



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

HUMA • NUMBER 151 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, June 6, 2019

—
Chair

Mr. Bryan May

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

Thursday, June 6, 2019

•(1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on Tuesday, May 28, 2019, the committee will now commence its study of report 1, "Call Centres", of the 2019 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

We are joined this morning by representatives from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, including Sylvain Ricard, the Interim Auditor General of Canada, as well as two of his staff: Jean Goulet, Principal of Performance Audit, Audit Operations; and Joanna Murphy, Director of Performance Audit, Audit Operations.

Thank you all for joining us here today.

I will now welcome Mr. Ricard to make an opening statement of up to 10 minutes, after which we'll open up the floor for questions.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard (Interim Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to present the results of our recent audit report on call centres. Joining me today are Jean Goulet and Joanna Murphy, who were responsible for the audit.

In this audit we looked at the call centres of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; Veterans Affairs Canada; and Employment and Social Development Canada, including the employment insurance as well as the Canada pension plan and old age security call centres. We also looked at whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat included call centres within the Government of Canada's service strategy and whether Shared Services Canada provided support to modernize call centres.

This audit is important because call centres are a key source of government information. This is especially true for people who are visually impaired, have intellectual or physical disabilities, do not have a computer or Internet access or the skills to use these technologies, or who live in rural or remote regions and do not have high-speed Internet access or cannot easily get to a government office.

[Translation]

Canadians make millions of calls to the government every year to get the information they need to make time-sensitive, important

decisions. For example, they may be calling to ensure that they receive benefits on time or to find out about the status of an application.

Overall, we found that getting through to government call centres took time and persistence. In fact, we found that half of the 16 million Canadians who tried to speak with an agent could not do so. Seven million callers were redirected to an automated system, were told to visit the website, or were disconnected. In addition, more than a million callers gave up waiting and hung up.

•(1105)

[English]

We also found that service decisions were not driven by callers' needs. For example, departments did not offer callers the option of staying on the line or of getting called back when an agent became available.

The way in which call centres set service standards was not relevant to Canadians, transparent or consistent. None of the call centres we audited had service standards on clients' likelihood of reaching an agent or on the accuracy of the answers they provide to callers.

Regarding Employment and Social Development Canada, we found that when the department reported on its service standard to answer 80% of calls within 10 minutes, it did not include calls during which the caller hung up after reaching the queue. The department also published call centre performance results that were based on unverified data. Without service standards, callers cannot know what level of service they can expect from call centres.

[Translation]

And the situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. The government's clients first service strategy does not include call centres, though more than 25% of Canadians use the telephone to connect with the government.

In addition, after five years of a call centre modernization project, Shared Services Canada has managed to upgrade only eight of 221 call centres, and it has no plan for the remaining 213. We made five recommendations, including two to Employment and Social Development Canada. All organizations have agreed with all of them and have shared their action plans with us.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

First for questions, we have Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Ricard and your staff, for being here today to answer some of our questions.

As much as we think we're very important as members of Parliament, I think the number one thing our constituents and Canadians want is service from their government. This report on these call centres is extremely disconcerting. I would say it's completely unacceptable for the Government of Canada to have this kind of service for our constituents and for Canadians, who are the people they should be answering to. I really do appreciate the work you've done on this to highlight the shortcomings within our call centres, and to give us some opportunities, hopefully, to address some ways that we can try to remedy those.

The one thing that jumped out at me from your report was that ESDC was the department that wasn't complying with some of the guidelines when it came to your audit. It was refusing some of the recommendations that you're putting forward, saying that it doesn't track dropped calls or have standards or anything like that. Was there any reason that it decided it wasn't going to comply? Is that something it can do?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We are of the view that, based on our review of best practices, it should be included. That's a question you could ask the department or government officials, I suppose. We believe in full transparency in disclosing the results that they're achieving on a service like this one. That's why we referred in our report to the importance of having service standards that are based on consulting Canadians on their needs, making those service standards public so that they know the service levels they should expect and then reporting on performance against those.

● (1110)

Mr. John Barlow: As part of your report, you also mentioned that the Liberal government had made a commitment to upgrade the 221 call centres, but only eight have been done. Have there been any plans or a concrete strategy to complete the other 213 upgrades? You were talking about the lack of resources there or up-to-date technology. As part of your report, was there any plan for completing the upgrades on the other 213 call centres?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: In the report—and I'll ask Monsieur Goulet to correct me if I'm wrong—we referred to the fact that all 221 were supposed to be finished by 2020. That was the original plan of Shared Services Canada. It realized that it had underestimated the level of effort, the complexity, the cost and the need for preparing the various players in the process. It realized that it could only do eight of the 221 by 2020 rather than all of them. At the time of the audit, there was no plan for the remainder.

Mr. John Barlow: As part of your report, you also mentioned the request for an additional \$10.8 million to be able to complete your mandate. Could you explain why you need that additional \$10.8 million to do the other audits that your department has been legislated to do?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: The former Auditor General submitted a request for additional funding through the budget process. He wrote to the Minister of Finance in 2017 as part of the 2018 budget process and identified a need for, I think—I'm going on my memory here—\$21 million. We got some of it. We got \$8 million in the 2018 budget. He wrote again last summer for not quite all of the difference because everything had evolved in the meantime. He didn't ask for the full difference; he asked for a little bit less than that. The difference would have been \$13 million and he asked for \$10.8 million. That's basically to be able to deliver on our mandate.

Much of our mandate is mandatory, such as auditing the financial statements of the various organizations. We can't not do them. The number increased. We also have an additional mandate related to the commissioner of the environment, where we have to do some work. In the past there were, I think, 26 entities that we had to review. I think it's now up to 93. It's all of those challenges, along with updating our technology, which is outdated. We need all of those things done to be able to deliver on our mandate.

