineers. Even though

they're retired, they can still contribute to society, including becoming community volunteers.

Have any of you ever had a chance to go to visit a Chinese restaurant in the morning? Every morning, there are many retired Chinese elders drinking tea and eating breakfast. If you go to the supermarket and malls during work hours, you'll see many elderly people shopping, and grandparents buying things for themselves and also for their children and grandchildren. Their friends from back home will also visit them. They also frequently travel back to visit relatives and friends. This is good for travel and tourism.

The increasing popularity of Canada-China flights is something I've witnessed myself. China's Xiamen Airlines began offering services to Vancouver this year. I also participated in the opening ceremony. Starting in November there will also be flights from Zhengzhou to Vancouver. Other airlines have also expressed interest in offering new flights.

Right now there are still many problems and unreasonable situations concerning sponsoring immigrant parents and grandparents. The government and government leaders say that immigrant parents and grandparents have to wait four to five years, but it can actually take up to as long as eight to 10 years.

•(1550)

Four to five years, the government claims, is the review time at the foreign consulates and embassies. But before that, the applicant needs to undergo review procedures in Canada. These procedures can take up to four to five years as well. If you add the two up together, it takes eight to 10 years. Some families wait year after year for approval. Sometimes the parents and grandparents have already passed.

The government told us four to five years. This is something the government needs to look at and probably shorten. Canada accepts approximately 300,000 immigrants every year, including refugees. Last year it was 330,000 immigrants, including the Syrian refugees. So we would like this number broadened and the procedure shortened.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wang.

Mr. Ehsassi, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): I'd like to thank all the witnesses for their testimony. This obviously will be very helpful to us as we focus on the issue of family sponsorship.

I'll start with you, Ms. Bukhari. Welcome back. Thank you for once again appearing before us.

Your centre does an exceptional job in assisting newcomers, with the aim of empowering them and assisting them to integrate into Canadian society. Would you be kind enough to share with us your observations on how significant family sponsorship is for the process of empowerment and integration?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Family reunification is great in empowering the clients who are already here, just in terms of their peace of mind. The Middle East, where many of our clients come from, is in a turbulent state at the moment. Clients who are here feel paralyzed by having left their family members behind, especially their parents, and especially within conflict areas. They'd like to be able to bring them out here as quickly as possible. This worry about not knowing whether they will be coming, and about the long processing times for bringing family members here, immobilizes many of our clients. They can't seem to concentrate. They can't seem to move on with their lives.

Not only that, but the family members we're dealing with in our office are forever thinking of ways to send money back, to make remittances to their family members who are back there. Taking \$300 or \$400 a month, let's say, and trying to send it back with someone who may be going there, or through someone who is there, immobilizes them financially here.

What we try to do at the centre is to provide information. That is what we do. We provide information. We try to help with the applications. We call on their behalf. We send them to their MP's office if the application takes too long. In reality it is immobilizing for them. If you know that your parents and all your children who are over the age of 19 are in Syria, in Aleppo, let's say, and you are doing your best to put your resources together to try to get them out, which is what we're seeing at the moment, it's immobilizing for you.

We try to be as positive as we possibly can, but in the current situation that is happening not only to the Syrian community that we're assisting, for example, but also to the Yemeni community that we're working with, and to the Eritrean community that we are working with, and to some parts of the Sudanese community that we're working with, and anywhere where there is conflict in the Middle East, when we get those clients in the office we can see that it is very immobilizing. They can't seem to move forward, especially those with young children.

• (1555)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

Ms. Al Hamdan, in your statement you were referring to specific experiences of members of the Arab community. Thank you ever so much for that guidance. Are there any other experiences that are specific to the Arab community that you would like to share with us today?

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan: On the specifics with the spousal sponsorships, a lot of the newcomer clients that we see, by the time they actually get their finances and their lives together, want to start a new family. They eventually end up getting married, and by the time they come back, a lot of the details that are deemed reasons to constitute a legitimate marriage in a Canadian context are not really something that is shared or important in other cultures.

For example, on the specifics of somebody's job, a lot of professional engineers end up taking administrative jobs in other companies. When the wife is asked what her husband does, most of the time she responds, "My husband is an engineer", because to her and in her country, her husband is an engineer. That deems her not credible.

What is the exact date of birth of her husband? There are things like that. For example, some of the clients, if he or she were married before, have to give the exact full name of the first spouse. It's these little details. It's not done in malice, but a lot of the time these are not important details for somebody who is starting a new life. These are not things that are taken into consideration and, in the context of a traditional Middle Eastern marriage, there isn't a lot of time for the couple to actually interact in the way it is understood in the Canadian context. That means that a lot of the time, the spouse, the marriage's legitimacy, and the credibility of the spouse who is being sponsored are undermined.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that.

Now I'll turn to Mr. Wang.

Thank you so much for explaining to us how significant family reunification is and how members of the family, especially the elderly, are there to assist their children and grandchildren.

I was wondering whether you could kindly comment on your experience with super visas because that is essentially a novel approach that has been adopted in our immigration system. Could you tell us how it's been working out insofar as members of your community are concerned?

Mr. Dianqi Wang (Interpretation): I would like to ask Mr. Ma to answer this question.

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Advisor, Canadian Alliance of Chinese Associations) (Interpretation): The super visa is great. It provides convenience. For grandparents and parents to come to Canada, it is a great approach, but it is a temporary visa. It cannot give a permanent solution. The parents and the grandparents can stay here only for a period of time. It's not a permanent solution.

When they come here they have to spend a lot of money to buy their medical insurance, which can prove to be very expensive. So this is a temporary solution.

On providing permanent help, I do not feel that this provides permanent help to us.

Thank you.

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

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): I appreciate all of your comments. Of course, the purpose of this study is to prepare a report to recommend to the House of Commons, or to the minister, how to improve the family sponsorship program. I appreciate a lot of the comments that you've made thus far explaining the benefits of parents and grandparents.

Mr. Wang talked about child care, teaching or maintaining language skills, community volunteers, and buying for the family. All of those are excellent things.

You also emphasized the length of time it takes to process these things, and it sounds, from your experience, like it's a minimum of four to five years.

We'll start with Ms. Hamdan, perhaps, but I wonder if each of you could make recommendations to the committee as to how the family sponsorship program could be improved.

•(1600)

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan: The family sponsorship program, especially when it comes to parents and grandparents, should at least consider the impact of a statement saying how bringing your parents and grandparents is going to help your life, how it is going to help your integration and settlement. That's number one.

Number two is a realistic minimum financial income. The financial income that is the threshold now is really unrealistic for the length of time that is being provided. And on the matter of giving specifics on the processing time of over four or five years, over that time people's circumstances and needs change. Also, the impact of the parents coming in from the date of submission to the date they actually arrive will change.

On the processing time, we are processing from January 2014, which is over two years ago. That doesn't even mean that the parents will be arriving right away once their application is picked up. It really need to take into consideration all of these aspects.

Mr. David Tilson: How long should the processing time take?

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan: The last time we looked at the processing time, we saw that they're looking at applications from January 2014.

Mr. David Tilson: But my question is—

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan: Our recommendation would be less than two years, between 18 and 24 months.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Wang, the committee will be making recommendations to the minister in the House of Commons on how to improve the family sponsorship program. Do you have any recommendations the committee could consider?

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): Both of us agree with what Ms. Hamdan just said, that we would need to reduce the time for review. The sponsorship standards also need to be lowered because new immigrants, if they have just arrived, don't have a high wage. Before the Liberal government came into power, the income requirement, I think, was only one year; now it's three years. We would like this to be returned back to one year; that is, the sponsor would just need to provide one year's proof of income. That would be more convenient for us.

Mr. David Tilson: In 2014 caps were introduced for the intake of applications for family class sponsorship of parents and grandparents. There was a limit of 5,000 new applications, which was increased last year to 10,000 applications. What is your opinion of this cap limiting the intake of parent and grandparent applications?

Perhaps we'll start again with you, Ms. Hamdan.

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan: Of the 310,000, only 10,000 being dedicated to parents and grandparents is really not sufficient for the numbers of, specifically, skilled workers who are admitted to Canada. If you count that each one of them will be bringing.... The cap should be at least doubled, because a lot of them will need to go back to the labour market with the help of their parents, to assist with the family unit. At least double that would be sufficient, considering that.

Mr. David Tilson: My question was with respect to parents and grandparents.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: I'll take that on. The number to bring in at the moment is 10,000.

Mr. David Tilson: Yes.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Just to give you an overview, at our centre we see 4,500 new clients a year. Of those 4,500 new clients a year we see—and this is within a one-year span—I'd say that almost 95% to 97% ask about parental sponsorships. We're thinking that in just our little centre within our little community, the Arab Community Centre, let's say 4,000 clients are asking to have their parents come in, and that's just us.

•(1605)

Mr. David Tilson: What should be the amount?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: I feel that the amount should be up to 30,000 a year, parents and grandparents.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Wang, do you have an opinion on this?

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): We agree with what Ms. Bukhari just proposed, 30,000 a year. We would also like to thank the current ministry for increasing the number to 10,000, but it's not enough: 30,000 would be more suitable, but we would like to actually cancel this quota. We're looking at other classes; they don't have a quota, so why are we restricting the numbers for family class? The people who are applying for family reunification are Canadians. They've already been living in Canada, so why would we place restrictions on our Canadian population?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ma.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, to all the presenters, for appearing before our committee today.

Mr. Wang and Mr. Ma, given that your organization represents a large number of groups in the Lower Mainland who are from the immigrant community, I'm wondering if you have heard of some specific stories or examples that you can share with us about where the problems are with respect to the parent/grandparent application process.

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): I think the main problem is that the waiting time is too long. Many people need to work; they need to take care of their children. They really hope that their grandparents or parents can come to help them with child care in order to allow both husband and wife, father and mother, to work in the labour force.

When they finally come after all these years.... Sometimes it's not four years to five years. We apply in Canada, and it takes four to five years to review it in Canada. Then, we will submit these papers to Beijing, and the embassy will have to work on it for another four to five years. So, added up, it is eight to 10 years.

If someone has to wait eight to 10 years—this is a very precious time of life—some of these young families are afraid of having children. They don't want to have children because they would have nobody to take care of them.

Some families, after they do have children, and both parents need to work, they send their children back to China, so their grandparents can help take care of them. This is one solution, but it is not that reasonable. These are our own children, so why should our grandparents raise them in China? When they come back to our society, they are faced with a lot of pressure.

We hope that the IRCC can understand the challenges we face in our lives and allow our parents and grandparents to come over, so we can go back into the labour force.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I think we've heard from everybody just now. I'd like to turn to the financial requirements, to talk about the onerous pressure for families, both on the super visa side as well as the citizenship side, and on the threshold, as well, for sponsorship and the amount on that.

On that issue, I'm wondering what thoughts you might have on what governments can do. Should the threshold, for example, for sponsorship be lowered to a smaller amount, a shorter length of time in terms of proof of income? I would love to hear your thoughts about the financial aspect, or if you have stories that you can share with respect to that for us.

I will go to the delegation here in Ottawa, and then we'll go to the delegation on video conference.

•(1610)

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Thank you.

We are seeing larger families, and we have been seeing that over the past maybe year and a half or so.

To give you an example, two weeks ago, we had a client who came into our office wanting to sponsor his parents from the Middle East. He has seven children. He and his wife, the family, make up nine people. For him to sponsor his parents will make it an 11-person family. The staff member came back and said, "How do I tell him that he will not be able to get his parents here?" He wanted his parents to come in to assist with the children, to help with the children and with child care.

My recommendation would be to lower the requirements from what it is right now. Lower the threshold and lower the basic requirements from what they are at the moment, and, as well, lower the sponsorship years, the undertaking that they're going to be taking on for 10 years. Quite often, we see that the parents pass away before the 10 years is over.

We would like to see it lowered to five years, if possible, for the parents and the grandparents. The table of funds that is available for them to be sponsored needs to be lowered for many of our clients. They're in need of their parents to come in. They feel that they are not complete. As with many other cultures who come here, a family does not only include the mother, father, and the children, so you've left a part of you behind.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Wang or Mr. Ma, on the financial requirements.

Mr. Zaixin Ma: (Interpretation) We also would like to see the fees lowered. We have a friend from Qingdao in China. He's around

35 years old and is a white-collar worker. His wife is pursuing a Ph. D. degree. They have one child who is one and a half years old. His wife needs to stop school to take care of this child. They cannot satisfy the income requirement because the wife is not working and doesn't have an income. There are many examples like that. They are highly educated young people. If they could have their parents come over to help, they would be able to better participate in building Canadian society. If they cannot reunite with their parents, they will miss their parents as well. Not only do they have problems taking care of their children, but they also worry about their parents and have to visit them back in China.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ma.