Mr. John Barlow: This report on the call centres shows how important the Office of the Auditor General is to highlight where we have shortfalls within government. Again, I was astonished with the results of your audit on the call centres. It is completely unacceptable for Canadians that they're getting this kind of horrific service—and I would call it horrific.

From my understanding, never in Canadian government history has an Auditor General not been able to fulfill their mandate, and funding goes up and down. What has changed? Is it just a matter that your workload has increased that substantially under the current mandate? Before, the Auditor General would do 25 audits per year. Now you're down to 14. Is it just a matter of an additional workload?

The Chair: That's actually the time, but I'll give you an opportunity for a very quick answer.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Very briefly, there are kind of two drivers. We need to update our technology and our tools to perform audit work in order to align with new technology that is out there where we perform audits, and yes, additional mandates have been given to us over the years.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you.

The Chair: MP Ruimy, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): Thank you for being here today.

Clearly, looking at the report, it's quite an eye-opener for a lot of folks.

I'm a numbers guy, and when I start looking at this, the first thing that comes to mind, knowing that this government has reinvested more money into call centres and hiring more people, is whether there has been an improvement from the last time a report like this was completed.

• (1115)

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: The one I'll mention wasn't on them. We had a similar type of audit on call centres for CRA, two or three years ago.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: How do we know whether we're making progress on this? From the minister's numbers, the number of calls answered has increased by more than 850,000 since 2014, from 3.8 million to 4.6 million. I keep seeing that there's a number that's missing. There are about 13 million calls, I think, that are not being accounted for or weren't there. I'm trying to understand how these numbers all work together.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'm not quite sure what number you're referring to. I think you asked a question about how we know that we have improved. We need service standards in place. There's a policy from Treasury Board secretariat for a reason. You need service standards in place—

Mr. Dan Ruimy: I agree.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: To establish those service times, you need to have consulted Canadians to know what they expect and what they need, and you make your decision about the service level you want to have in place.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Are you suggesting that there have not been any service standards? The way you're saying it is like we have no service standards.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Yes.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: What's happened over the last 10 years?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: In our audit, we do mention, regarding the three service standards that are required under the TBS policy, for two of those service standards there was none, and for the other one, one of the entities had no service standards.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: When was that determined? I'm struggling to understand why, all of a sudden, now we're talking about not having service standards when, to me, it's something that should have been in place many years ago.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'm afraid I'll have to say I agree with you. Service standards should have been in place for some time, I suppose. We perform an audit for a period of time, so I can't tell you if there were some before and whether they were removed or dropped. At the time of the audit, there were no service standards, as I mentioned, except as I just described a few minutes ago.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Okay. It's a little frustrating because generally you compare where we were and where we are today. In order to get to where we want to go tomorrow, again, you have to be able to measure where you are. I'm just surprised that we don't have that.

I want to move to the digital aspect. I know that our government has been trying to digitize a lot of the services. Has any of that played into your report?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I guess it plays into our referring to the fact that there is a strategy at TBS about what I'll call online services

generally. As part of that strategy, call centres were not considered. As we note in the report, and I referred to this in the opening statement, 25% of Canadians want to use, or in certain cases such as I described in the opening statement—disabilities and all of those reasons—don't want.... It's not that they want to use, but they have to use the phone.

We recommended to Treasury Board to include in their strategy the call centres, and they accepted that and are going to do it.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Okay. You also mentioned that eight call centres have been upgraded. Have you been able to determine whether there has been a marked improvement from those specific eight call centres, or have we not looked at that?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: The upgrades—those eight—were not up and running at the time of our audit, except for maybe one. I'll refer to Mr. Goulet the question whether there was one. The improvement, if any, would have occurred after the period of the audit, so I'm afraid I can't answer that question about its impact and improvements due to it.

• (1120)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: From what you've seen of those upgrades, would you feel that moving down the line they would produce better results?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Well, it's difficult for us. Auditors like to speak based on facts. All I can say is that based on the action plans that were presented to us there should be improvements, but you will only see improvements once the plans are fully implemented and monitored. Until then, you won't know.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: What time frame was this report based on?

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: When was the report started and when was it ended?

Mr. Jean Goulet (Principal, Performance Audit, Audit Operations, Office of the Auditor General): The scope of the audit was fiscal year 2017-18.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

The Chair: Monsieur Dusseault, take six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Chair, thank you for welcoming to your committee.

I'm very interested in the topic, since we're talking about services to Canadians. When it comes to service quality, the Government of Canada can't be said to be performing well, not just compared to other governments, but also compared to the private sector, where no one would accept poor service from a company to its customers.

Canadians pay taxes to the government every year and expect that this money will be used to serve them well and in a timely manner. Clearly, this isn't the case with the call centres you looked at, and I remember that it was the Canada Revenue Agency that was severely blamed in 2017. It seems that all these government agencies are fighting each other to get the worst customer service record.

In your audits, did you find out if your 2017 report on the Canada Revenue Agency had any feedback from departments and if they were aware of the issues? Do you think these organizations have tried to solve these problems or simply ignored them since 2017?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Since this isn't an issue we addressed during our audits, it's difficult for me to tell you whether these organizations were aware of the problems or ignored them. Again, you may want to contact the departments directly to ask them if they are aware of the situation and if this has influenced their approach to call centres.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: My colleague just raised the whole issue of technology modernization. In its response to your report, the Canada Revenue Agency was clearly committed to modernizing its systems to respond adequately to the public.