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): Okay.

The Chair: Ms. Dzerowicz, go ahead.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thanks so much for the excellent presentations and for being here today.

I'm going to start by following a little the line of Ms. Kwan's original questioning. The five-year processing time does seem long, and I'm also particularly disturbed to find that it might be five more years in another country as well for processing.

I want to dig a little deeper. I actually go through every single case that comes through my office—every single case. I want to understand what is happening. There are different reasons for the length of time. In some cases, it's even different parts of the world. Sometimes it's a security check that's holding it up. Sometimes it's medical that's holding it up. Sometimes we don't even know; it's just in the process and we don't quite know where it's gone in the ether.

I guess I just want to get a sense from you, in your experience, where you're seeing the delays. Sometimes it's an error that was made on the application, okay? If I can get a little more specifics from you about.... We're seeing for the most part that it tends to be the security that tends to go along the application. If you can give us maybe a little bit more information, that would be very helpful to us.

•(1615)

Ms. Huda Bukhari: I'm sorry. Can I take this first?

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Yes, please.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Thank you.

Over the past six months, or eight months or so, we have been hearing from the Yemeni community. The Yemeni community is new to our centre. We haven't seen as many clients as the Yemeni community come in. This is an example. They are convention refugees. They've become convention refugees, and it is typically the males who are here. They have family members behind in Yemen, and they put in the applications to have them brought over with them. These are not the general sponsorship forms, but family reunification.

The issue that is happening in Yemen at the moment is that this particular family, or several of them that we have begun to see, cannot leave their little area where they're living because of bombardment. They cannot find a Canadian-designated medical doctor within that area so they can go through the medical check. They cannot go to a police station so they can have their security certificates issued or have their fingerprints taken.

We hear stories, and we see pictures when the clients come into our office showing us that the building right next door to their family has been bombed and they can't leave that area. That is what we're hearing from the Yemeni community and seeing now almost on a daily basis. We have heard recently that IRCC has designated a medical doctor for the clients to go to get their medical checks done, but this particular doctor as well lives far away from most of our clients' homes, and they can't leave one area to go to that doctor.

We have been working closely as well with the Canadian Council for Refugees in addressing this particular issue. This is the Yemeni community, but in general security certificates take a very long time. We appreciate that. We understand that they need to happen, but by the time the security certificate is done, the medical has become obsolete. The clients need to go back and redo the medical, pay again to have these medical tests done—and medicals are very expensive back home in the Middle East.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: When you say that the security takes a long time, is that a year, six months, or a year and a half?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: It can take more than a year. It can take up to two years, and medicals are only good for six months.

If it's, let's say, a wife and three children, and they need to pay about \$200 per person for a medical checkup, then that's \$600 twice a year to get the medical checkups again. Then they start waiting again to be re-interviewed.

There are issues that are happening on that end. Yes, I acknowledge that there are issues where the clients will not fill in or sign the documents, and those do come back, which delays the process. However, we can deal with those from our end with the staff. Things such as expediting the security checks and expediting the medical files will really speed matters.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much.

To our presenters in Vancouver, I'm a little disturbed to hear that it takes an extra five years to process in Beijing. I know that's probably an average.

Is this for everyone, or is this just in some cases, or in all cases? Could you just give me a better idea about that?

Then I want to move to spousal sponsorship.

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): Not necessarily everybody will face this five-year-plus period. Maybe some people will go through faster, but generally speaking the examples we receive usually take eight to 10 years. A minority will go through faster.

We mean to ask IRCC why it's this long, because many friends have put in their applications, but they have to wait for a long time. Sometimes they make mistakes in their application form, but sometimes they wait for no reason. We would like to ask this

question of the department. Why, in some cases, do they have to face such a long delay?

• (1620)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: On the spousal issue, I'd love to ask a lot more questions on the rejections. What would be your recommendation around that? Is it just an issue of providing more training for IRCC officials? What would be your recommendation on how we can address that?

The Chair: A five-second answer, please.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: Yes, we strongly recommend training of IRCC officers—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: —so they will know more about—sorry, Mr. Chairman—the culture that they are dealing with, and more about the people that will be brought over.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you to all the presenters. It's good to see you again. Thank you so much for coming and for your good presentations.

What sort of questions would you like to see? If I heard correctly earlier, sometimes they don't know the husband's proper name, the date of birth, or what he does. I think those are the security check questions they use to make sure that the wrong people don't come to the country.

What would you suggest so we can balance both sides and the wrong people don't come here at the same time that the correct people are coming in?

Ms. Zena Al Hamdan: As Huda said, the officers at the embassy who are assessing and doing the interviews have to have some cultural context of the person they are interviewing, not only from that country but also within the different classes of that country. Some people and some classes are more aware of the western way of living.

For example, there are things to do with how the spouse lives in Canada and the details of that. They have some context of what life in Canada looks like. Other spouses in different classes don't really...

The officer who is interviewing should have a bit of context of what constitutes a legitimate marriage in that culture, specifically. Yes, there are a lot of ways to scam the system, but the reality of the matter is that most of the cases that are deemed not credible are not decided in malice, but because the questions are a standard set of questions, yes or no.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Okay. Anything—

Ms. Huda Bukhari: To mitigate, for example, the security check, we have full confidence in the Canadian government to go through the security screening. In terms of the cases that we are seeing and that are coming to our office at the moment, just this past week we had two cases that were deemed not credible for spousal applications, because, for example, a wife who is already here did not tell her husband there that she's suffering from stress. Had she told him that, then he would have thought that "stressed" meant that she was mad within the culture, which would have caused more problems. So she didn't tell him, but she did write it in the application that she was stressed, amongst other things. He told the officer all the other things, but because he didn't mention the term "stressed", he was deemed to be ineligible.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are there any issues in Vancouver for the same line?

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): I partially agree with the witnesses in Toronto. For example, kinship is emphasized in Chinese communities and families. We're not as so-called independent as in the traditional western concept. We would like to live close by, together in the same building. We can look after each other, keep the kinship. In the Caucasian concept, the officials of Caucasian background may not understand this. Why do you need to get your parents and grandparents over here to live altogether? I'd like to think that our officers working with these applicants should understand the cultural background of the particular community more.

After the parents arrive in Canada, they are not burdens to Canadian society. Not only do they bring their income, their pension, but they also bring their knowledge and their other contributions to this society to help alleviate the hardship in the family by looking after their grandchildren. The working couples can be more liberated and released from the domestic work after a heavy day of work at their job.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ma.

Mr. Tabbara, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you all for being here as we conduct our study on family reunification. I know that both parties have been doing a tremendous job in helping families come together and integrate into our society.

My question will be for Ms. Al Hamdan and Ms. Bukhari. I'm sorry for the mispronunciation.

I have a question based on the following experience that I hear about. I'll give you an example that I've seen of a constituent of mine. They came from overseas: the mother, the father, and a son came over. But on a separate application there was a daughter who was, I think, under the age of 19. I think she was 17 or 18 and she was married, so she had to apply under a second bracket with her husband.

Can you tell us maybe some of the experiences you've seen that have caused some hardships? Maybe part of the family came over to Canada, but the second part of the family is still back in a country overseas.

Ms. Huda Bukhari: I'll start, and then Zena will add to it.

Over the past almost two years, we've begun to see that the Syrian newcomers who have come in are younger parents. They are parents who are 15-year-olds or 16-year-olds who have two or three children. They may not have been with the file of their parents, and yet their parents are here. As our colleagues in Vancouver said, kinship is very important. It then becomes very difficult for the parents to sponsor their 16-year-old daughter who has a husband—who may be 18—and three kids. That's a family unit in Canada.

That is why, when we started this presentation, I said that maybe Canada needs to look at the concept of family, because that is their daughter, and those are their grandchildren, yet because she is deemed to be married, he is a separate file. It becomes very difficult.

That is not the only case we've seen with this. We have a client who is also Syrian, and she didn't come with this last wave of newcomers. She has been here for a while, almost three years. Her two children were able to escape from Syria and are now in Turkey. One of them is 23, and the other is 17. She cannot bring them. She has been having such a horrible time trying to bring her children, only because she has remarried. These are the laws in Canada here. She has remarried another man and not their father. Their father is still in Syria. The 17-year-old is deemed a minor and will need to go back to Syria or get some documentation from his father in Syria—whom he can't get a hold of because they don't know whether he is alive—to be able to be sponsored.

His older sister is 23, so her mother cannot sponsor her. She is in Turkey, looking after her younger brother, and the mother is in our office in tears. Those are the cases that we see, not only from Syria but from all over the Middle East.

• (1630)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I just want to continue on this theme.

My next question will be to Mr. Wang and Mr. Ma. You spoke a lot about parents and grandparents. As you know, the current government has increased parent and grandparent sponsorship from 5,000 to 10,000. Could you elaborate on the cultural background you mentioned, how grandparents can play a pivotal role in helping a young family raise their children? In your first testimony, you mentioned a restaurant and how some elders—

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: —would be working in that restaurant. Can you elaborate on that very quickly?

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): First of all, we would like to thank IRCC. They increased the quota to 10,000, but our recommendation.... According to our realities, 10,000 is not enough to satisfy our needs. The witnesses from Toronto recommended 30,000, and we agree with that.

In our Chinese tradition, our emphasis on kinship is very different from that in western culture.

Xiexie.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ma.

Mr. Tilson, you have five minutes.

Mr. David Tilson: The minimum age to sponsor a spouse is 18 years old. Is that appropriate?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: This may not be appropriate within Canada, but within the Middle East....

Mr. David Tilson: Well, the sponsors are in Canada. Obviously, one of their roles is financial. Another role is maturity. The question is, does an average 18-year-old have the financial resources and the maturity to receive parents and grandparents?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: They have the maturity, but do they have the financial resources within our community? They do not. We are seeing Syrian children right now taking care of and acting on behalf of their parents. They have been hardened. The Middle East is going through, and has gone through, such turmoil that these children have grown up.

Mr. David Tilson: I'm sure they have.

If the average 18-year-old doesn't have the financial resources, what's an appropriate age?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: We do not want dependency either. If someone is able to work and is then able to take care of their parents and grandparents or someone who is unwell, if the 18-year-old can meet that minimum financial requirement, that's fine.

Mr. David Tilson: A sponsor must show that he or she has the income to support the sponsored family member. This proof can only come in the form of tax returns or documentation from the Canada Revenue Agency.

Has this caused problems for the people you see?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: It has only caused problems for those who haven't been in Canada for three years. Clients who have come in the last two years need to produce three years' worth of tax returns.

The Chair: Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Mr. Wang, you mentioned the financial burden is too high to sponsor somebody for the family class. You said it previously was less. What is the amount today compared to the previous government?

•(1635)

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): The Liberal government before the last Conservative government only wanted one year's proof of income. After the Conservative government came to power, it was three years. Now with the Liberal government, it's still three years. Our recommendation would be that we go back to just this one year of proof of income.

The sponsor would also like to see the wait requirement lowered, because it is difficult for new immigrants to find a job. They come from a different cultural and language background. It is very difficult for them to find higher paying jobs in large companies. Usually they find jobs in smaller companies with an hourly wage of \$15. Their annual income is only \$30,000 to \$40,000.

Right now the requirement is \$50,000 to \$60,000, so they both need to work. If one person needs to stay home to take care the child, then they wouldn't be able to satisfy the financial requirements and thus wouldn't be able to sponsor the parents or grandparents.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Both of you said that the age of 19 is too low. In 20 seconds, what age are you recommending for the family class?

Ms. Huda Bukhari: I recommend 24.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ma.

Mr. Zaixin Ma (Interpretation): Our Chinese culture is different from the Middle Eastern situation. Our parents are older, in their 20s, maybe 24.

The Chair: Thank you to the witnesses on the panel for appearing at this committee hearing.

We will now suspend.

•(1635)

(Pause)

•(1645)

The Chair: The committee is resuming.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses on our second panel today. We have, as an individual, Usha George, the interim vice-president, research and innovation, at Ryerson University, by video conference. From the Centre for Newcomers, we have Anila Lee Yuen, the chief executive officer, by video conference from Calgary; as well as Admasu Tachble, director, settlement and career development. As an individual, we also have Madine VanderPlaat, professor at Saint Mary's University, from Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Welcome. You have seven minutes, please, and we will begin with the Centre for Newcomers, Ms. Anila Yuen.