I'm wondering what happens when calls are rejected, when people are redirected to other telephone options or when they are simply asked to call back later. How is this accounted for in performance measures? What worries me about the numbers I'm seeing are the average wait times, including eight minutes for employment insurance, five minutes for the Canada pension plan and old age security, 32 minutes for Immigration and five minutes for Veterans Affairs. However, these statistics don't include calls where communication is cut off and people haven't been able to speak to an agent. Does that distort the data a little? If communication is cut off in 45% to 50% of calls and people can't talk to an agent, but agents answer the other half of the calls in eight minutes, do you find these statistics reliable?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We highlight this situation in one or two of the tables in our report. To take the example of employment insurance, the government received 8.9 million calls. Of that number, 3.6 million failed to establish contact with an agent, and 690,000 people hung up. The remaining calls were from people who were able to talk to an agent and, unless I'm mistaken, the wait time for those calls is counted.

• (1125)

Mr. Jean Goulet: Indeed, it's for the calls that reached an agent.

The department verifies that 80% of calls reached an agent in the eight minutes set. Although the department tracks redirected and blocked calls, or calls where the caller hangs up while on hold, that data isn't disclosed publicly.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: This calculation method removes their importance from service standards. If, for instance, the standard is 10 minutes, but that time limit is only met for 25% of calls that have not been redirected, cut or abandoned, the service hasn't improved in my opinion. So it isn't enough to establish service standards for time limits; the service also has to be accessible.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: That's what our report explains. It's important not only to have service standards and to measure performance, but it's also important to be transparent and provide all the information. The table I mentioned earlier shows that 50% of calls don't reach an agent. It's important, since it shows that the eight minute time limit applies only to calls answered by an agent.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: I would like to ask one question in the time I have left.

[English]

The Chair: You have 35 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: I would like to come back to the argument made by Employment and Social Development Canada to give it the benefit of the doubt, namely that self-serve functions are offered by the department 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

How are calls from people who use these self-service functions counted? These people may eventually get their questions answered, receive the service they are looking for and become satisfied clients. These calls aren't rejected or forwarded to an agent. Are they counted in any particular way?

[English]

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Goulet: Based on this, we focused on calls where the person wanted to talk to an agent and did not want to use the department's automated system or other options.

That being said, we did take a quick look at the automated system, but unfortunately the department does not keep sufficiently reliable data about it for us to include it in our audit.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Morrissey, please.

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

My question is to Monsieur Richard.

You focused a lot on the requirement to update technology within these call centres. As you were doing your audit, would you have established a baseline for the technology that was being used before the five-year process began? I assume you would have been auditing the five-year modernization of these call centres.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: No, we didn't audit the technology or the transformation initiative or any of that. We looked at, I guess I'll say it this way, the planning of it.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: So your focus was all on the plan, not where it started and where it was attempting to get to?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: No. It was about the following. Is something being done? Where are we? How much progress has been made? It was those types of things, and not the technology for the technology.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Would you have analyzed as well the personnel who were assigned to handle these? For each of these issues, while you may have modernized technology, one of the key aspects of service would be the ability to have people on the end answering those inquiries. Were you able to establish the change over that five-year modernization period in the number of agents assigned? Was that a field or a scope that you would have looked at?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Sorry, I'm not sure I quite understand the question. Is it about the staff on the modernization project?

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Yes.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Okay. Again, we didn't analyze that. We've turned to the organizations, to the departments, asking what's being done here, who's doing what, whether it has proper planning and so on and so forth.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Okay. You're looking at the statistical side of what their policy was in place.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We've asked them: Are you planning for this? Where have you started? What's happening? They've realized that they underestimated the level of complexity and the level of effort to deliver the project. They will now have to turn to replan the whole initiative, because as we mentioned in the report, at the time of the audit, there was no plan for the remainder, the 230 call centres that had not been modernized.

• (1130)

Mr. Robert Morrissey: In your opening statements, I'm not sure if you elaborated. You say you made five recommendations, including two to Employment and Social Development Canada. Did you outline what the two—I'm curious about the two recommendations you made to Employment and Social Development Canada.

Mr. Jean Goulet: Basically the first recommendation is that some departments, including Employment and Social Development Canada, should review how they manage incoming calls to improve access to agents. They should consider practices such as allowing callers to decide if they prefer to wait, use cell service options or have the call centre call them back later.

The second one, again going to the department and other departments as well, is that they should set call service standards that are relevant to clients and consider client feedback as per Treasury Board guidelines on service, and that they should publish call centre standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent manner and verify the results to confirm accuracy.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Did they have a process in place to document or analyze any client feedback?

Mr. Jean Goulet: They have a quality control mechanism in place, yes, but we did not audit that.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: So you cannot comment on that process

Mr. Jean Goulet: No, we can't really comment.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: —and its ability to capture relevant data.

Mr. Jean Goulet: That's right. The only thing we can say to that is that this is one of the standards the guideline recommends, which is the accuracy standard. None of the departments we audited had an accuracy standard.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Again, you may have answered this question earlier, but when was the last time the scope of audit that you're currently reporting on would have been done, if ever, on the similar centres or departments?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: That's the first audit we did on that—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: This was the first. This establishes a benchmark of numbers and statistics.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: —unless I'm forgetting something from many, many years ago.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: But I'm talking about the past 10 years, so this is the first critical analysis, detailed analysis, of the government's ability to deliver in this area.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: As I said earlier, except the CRA one, which we did a few years ago.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: On another subject, Mr. Ricard, you made reference to doing 26 entities and now you're doing 96. It was a comment you made.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Yes.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: How do you describe those entities? Just elaborate a bit more on that.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: That's some work—I was answering a previous question that was just about the workload that we're doing in the office, and I referred to the fact that, recently, the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development mandate, where she has to do some work on 23 or 26 entities, where she has to look at the.... There are sustainable development strategies. We have 20-some entities we had to review and assess before, through legislation. The requirement has now moved up to 93 or 96 entities.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: When did that requirement occur?

The Chair: Answer very briefly, please.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: It's also over the last year.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: So it's fair to say that the Office of the Auditor General is taking a much more comprehensive review and analysis of government operations in general than in the past.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Well, there are all sorts of up-and-down or movements; everything always evolves. I use that as an example of some additional work we got. We've also been tasked to audit—I'll call it the pipeline—the western entity that we—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: But they're all public issues—

The Chair: I've got to step in. I'm sorry.