•(1650)

Ms. Anila Lee Yuen (Chief Executive Officer, Centre for Newcomers): Good afternoon. My name is Anila Lee Yuen. I am the chief executive officer of the Centre for Newcomers, and with me here today Dr. Admasu Tachble, our director of settlement and career services.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak before you. The Centre for Newcomers is a settlement agency located here in Calgary, Alberta. We see about 10,000 immigrants and refugees every year for all of our settlement programs. Refugees make up about 20% of that number.

In regard to today's topic of family reunification, we've been hearing a lot of positive feedback as to the direction that the present government is taking. This policy is manifested in the increased quota that IRCC is giving to immigrants coming under the family class. While, overall, our position at the Centre for Newcomers is that the immigration policies in Canada are generally supportive of newcomers and complementary to our Canadian diaspora, there are some challenges remaining.

Today the main challenge I'd like to focus on is the ease of reunification with parents and with grandparents. We would really like to see the government continue to review the parents and grandparents sponsorship immigration policy and make it easier for children and grandchildren to sponsor their relatives to come to Canada.

The parent and grandparent sponsorship application window is quite short. What we hear is that, as soon as the quota is reached, the remaining applications are rejected. To add to this, from what our clients are telling us, the processing time is anywhere between three to five years in length, which is really quite an excessive amount of time in terms of wanting to have your family unified.

Those who are denied the ability to bring their parents over are, in our opinion, also denied their basic quality of life indicators, including family support and the ability to look for employment effectively. This is because they don't have the adequate child care that the grandparents would provide, and the child care that is available is often too costly. We know in Alberta that the cost of child care is quite steep, and it's very difficult for families to be able to find cost-effective child care. Not having the grandparents there to be able to participate in that aspect really puts a financial burden on the family, as well.

It also increases the family's financial burden because the entire family isn't in one location. We find that our new immigrant couples are not only taking care of their Canadian children here, but they're also needing to send money to support their parents.

We want to talk a little about the super visa program, as well. We don't believe it's a sustainable alternative to the direct sponsorship and immigration of parents and grandparents because, currently, many families are financially and emotionally burdened by this program. When we talk about the finances associated with the super visa, we're talking about the number of flights that have to be booked so that grandparents and parents can come and go. We're also talking about the high cost of health care in terms of having insurance readily available.

The other piece is that, because those grandparents don't have the ability to work, once their grandchildren are of school age and can go to school, there is a loss of family income that potentially the grandparents could be filling by being able to legally work in Canada. Emotionally, it's quite disruptive on the family unit and on the well-being of the grandchildren that they're primarily here to support. Children get attached to their grandparents. It helps them thrive; it helps them grow. It can be really traumatic for those Canadian children to have their grandparents needing to leave and then come back or not being allowed to stay after the visa expires.

The children are nurtured and cared for by the grandparents, and this builds a strong bond between the children and the grandparents, hence facilitating the positive identity-building of those children. The grandparents gain satisfaction as contributing members of the family unit. They contribute towards narrowing the generation gap and instilling some of the identity-based cultural values that are important to family cohesion and the family unit. This allows the newcomer couple to build their social capital in their own home.

•(1655)

I can speak from personal experience. In fact, today would be my grandmother's 106th birthday were she still alive. She lived with my family throughout the entirety of my childhood. I'm convinced that every accomplishment that I have made comes from the nurture, the care, and the bond that she created with me, and with my brother as well. It allowed both of my parents to work and it allowed my brother and I to have safety, care, and upbringing in our own home.

I'm really grateful for that opportunity and I hope every other Canadian born to immigrant parents also has the opportunity for that enriching, confidence-building experience.

Lastly, we really wanted to talk about grandparents who are here on super visas. They can't access the services and supports that they need for the well-being of the family and for their own improved quality of life. As sponsored immigrants, they would have access to all the settlement services and agencies, like us at the Centre for Newcomers, where they would be able to get English classes, settlement counselling, and employment counselling free of charge. As their grandchildren get older and are enrolled in school, they would be able to work and also to participate more fully in other aspects of Canadian society, thus decreasing social isolation and increasing the Canadian diaspora and all of the wonderful things that come with that.

For all of the aforementioned reasons, through discussion with our own clients and the support services we provide them, it is our stance at the Centre for Newcomers that sponsorship of parents and grandparents as immigrants should be more easily attainable in a timely manner. We should discontinue the super visa and instead allow them to become permanent residents and stay here.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. George, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Usha George (Interim Vice-President, Research and Innovation, Ryerson University, As an Individual): Thank you very much for this opportunity. I am delighted to be here. For over 24 years, ever since I came to Canada, my work has been with the newcomers and immigrants to Canada, three years as a community worker and for the rest of it, as an academic at the University of Toronto and now at Ryerson University.

Much of what we do is, of course, looking at various aspects of the immigration policy and how it's implemented. My presentation today touches on three major points. One is about refugees; another is about people who have applied for family reunification under the live-in caregiver program; and the third one is about family reunification for parents and grandparents.

I would like to remind everyone of the objective of our immigration policy, which is to support self-sufficiency and social and economic well-being of refugees by facilitating reunification with their family members in Canada. This is for refugees. On the whole, we say that we see that the families are united in Canada.

My submission is that two of the three goals that we have stated in our immigration policy are not being satisfied by the current family reunification policy. These are the social and the humanitarian pieces.

Let me start with the humanitarian piece around refugees. As has been said before, refugees come to Canada from war-torn countries and have traumatic pre-migration experiences. There's very little social capital available to them, so the initial phase involves them looking for anything that they can have in order to settle in Canada. The lack of family around them actually disrupts and delays their own settlement and integration, and as a result, they experience alienation and marginalization as well.

More and more, we are aware of what is called the feminization of migration. Many of the refugees who are coming to Canada now are single women with children. For example, we recently sponsored a family from Syria. The family arrived about three days ago, and it's a single mother with two children. Especially for women who are coming on their own without much social capital, we find that it is becoming very difficult for them.

On the whole, there are enough statistics to show that the processing times are very long and people have to wait patiently. I'm not even getting into the details of the bureaucratic and process-related issues, for example, the DNA testing and the excluded family category, and whether the sponsor is receiving social assistance. All of that aside, just the process itself taking so long actually puts a heavy emotional toll on the refugees.

My second example and argument is about Canada's caregiver program. We know that in the past, live-in caregivers had to live with a sponsoring family for two years, and after that, they would get their open work permit.

I just wanted to give you one story that I came across recently, and I've changed the person's name. This is a person I know very well. Mary came to Canada as a live-in caregiver in November 2009. In 2012, she received an open work permit. She applied for PR in March 2012. It has been four and a half years and she is still waiting for a response from the immigration department. When she came to Canada in 2009, her children were four years and two and a half years old. Now they are over eleven years and nine years old respectively. She has not seen her children in the last seven years.

Mary is just one of the many who are caught in the system in Canada, and there are very many, I understand from Mary herself. They actually even have a support group to talk to each other about their own experiences.

We know that this kind of delayed processing has affected the well-being of the children who are coming to join their mothers at any point in time whether after five years or six years.

• (1700)

The phenomenon of "barrel children" is well known to us, especially from the time when the Jamaican live-in caregiver program was quite alive. The term "barrel" refers to children who receive blue plastic barrels of things—goods and clothes, all of that—from their mothers in Canada, with the hope that their reunification will happen very fast. Studies have shown that, even when reunification happens, there are a great many issues around their emotional well-being and social adjustment, school adjustment and performance, and so on.

There have been a number of studies about the Filipino community, especially the children who have joined mothers in

the live-in caregiver program. I don't know if it was Madine, but someone did a study on the Filipino children, and one of the findings was that a quarter of Filipino girls and more than a third of Filipino boys entering grade 8 in the late nineties had not graduated by 2003. The average age of separation is from five to six years old, and by the time the kids get back with the mothers, if at all, they are 13 or 14.

I was also reading about many of these children becoming members of gangs, simply because they don't perform well in school and they feel isolated. Then there are many examples of Filipino children underachieving in our school system, simply because of the separation and the anxiety, and the lack of support they feel, particularly emotionally. Of course, they were getting—

The Chair: Ms. George, you have 20 seconds, please.

Ms. Usha George: Right.

The other issue is the grandparents and parents super visa. It's almost as if they are caught in a system. If they don't have enough income, they can't sponsor their parents. But the parents actually help to look after the children, which enables both the parents to go to work, so they are caught in that system.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. George.

Ms. VanderPlaat, you have seven minutes, please.

Dr. Madine VanderPlaat (Professor, Saint Mary's University, As an Individual): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address your committee.

I'm here specifically to speak to the value of sponsoring immigrant parents and grandparents. In particular, I hope to provide you with a more robust theoretical and methodological context for your future deliberations.

The sponsorship of parents and grandparents has long been a highly contentious issue in competing views surrounding Canada's immigration strategy. Much if not all of the debate is grounded in discourse or narrative and not based on any empirical evidence. In very simplistic terms, the discussion on the value of sponsoring parents and grandparents takes place between those who advocate a humanitarian rationale for family reunification versus those who argue against such policies from an economic perspective.

The position opposing large-scale family reunification policies is based on an economic imperative that contends that while families may be good for the well-being of individuals, family class immigration may not be in the best economic interests of the state. In particular, sponsored parents and grandparents are viewed as potential burdens on Canadian society by virtue of their perceived diminished capacity for economic contribution and increased potential for stressing the social welfare and health care systems.

The humanitarian position, by contrast, derives its moral imperative from Canada's commitment to a number of international conventions that recognize the migrant's right to join or be joined by their family. The humanitarian position often also argues that not only is access to family a right, it's also fundamental for the social, physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of newcomer populations.

In its current state, much of the debate between the more altruistic humanitarian position and the instrumental economic perspective is not particularly useful, because it lacks a common ground for argumentation. A more fruitful platform for discussion is presented by those who argue that the notions of contribution and burden are inappropriately defined by the dominant economic and human capital constructions of integration.

Researchers from this perspective argue that not only is the family good for the well-being of the individual, it is good for society as a whole because access to family relationships and networks can support and mitigate the settlement and integration experience. For example, by providing child care and/or labour to family-owned businesses, sponsored parents and grandparents can contribute to the overall economic well-being of the family and support the educational pursuits and labour market activities of other family members. Through volunteerism, informal networking, and kinship work, sponsored parents and grandparents can also contribute to community cohesion and social capital formation. In addition, the possibility of sponsoring relatives may be an important element in attracting and retaining immigrants, something that's very important for my corner of the country.

The problem with the alternative contribution discourse is that what “may” or “could” happen is more or less based on speculation rather than concrete evidence. Little attention has been given to developing models to ascertain the non-economic contributions made by these newcomers to Canada, or to develop more appropriate models for measuring the non-standard economic contributions of this particular class. Yet the need to understand the contributions that different families bring to the immigration experience is considered critical.

My research—with my colleagues Howard Ramos and Yoko Yoshida from Dalhousie University—constitutes a very preliminary effort to take a closer look at the role of sponsored parents and grandparents in this regard. Using the longitudinal survey of immigrants to Canada, and later the longitudinal immigration database, we uncovered some interesting differences between sponsored parents and grandparents and other immigrants.

Some differences provide ammunition for the burden narrative, as sponsored parents and grandparents are more likely to be women with less education, have less work experience, have weaker official language skills, be less likely to be married, and be older. However, they are not as elderly as some might expect. The average age of sponsored parents and grandparents in the LSIC is 60. Almost 70% are under the age of 65. This calls into serious question sentiments such as those expressed by a journalist from Edmonton who stated, “Most of these older immigrants will never work or will work very little between the time they are admitted and the time of their death.”

• (1705)

This leads to a second surprising finding. Only 30% of sponsored parents and grandparents state that their primary activity is being retired. The remaining 70% are either working—in fact, 40% of the population is working—self-employed, or in the case of many women, looking after family and home, all of which support the alternative contribution argument.

These findings suggest important directions for the type of research needed to effectively inform debates about family class immigration.

First is the need to recognize immigration, integration, and settlement as a family experience. Family class immigrants are, by definition, part of a larger social unit. Hence, arguments based on their outcomes as individuals, especially those that focus on economic indicators, are grossly misleading.

Second, our analysis shows support for the alternative contributions argument. Sponsored parents and grandparents are active, which supports the contention that further research is warranted to establish how sponsored parents and grandparents may not only be contributing to the best interests of the family, but also, through their social and cultural reproductive activities, to the best interests of the state.