MP Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your presentation this morning.

I think all of us as members of Parliament, certainly in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay, are inundated with people coming in the door frustrated with the system, with the centres. I don't think that's a political statement. I think everyone, regardless of party, has the same issue. My constituency assistant Jeannette Arseneault does a wonderful job. We talked about it this morning. Two more people came in this morning saying they're calling, not getting answers, being left on hold, nobody calls them back, and it just goes on and on.

With that being said, I have a great relationship with the employees of, say, the call centre in Saint John. It's a CRA call centre. I talk regularly to the employees who work there. They work for PSAC or UTE, and they're good people. They're frustrated. They go to work every day, and they want to do better. We all want this to be better.

Cultural shifts don't happen overnight; they happen over a period of time. Cultural shifts can happen for many reasons, but one of the reasons is an overall lack of support, funding, what have you. It's quite clear that what's happening with call centres didn't happen overnight. It evolved over many governments.

Your report is there for the record, but can you give us your thoughts on what it's going to take to fix this. It's one thing to say they're underfunded, but I think it's a bigger issue. I think you can say funding, but also how do you see this correcting, and over how much time? What's it going to take to change this culturally? Can someone elaborate on that?

•(1135)

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We do refer in the report that the volume of calls clearly surpassed the capacity to answer them, that they don't have features such as option to wait, callback, so you need to resolve that part. I referred earlier to the fact that all departments gave us action plans, and that's part of the action plan that was developed following the audit to address the technology side of it.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, for us there are also service standards: establish service standards, be transparent, reach out to Canadians on what they want or need. This is the only way you can make an informed decision about what you should be aiming for. Once you establish that, and make the decision about what you are trying to achieve, you need to measure and report on it.

Again, when 25% of Canadians need phones to reach out to government, this has to improve. You can't get around that. They need that.

Mr. Wayne Long: I want to jump in. I think one of the under-reported things about the previous government was the approach to IT. I think things were consolidated under Shared Services Canada. I don't think implementation was done very well. It was underfunded. I think it's been three and a half or three and three-quarter years, but I think our government's made major investments to fix these problems. We still recognize we're not there. We know it's a challenge.

Can you tell us how much responsibility for call centre performance falls on individual departments and how much can be attributed to Shared Services Canada?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I guess it depends on when one looks at the question. Shared Services Canada's responsibility is infrastructure on the technology angle, but obviously they can't walk into the department and force it on them. The department also has a responsibility to establish their needs to work with Shared Services Canada to ultimately deliver the operations of that call centre. That could be a question you could ask the department. I think that could be useful.

Mr. Wayne Long: The report looks at Government of Canada call centres broadly. There's clearly a variance among departments.

Can you tell us how Service Canada compares to Immigration, CRA, Veterans Affairs?

•(1140)

Mr. Jean Goulet: Exhibit 1 of the report talks about the differences among the call centres of the departments. The exhibit speaks for itself. With regard to employment insurance, only 52% of people who wanted to talk to an agent could talk to an agent. With the Canada pension plan, it's 49%. IRCC is 22%, and Veterans Affairs Canada is 79%. I don't think we have the numbers for CRA, but this is additional information we can get for you.

It's limited to those call centres because they were part of the scope of the audit, but they're a good representation of the different types of call centres we find within the federal government.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Kelly, you have the floor, please.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): I want to thank your office for the work you do. This is a bad report—it really is—but this is why we have your office. Your office exists to give parliamentarians information they need to demand better from the public service, regardless of who is in government and who is in opposition. This is why the auditor general is so critically important, as an officer of Parliament.

The report pretty much speaks for itself: call centres not focused on the needs of their clients, making decisions about the call centre, and departments' public reporting on the call centre sometimes overstated results. Departments are deluding themselves, either deliberately or not, about just how bad their service is.

Parliamentarians need this information in order to improve. It's great that we can take a report like this, shed light on a horrific state in our call centres and demand better.

You reported at public accounts recently that with the additional responsibilities you identified, in answer to both Mr. Barlow's and Mr. Morrissey's questions—the expansion of the commissioner of the environment, and audits going from 26 to 93 organizations, and the audits of the Canada Infrastructure Bank and Trans Mountain Corporation—you now do not have sufficient funds to audit things like cybersecurity and Arctic sovereignty.

A future committee this fall, whether it's public accounts or another committee, is not going to have the equivalent of this report to identify problems with cybersecurity. Can you comment on the importance of having a report like this, and the consequences of not being able to deliver these reports that we need?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: As a matter of humility, I will be careful how I comment on the usefulness and impact of our reports, but we can't be in that business and believe what we're doing is unimportant. I guess I'll start there.

Obviously, when we select our audit, we try to select topics that will have an impact on service to Canadians. I keep referring to the former auditor general; he's been on the record many times. After that, it is about technology, then about service to Canadians and making sure that, ultimately, we audit entities so that they measure less of their own activities and more of the impact they have on service to Canadians. That's where we see the usefulness of our report: to bring that information to Parliament, and to MPs, so you can do your work.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Thank you.

On this report itself, can you comment on the responses you've had from departments? When you say to a department that they are flat out... I quote:

The call centre for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada did not have a [time lines] target. This call centre had the longest average wait time for callers to reach an agent, of 32 minutes.

That's an average. For every person who had to wait on the phone for only, say, seven to 10 minutes, which is longer than a normal person would generally want to wait, you have someone who waited 40-plus minutes.

What was your response or reaction? Were they not aware of just how bad their response time was, or were they indifferent?

• (1145)

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'll let Mr. Goulet add to this, if there are more specifics, or on how much of a discussion there was during the audit.