I would therefore ask that future policy directions be supported by a very strong research base, one that starts with the recognition of immigration as a family project, and one that acknowledges the very many and intersecting ways that members of a family collectively can contribute to the well-being of both their family and their country.

Thank you.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. VanderPlaat.

Ms. Zahid, you have five minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will take this opportunity to thank all of our witnesses for providing their input to this important study, and for all the work they are doing with the new immigrants.

My first question is for Ms. George. It's really a pleasure to hear from someone with your level of experience and expertise.

Adaptation to a new country is a complex process. Immigrants who are dissatisfied with their settlement experience seriously contemplate leaving Canada. In your paper “To Stay or Not to Stay: Characteristics Associated with Newcomers Planning to Remain in Canada”, you examine some factors that would encourage new immigrants to stay in Canada once they have arrived, despite the difficulties they might be facing in the adaptation process.

Could you speak to the importance of the presence of a spouse or an extended family in the decision to make Canada a permanent home?

Ms. Usha George: Definitely.

That study, particularly, was about all immigrants who came into the country and were here for less than five years.

They found that the social capital they had in terms of the family, as well as the networks they created within and outside of their ethnic community, provided a strong impetus for them to feel a sense of belonging, to feel that Canada was their second home, and to describe themselves as Indo-Canadians, or whatever country they were from—that kind of hybrid identity we talk about. It was always seen that those social networks, particularly the family, were extremely important.

In another study, we also found that women, the wives in the family, asserted their agency, so to speak. While they went out to look for work and so on, they networked with other people, who were sometimes from their own community but sometimes from outside the community, and brought information back to their husbands to say, “Here is a job. Here is a company that’s hiring these kinds of workers. Why don’t you go and try it out?”

I have another paper called “Tell me what I need to know”. It’s basically immigrant women saying to us, “Give me the information. I’ll process it. I am able to look for it.” It is all within the confines of the family that these things happen.

People who leave are sometimes disappointed that they don’t have the kind of job they wanted, but many of them feel they don’t belong. The presence of family and friends is certainly a very important consideration for them.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

You have talked about women specifically.

For the spousal visa, are any women having problems proving their legitimate marriage in certain parts of the world because of some cultural values, or because the person who is interviewing them doesn’t know what culture they belong to or what is in their culture?

• (1715)

Ms. Usha George: Absolutely. The external perceptions of marriages from different parts of the world actually act as a big burden on these women. They have to prove that their marriage is legitimate. The data that is collected in this case, which is not culturally and linguistically sensitive to the background of the couple, can lead to quite misleading conclusions around the validity of the marriage and the genuineness of the partnership.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

My next question is for Ms. Yuen and Mr. Tachble. Have you found any difficulties relating to family reunification in certain parts of the world more than in other parts of the world?

Dr. Admasu Tachble (Director, Settlement and Career Development, Centre for Newcomers): This may be dependent on the kinds of criteria we set, particularly when we demand financial stability for the last three years in order to sponsor one’s spouse or one’s parents. In some societies this might be easier, but particularly if you are African, the demands on the part of the sponsored people are much stiffer for them to fulfill.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tachble.

Ms. Rempel, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I’ll address my first question to Professor VanderPlaat, and then I’ll go to Ms. Yuen.

First of all, for context, I moved to Calgary from Winnipeg when I was 24 years old. I wasn’t moving to a different country, but certainly, not having any family in the city influenced my decision not to have any children, which continues to this day. I think the rationale around family reunification, that it allows women to perhaps have a greater and more significant participation in the workforce in Canada, is valid.

There’s a perception issue in Canada that all of you addressed. You danced around it but I’m going to address it flat out. There’s a perception that the parent and grandparent program is somehow a burden on the system. What I’d be very interested in as an outcome of this study are best practices on how we can communicate in a concrete way the value of these types of immigrants to Canada, such that the type of research you both mentioned is communicated to the public.

This would be my first question to both of you. Is there some best practice on how we can share stories and share that information in, perhaps, a more effective way?

Second, is there any data that either of you know of, or could point us to, that shows how many people out of that cohort end up on social assistance and why? Rather than saying, we don’t want people coming to this, which is a value judgment, we could ask how we could help overcome those obstacles if they’re there. Is language a determinant? There are these sorts of things we could ask.

I know this is a bit of a run-around question, but I’m wondering if you could talk first about how we can better communicate the validity of this program such that we can gain social acceptance. If you think that there are specific roadblocks to gaining social licence, if you will, for this program in the broader Canadian community, how can we address that? How can we look at data on the prevalence of social assistance usage and the reasons for it?

First, I address this to Professor VanderPlaat, and then to Ms. Yuen.

Dr. Madine VanderPlaat: As I said, I think the only way you’re going to change perceptions is to do some research. Right now, everything that’s being said and anything that’s ever been said about parents and grandparents is pure speculation. The assumption, for example, is that they’re old because the word “grandparents” is in there. It’s just not true. Seventy per cent are under the age of 65. The average is 60. You can imagine the range there.

I think that there are numbers you can fight with—numbers and stories—that will really show how these parents and grandparents are connected to their families, but it’s a big problem. For any data we do have, they are analyzed in isolation of the family they are attached to, so we have absolutely no idea of whether or not that family’s income has actually increased because the grandmother is, for example, taking care of children.

Maybe I’m just being self-serving here as an academic but I think that, without the research, it’s all just going to be talk.

•(1720)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I have a minute left, and I want to pass it off.

Dr. Madine VanderPlaat: The second—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt. I only have a minute left.

Just very succinctly, could you point us to any research that's been done on the prevalence of social assistance usage for this cohort?

Dr. Madine VanderPlaat: Very little, but you have to remember, though, they had to be here for 10 years before they could apply, and it's 20 under the new legislation.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

Ms. Yuen.

Ms. Anila Lee Yuen: I just want to reiterate what the previous witness was saying. I think the way that we're going to best combat any of these assumptions will be based on research and based on fact. I think the more that we talk about it... It is really up to our leaders, all of you in government, to be able to talk about those numbers, to be able to utilize those numbers, and to be able to say that when we do talk about it, it is a family unit.

My own grandmother didn't work, but I know for a fact that if she hadn't been there, then my mother wouldn't have been able to work. My mother brought in a full 50% of our household income. That allowed me and my brother to go to university, and me to be in the position that I'm in today, and I know that from many different sources.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much to all of these presenters. That was very informative.