For us, the answer we have is the answer that we published in the report. They have all accepted the recommendations to their action plan. They are signalling that they will make the change and want to improve.

I will go back to the point I made earlier about the impact and the importance for Canadians. Call centres are important, and you need, as management, to have service standards so you know where you're going and you can measure against your performance, and react to it and deal with it.

Mr. Pat Kelly: I've read many of your reports, of course, at public accounts. We're going to make progress, we hope, on call centres. That's the purpose of the report.

What I am worried about are the reports that we are not going to see—cybersecurity. We will not have a cybersecurity report, which your office has identified as an important area that needs to be studied. What can you tell Canadians about areas that they ought to be concerned about, for lack of audit and lack of information, and to let parliamentarians hold their government to account?

The Chair: That's time, but I'll allow for a very brief answer, please.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: You refer to the public accounts hearing that we had on our plan for the upcoming year, where we indicated that the number of audits would go down, as was indicated by the former auditor general over the last few years. If nothing was happening with our capacity, the number of audits would not have matched our funding.

It will be what it will be. We have no choice. We don't have the capacity to do more, given the mandates we have right now.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Hogg, please.

Mr. Gordie Hogg (South Surrey—White Rock, Lib.): My riding is South Surrey—White Rock. I have to say that at any HUMA meeting.

Mr. John Barlow: Who's your staff?

Mr. Gordie Hogg: Yes, my staff, I would like to...

The Chair: It's not a farewell speech, Gordie. Come on.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: Okay. Thank you.

How did you determine the eight call centres you wanted to look at? Can we assume they are statistically significant in the range of the 221 that are out there?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'll ask Monsieur Goulet to expand on that. I just want to make one small clarification. We didn't look at the eight. We looked at the four we have in the exhibit in the report. The eight refers to the fact that there are 221 in total; eight were modernized, or are being modernized. On the 213, they will have to...plan to modernize them.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: So you only looked at four.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We looked at the four that are listed here in the report.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: How were they selected?

Mr. Jean Goulet: I'll ask Ms. Murphy to add to this, but basically we were looking at the possibility of studying call centres of different tenures: some that are significantly large, others that are medium-sized, and smaller sized as well. We also had to consider our own capacity.

It's not a sampled representation, but it is one that emulates, if you will, whatever is out there in terms of call centres.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Basically, what we're trying to do here... As I referred to earlier, any audit we do, we're trying to make a difference for Canadians. When we turned to the 221—some of them are internal to government, some of them are for Canadians—we established that those four would be very relevant ones to select. We have to draw the line somewhere. We can't do all of them.

• (1150)

Mr. Gordie Hogg: You noted that none of the four you looked at had done any audits or had any service standards in place. Is that correct?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Well, I mentioned briefly that there are three areas where the Treasury Board policy asked to have service standards. For two of the three areas, none of the four had a service standard. For the third area, one of the four did not have a service standard.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: I note you also said that without service standards, callers cannot know what level of service they can expect from call centres. I think people do have a sense of what to expect, and they reflect that, I think, to all of us quite accurately and appropriately. The media does have standards. If we're going to look at developing things, obviously we should be going to the recipients of those people who are making the calls, the ones who will be impacted by the policies. Do you have call standards at the Auditor General's? When people call in, what would your standards be? Would they be typical, gold standard or...?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We're not a call centre.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: You do receive calls.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We do receive calls but I'll say it's very limited in terms of the number of calls from Canadians for a request. We get requests from Canadians through various means, from IDs to sub-topics to audits. I'm going to risk saying that when you call our office, in the vast majority of cases you are going to be answered either right away or within a minute.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: What's the phone number?

Mr. Gordie Hogg: He's just dialling it. In my office, and I think in most of our offices, we have a mission statement or a statement of standards that we expect from our staff in terms of carrying them out. I think most MPs probably have something like that. Is there something you've learned from your experiences that you would look at in terms of what those standards might be? If we wanted to give the call centres something to start with, this is sort of what we want. I'm assuming that within the culture of what's going on, a lot of the staff are frustrated too. I think they are feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with that, so it's also about the culture of what people are dealing with within the call centres. Is there anywhere in the world that actually has a gold standard in terms of these operational standards that could be put in place? Is there a model that makes those principles or values operational and shows us how we are going to check?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I will ask Mr. Goulet to add to this if he feels the need to but I'll start with this. Good practices exist. We have not done any benchmarking on this audit. Again referring to a comment I made earlier, we have to make choices as to how we scope the audit, given the capacity we have. We also try to maximize the value we bring. We have not done benchmarking to compare. The questions that were important for us were: Is there a service standard? Has management established a service standard based on consulting with Canadians? We do mention in the report that on average, Canadians, based on the survey, expect to speak to someone within seven minutes. I'm offering that although I'm not sure that's answering your question.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Jean Goulet: If I can add to this, what Monsieur Ricard just alluded to is a survey done by the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service, which is a non-profit intergovernmental organization. It's not as if we went to service standards that are being applied by private organizations or private call centres. We're looking at it from a Canadian's perspective with regard to their expectations of government.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Falk, you have five minutes, please.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you all for being here today.

I want to follow up on what Mr. Hogg was saying. Was this the first audit done on call centres?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Yes, with the exception of the CRA audit done two years ago. That's my recollection.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Right, okay.

From what I understand—and please correct me if I'm wrong—the workload has increased because your office is receiving more legislative mandates for audits from the House of Commons.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'm afraid I have to start to expand a little bit here. It's a complicated story in the sense that it has many drivers. Yes, there are more mandates in terms of more entities and different entities.