Professor VanderPlaat, with the numbers that you did present at this hearing today, I wonder if you can provide that study and that information to our chair and to the clerk so it could be shared. I'm interested in looking at that study.

We heard from the delegation before you, and from your presentation, about the value of parents and grandparents when it comes to sponsorship. Right now we have a quota that was increased from 5,000 to 10,000, but within days and within hours of the quota being opened up for application, it was filled up. Some of our previous presenters said it should be increased from 10,000 to 30,000. I think there was a point where Mr. Wang, in Vancouver, or Mr. Ma, said maybe even unlimited.

I'm interested in hearing from you what that should look like? Should that number increase from 10,000 to some other number? I'll open it up to all three groups of presenters.

The Chair: Perhaps we can begin with Ms. George.

Ms. Usha George: I'm in no position to say it has to be unlimited, but definitely it is a matter of eligibility. Of course, the government and the committee has the right to define those eligibilities. It definitely has to be based on a need, the presence of children who need looking after, or after-school programs. As Madine said, there

needs to be some studies. I would not directly advocate unlimited numbers because the entire immigration system is based on numbers. I would say it has to be within reasonable limits, as it is definitely too small for a country as large as ours—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt. I don't know how many minutes we have now, but I need a quick answer from the others.

The Chair: Mr. Yuen.

Ms. Anila Lee Yuen: I guess my statement to that, Ms. Kwan, is that if Canada wants to continue to attract the best and the brightest immigrants in the world, we can't do that by looking at them as individuals. We have to do that by looking at what is going to make them happy and fulfilled, and want to come to this country. That means allowing them to have the people they love, including their parents, come with them.

I don't know what an exact number would be, but I think that it's important that we look at the family as a whole unit. I wouldn't say unlimited, because we do have our own criteria for safety reasons and other reasons, as well. I would say, at least for the people who are here, that we've already allowed them to come, so let's try to increase their quality of life so they can really be the best possible Canadians they can be.

•(1725)

The Chair: Ms. VanderPlaat.

Dr. Madine VanderPlaat: I'll just add to that, you can also think about it in a regional context. Maybe allowing more in Atlantic Canada would help us to attract and retain more immigrants because we allow for more family unification. That might take pressure off the larger centres, where even though they may be contributing, it may be hard to provide all the supports.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Therefore, in one aspect we could correspond the number of the other categories that are coming in to be matched with families in terms of reunification. If I understood people's responses correctly, they're saying that, if we're allowing them in, they ought to be allowed to bring their families in and to be seen as a unit.

I'm just going to move on quickly to the financial aspect, because a lot of presenters and sponsor families are saying the threshold requirement is very onerous. Especially for new immigrants when they first come, their wages tend to be lower than their Canadian counterparts, for a little bit in any event. I wonder if you have comments about lowering that threshold to make it more feasible for people to be able to sponsor their families to come to Canada.

I think I only have seconds left, so—

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have 20 seconds, so five seconds each, very quickly.

The Chair: Go in the same order, please.

Ms. Usha George: I'll jump in to say that, yes, it's onerous. Therefore, we need to look at that carefully. Again, studies tell us that if it used to take five years for a newcomer to catch up with the average Canadian salary, now it's taking about 10 to 13 years. The threshold we have kept is quite high, and again, we need to—

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Yuen.

Ms. Anila Lee Yuen: Yes, and if we take into account also that most of these people who are wanting to bring their parents over are also supporting their parents back home, where they are coming from, then lowering that threshold and enabling those family members to come here would mean that money would actually stay in the country. That's important to note.

The Chair: Thank you. Unfortunately, we'll have to move to the next questioner.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Professor VanderPlaat, I think you were talking about the longitudinal data. I happened to be talking to someone about it this morning who told me it's unique data that only Canada actually collects. I'd love the data. I think it's split out by cultural groups, like the Portuguese and the South Asians. Is that true?

I think we've already requested that information.

Dr. Madine VanderPlaat: Yes, I do believe that's true.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay. I am very curious about that.

I just want to continue the threads and pick up on the pieces. The reason we have around 300,000 as the number this year is that it's our capacity. My sense is that you're always looking at what is the capacity of settlement agencies, health care, or schools, when you're looking at an overall number.

It seems to me that we now get down to some research. You all have recommended that we do a little more research to dispel some of the myths, but I guess also to gather some data. I wouldn't mind some advice on what kind of research we might be looking at beyond what percentage actually end up on social assistance. What kind of research do you think we should be looking at in trying to get to the right number around family reunification? That question is to all of you.

The Chair: Let's start in reverse order.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That's okay, starting with her is fine. Go ahead.

The Chair: Ms. VanderPlaat, the question is yours.

Dr. Madine VanderPlaat: Any kind of research in this area has to use the family as the unit of analysis. To just look at parents and grandparents is not going to tell you anything. If you're going to look

at economics, or any of that, you're going to have to look at how they fit into a larger family strategy for immigration settlement and retention.

The issue of whether or not they're going to put a burden on the health care system is pure speculation. It's the equivalent of saying they're old—like the quote from the journalist that they're going to die soon—as opposed to looking at them as actually making a contribution. Little kids get sick too and are very expensive.

We are working with a lot of myths, and the only way to really get around those is to look at how they fit into a much broader social network.

• (1730)

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Yuen.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That's fine, go ahead.

Ms. Anila Lee Yuen: To add to the point, it's really important, as you're doing research—because the financial piece and that economic burden are so important—to really look at these cases, where parents are able to work and work longer hours and potentially able to better themselves and progress, and how much it is impacting their ability to earn that they have parents at home who can take care of their children and can be there and serve that role.

Understanding that economic impact in terms of how much they saved on child care, how much they were able to earn.... In terms of stresses on their lives and in terms of their children's abilities, I would venture, based on my own personal experience and that of others, that children who get raised with the help of their grandparents are very happy children because they're getting a lot of attention and they're getting a lot of love in the home. Looking at those kinds of studies, are there any differences between that group versus other children who may be latchkey children or who don't have those kinds of supports?

Ms. Usha George: If I have a second I'll add to that by saying that if you do a cross-sectional study, almost like an economic modelling, of how families function with and without grandparents, the years when they came, the size of the family unit, and so on, we'll get to have a good understanding, especially if we have children who have to go to a day care or who require after-school assistance, etc. I think we can do that as a cross-sectional study.

The Chair: I would like to thank all the panellists for appearing before our committee today.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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