• (1155)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: There is a level of complexity in the business of some of those entities. When you audit entities that are in the business of financial instruments, it gets very technical. The world has evolved significantly in terms of investment and the types of transaction they do. You're facing more and more artificial intelligence types of contexts. I'm not suggesting that it's all over the place, everywhere you go, but we're comparing ourselves and reaching out to private sector colleagues and finding out our methodology is based on that of one of the big firms. Having reached out to them we do realize that we're behind in terms of our audit approach.

I'll leave it at that, because I could probably go on for two hours trying to describe the whole business case that was put together or described by the former auditor general to explain why he felt strongly that he had a need for \$21 million.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay.

You mentioned that there was an increase of more than 93 audits. Given the conversation with Mr. Kelly and his question, how is the priority for which audit is going to be done determined?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Again, as a matter of transparency, if there's one organization that has to believe in transparency, it's us. It's not 93 new audits per se. It's 93 entities that are subject to the review that we have to do. We were already doing that audit, but that audit is becoming four times bigger—from 20-something to 90-something.

Sorry, I lost track of your question line when I took that detour.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: How are they prioritized?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Oh, yes. Thank you.

There are two or three ways. First, we have what we call mandatory audits—some audits that were given to us by legislation. We have no choice but to audit, I'll say, 60 financial statements for organizations. It's 40, 50, or 60. I forget the number right now. For those, we don't have a choice. We have to do them. Crown corporations are subject to special exams once every 10 years. We have that calendar, that program, whereby we do so many a year to be able to go at them once every 10 years.

Then we have those types of audits that you're reviewing today—and I'm oversimplifying here, obviously—for which, with the remainder of the resources we have—because the others are mandatory, and we have no choice about doing them—we go through a risk analysis process. We're trying to select audits that would have a bigger impact or benefit or value to Canadians. In a nutshell, I would describe the selection process in the words I've just used.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay. Thank you.

Would there be any plans for the office to conduct a follow-up audit with regard to ensuring compliance with the recommendations on this call centre audit that was just completed?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: It's too soon for us to confirm whether there will be a follow-up audit. It will be part of the selection process I just referred to a minute ago in future years to situate this relative to other priorities.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: If you do a follow-up audit, is there usually an average year down the road?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: It's a bit difficult to go with an average. Obviously we wouldn't go at it right away, because we know through the action plans.... Maybe one way to answer on this one would be to adhere to the action plans and the timelines they have there. We shouldn't go back before they can make the change or we will end up with the same picture.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: MP Dusseault, go ahead for three minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to quickly come back to the issue of call centre capacity. That's the excuse used by the government to say that the number of calls exceeds the technological capacity of the call centres.

However, the statistics indicate that Veterans Affairs Canada seems to be using technology that allows it to answer all calls, at least as a first step since all calls are have been routed, according to the graph you provided to us.

How did the other three departments justify the lack of capacity of their call centres? Were they really technological limitations that made it possible to manage such a volume of calls or rather an imposed constraint that redirects all calls elsewhere beyond a maximum number programmed into the system? Can you tell us more about that?

• (1200)

Mr. Jean Goulet: Our audit didn't focus on that specific aspect. But during our discussions, we learned that it was a combination of

factors, including the availability of resources, but also the age of the technology used for call centres, which doesn't always allow for additional resources or the management of incoming calls. All these factors, taken together or individually, affect the ability to answer incoming calls.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Ultimately, it's more an issue of resources than the number of agents available. Does the telephone system technology create a problem? For example, if 200,000 calls arrive in the same amount of time, will there be a problem with the 200,001th call?

Mr. Jean Goulet: This may be a combination of both factors, a lack of human resources and technological limitations. To give you a hypothetical example, some of the EI call centres don't have the ability to transfer calls they couldn't handle to another centre due to lack of resources and would have to abandon these calls.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: I would like to know if, internally, the department or call centre can decide not to answer calls over a certain number and instead redirect them to the website or other options. Is a decision being made somewhere to determine the number of calls over which there aren't enough staff to meet the 10-minute service deadline and people need to be redirected elsewhere?

[*English*]

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Goulet: We haven't checked this aspect.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That brings us to the end of round two.

Just to confirm, we have you until 12:30 p.m., I believe, so we have time to do a third round, if the committee desires.

I have MP Diotte up first, for six minutes.

Mr. Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): Mr. Ricard, the work you do is invaluable. I think everybody in this room has had frustration with call centres, whether of a government department, a bank, a retailer, or whatever. I think that regardless of our political stripes we all want to solve this. I'm sure your work is a good start to doing so.

It seems pretty clear that we need to get some benchmarking done for these call centres. I think you mentioned that Canadians expect a call to be answered within seven minutes.

What is best practice in the industry? Have you looked around? Have you gauged it in the private sector or in other levels of government, etc.?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: No. Again, due to the fact that we have to scope our audit to a certain size, at some point we have to make some choices. This is not something we've included.

Going in, we expected that there would be service standards to manage the call centres, given the requirements from the TB policy.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Right now, can you explain the lack of service? Are there no service standards per se, no benchmarks? Is it just left up—?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: TB policy requires service standards in three areas. In two of the three areas there were no service standards at all, and in one of the areas there was one entity that had no service standards in place.

For us, the importance here is that management turned to Canadians.... I mentioned earlier that 25% of Canadians, all for good reasons, need a phone system to reach out to government. You thus need to have well-functioning call centres in place; otherwise, those Canadians don't have access to government services.

• (1205)

Mr. Kerry Diotte: I've seen this myself, and it's frustrating: no matter what retailer or government you're dealing with, often they'll try to push you to the website. I've had an instance when trying to get my cable fixed. They say, well, you could do this by going online. No, my cable is down.

Is there a push in government, from what you've seen here, to push people to a website when they actually want to be served by phone, and in many cases need to be because of certain impairments and so forth?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'm going to be careful with this one, because I wouldn't want to talk specifically for the CIO who was at the public accounts committee hearing some days ago, who conducted a poll on that question. Maybe Mr. Goulet can help make sure that I don't go wrong here, but the best people to answer that question would be the CIO and Treasury Board.

They're working on—my words here—a multi-channel system. We refer in the report to the fact that there are various options when people call in. They can be referred to the website or referred to the automated system, but it remains the case that some Canadians can't operate like that; their needs are not fulfilled by those channels.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: My hunch is that there are call centres out there that do a better job. Is government behind the private sector, for instance?

Let me put it this way. Do you think there are private sector or other levels of government that do a better job, that might be the gold standard?

Mr. Jean Goulet: For the purposes of this audit we didn't really look at the standards of the private sector. We wanted to use a benchmark that was as close as possible to what happens in general when Canadians want to speak to the government. That's why we went to that survey, which basically said that Canadians are willing to wait up to seven minutes.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'm going to offer as well that if you don't have service standards in place and you don't measure your performance, you can't compare.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Right now an employee is sitting there, and if they're lucky, callers will get a live person. The employees don't have any standard. They don't know how long they're supposed to spend on a call, etc.

Don't most industries say you should spend five minutes on one customer and move on to the next? That's just one level of service standard.

Mr. Jean Goulet: We didn't look at the amount of time an agent should be spending with a caller. We only looked at whether the callers were getting access and whether the information that was being provided to them was provided in a timely manner, as per the standards. We also didn't look at whether the calls were answered accurately, although the departments have quality controls in place to deal with that question. We didn't audit that part.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Thanks.

The Chair: MP Ruimy, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you again for staying.

I'm an operations guy. I've been in the restaurant world all my life and I've worked a lot with service standards and service times.

There are a couple things. We have to be careful, because government is not private. When you call a private call centre, it's to order something, it's to lodge a complaint, it's for a whole bunch of different reasons. When you're calling somebody about immigration, however, the standard for how long you're going to sit on that phone is going to be quite different from everybody else's.

My first question is, did you take into consideration the time spent...? There were four call centres, and they were all different. Did we look at what type of call centre it was? For immigration, was there a longer time that they were on the phone actually talking to the representative?

• (1210)

Mr. Jean Goulet: As I mentioned earlier, what we were interested in was the three specific standards—whether the callers were getting access to the agent, whether they were getting timely responses, and whether they were getting accurate responses. We didn't look at how long an agent would be talking to a caller in order to deal with the issue.

As I mentioned earlier on, by way of comparison we looked at the survey that basically says Canadians are willing to wait seven minutes to get to a caller, but we didn't audit anything after an agent answers a caller.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: If I may offer one additional piece just for clarity, I would say that it's not for us to establish the standard. We're not judging the standard. We're auditing against all the policy requirements and we're drawing the picture.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: I agree. We've talked about benchmarks. That's important. I'm trying to get to what this benchmark is going to look like in the future. You mentioned dropped calls, for instance. How did you determine dropped calls? What's the definition of a dropped call?

Mr. Jean Goulet: In this case, these were calls in which the caller wanted to talk to an agent but could not do so for a variety of reasons that we explained earlier on. They were either redirected to the automated service, asked to go to the website or disconnected. These are basically what we call the dropped calls.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: How did you actually execute this? Was it based on surveys? Was it you sitting in a call centre watching people? What was the methodology?

Mr. Jean Goulet: We asked to have access to the data of the call centres in order to do that analysis. We also requested the reports that the department had on that type of information. We could talk about the information that was in the report but the data itself was not available, so we couldn't provide any level of assurance as to whether or not what the department was reporting was accurate. We asked for new data to be generated on an ongoing basis during the audit, and, on the basis of that data, we did our own analysis.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: I'm struggling with this statement by one of the ministers:

Thanks to certain investments, Service Canada agents were able to answer 22% more calls than they did over the last full year under the Harper government, while the number of Canadians who were unable to reach a Service Canada agent fell by nearly 70%.

So each call centre has its own data. Is that correct?

Mr. Jean Goulet: Yes.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: They're using that data, so where's the disconnect in their data versus your data?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'll offer this. First, for our report, through our audit process, we get entities to confirm the accuracy and to confirm that nothing went wrong, because we could have forgotten something or not considered something. That's part of the due diligence we're going through.

Second, you're referring to some numbers. I'm sorry, but I can't speak to those. I don't know what they are. You can look at numbers in all sorts of different ways. You could refer to the number of individuals reaching out to a department to get access, and we do refer to that, to the broader service channels that are offered. Again, we didn't look at those other channels. We focused on the call centres.

So I'm afraid I can't speak specifically to the comparison of those numbers. There are all sorts of numbers out there.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Okay. I have only a little time. When you came to the final numbers of missed calls and so on and so forth, were those based on the four call centres, or on a projection that shows that if all call centres were operating like this, this is what that number would look like? Is that a statistical number?

• (1215)

Mr. Jean Goulet: Those are the numbers that were reported by the department, so they are their actual numbers. The problem is that we couldn't verify those numbers because the source data was not kept by the department.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: With your final numbers in your report—

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: They're their numbers. We asked during the period under audit that they maintain for us the stats of the calls so we could use them and report on them.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Was that in those four call centres or overall?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: It was in those call centres.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Dusseault, go ahead, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ricard, I'd like to come back to an observation you made about Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

In 2012, the department closed many offices that were open to the public. That was the case in Sherbrooke, where I'm from. I mention the name of my riding today because we suffered the consequences of this closure in 2012. Before that, people could meet someone in person in an office on Wellington Street, in downtown Sherbrooke. The department also closed offices in other Canadian cities.

Since people had no choice but to use the telephone service, the department received a significantly higher volume of calls. However, instead of asking for more resources to meet this new demand, the department decided to reduce services. It decided to stop responding to general inquiries because it was taking too long or because its resources were insufficient.

Have you observed the same thing in other departments? Are there departments that have decided to cut services, without regard for clients, rather than hire more people to meet the increased demand? The correct response would have been to better fund and organize call centres to meet the needs of citizens.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: I'll ask Mr. Goulet to clarify whether we have information on that.

You referred to paragraph 1.37 of our report, where we mention that in 2012 IRCC closed regional offices, which increased call volume. In 2015, the department stopped responding to general inquiries. After that, 70% of the clients' comments related to the fact that they could not obtain information.

In response to this situation, in 2017, the department resumed responding to general inquiries. In 2018, it rehired people in call centres. This is the example we gave, but I'm not sure if we have similar information on other call centres.

Mr. Jean Goulet: Absolutely. This example is very relevant to access and response time standards. We didn't look at the issue from a service reduction perspective. We didn't find a similar situation in other departments.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: In 2015, the department's reaction was to stop answering calls, but it wasn't necessarily the right approach for meeting client expectations. At least it ended up making adjustments.

My other question concerns service standards. You said that the Treasury Board Secretariat, or TBS, has established three minimum service standards. Did your study allow you to determine whether the TBS is doing anything to ensure that call centres meet these three service standards? Or has TBS simply issued three service standards and done nothing to enforce them through government call centres? Can you provide us with some insight into TBS' relationship with departments to ensure they meet these service standards?

•(1220)

Mr. Jean Goulet: We have made a recommendation with respect to TBS that it clearly specify to call centres and their responsible departments the direction to take to ensure that the standards they have put in place are in accordance with TBS recommendations, which are relevant to Canadians, transparent and consistent.

This recommendation has a second component, which relates to the publication of results related to compliance with these standards. Service standards must be published, but also whether they have been met, so that Canadians have a better idea of what is happening when they decide to use one of these call centres.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Is this because you found that TBS wasn't following up with departments to ensure that they were meeting the standards?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: At paragraph 1.44, we state that TBS did not provide clear direction and did not provide monitoring.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Okay.

You said that TBS has three service standards, but what are you referring to?

Mr. Jean Goulet: They are accessibility, response accuracy and timeliness.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: These are more general standards. Figures or time aren't necessarily given.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: These are areas where there should be a service standard and which should be assessed to determine what action should be taken, if any.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: TBS didn't say that the standard should be between 10 and 15 minutes, for example?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: No. It indicates which sectors standards should be established for, while specifying that it should do so in consultation with Canadians.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Okay.

TBS asks that standards be established for these three areas, but it lets the departments establish their own standards based on their reality.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Yes.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: If such service standards were established, ultimately, it would be TBS that would be responsible for monitoring it, according to you and it, I imagine.

[English]

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Goulet: What we're saying is that TBS should ensure that service standards are in place, but that it doesn't have to specify the details.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We have some time, and I understand that MP Barlow has a brief question.

Mr. John Barlow: Yes, thanks.

I have just one last question that I didn't have an opportunity to ask earlier. You mentioned the fact that there's a lack of capacity, maybe, in some of these call centres with regard to the volume of calls. The thing in your report that really bothered me the most was—and I know all of us in our offices deal with it a lot—a number that really jumped out at me: inaccurate information given to callers about 30% of the time.

We have to understand that if this is an immigration issue or an EI issue, this could cause somebody to miss out on a payment or to get an overpayment. I know that we've had a few.... I've had new Canadians or people here on work visas being asked to leave the country because they've filled out some paperwork the wrong way, or because when they call one time, they hear, yes, you need to do this, and when they call another time, they hear, no, you need to do that.

On that number—that 30% or so—provided from call centres giving inaccurate information, I'm assuming that this data is coming from the departments, that you're just having to go by what the departments are giving you in terms of the data they're collecting and this isn't data that you were able to find on your own.

Mr. Jean Goulet: We were looking at whether there were specific standards with regard to the accuracy of the information. We didn't audit accuracy as part of this audit report because of the complexity of the variety of call centres that exist. That would require—

Mr. John Barlow: Yes. I'm sorry. This is the CRA one. My apologies. I didn't make that clear.

Mr. Jean Goulet: Yes, that was the CRA one.

Mr. John Barlow: That data was from CRA, I'm assuming. It's not that you were analyzing specific calls and—

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: In the case of CRA...and I don't think I have this wrong. I was not the AG at the time and I was not in audit ops. I was the CFO at the time. I do believe and I'm pretty sure we've done calls ourselves, obviously not pretending that we were individuals playing an act as well—

Mr. John Barlow: Yes.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard:—but with generic types of questions on a sample basis.

Mr. John Barlow: Okay.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We had access to what the answers were supposed to be according to, I guess, their own tools.

Mr. John Barlow: That's interesting. Thank you.

That's all I had.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I don't often do this, but if the committee will indulge me, there is something that was just brought up by the last two questions. You talked about time, accuracy and accessibility being standards. Were there any conversations or any questions regarding Bill C-81 or the accessibility legislation that is now in place? Is that something that was ever part of the conversation?

•(1225)

Mr. Jean Goulet: Not really. I mean—

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Jean Goulet: The one example I could give you that probably relates to that is the TTY service that was removed at Veterans Affairs. The deputy minister, at the public accounts hearing, made it clear that this should not have happened and that they're reinstating it.

The Chair: Given that Bill C-81 has now received royal assent, is there a sense that there is significant work to do within the call centres in terms of accessibility?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We didn't look at that. I would suggest that maybe the officials from the department might be better placed to do that. If there's an impact, I suppose they would have analyzed that and they will be able to speak to that.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Thank you very much for being here today.

We're going to suspend briefly to allow the officials to join us.

• (1225) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1230)

The Chair: We're going to come back to order here, folks.

Again, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, May 28, 2019, the committee will now commence its study of report 1, "Call Centres", of the 2019 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

Our second panel is here.

We're joined this afternoon by representatives of the Department of Employment and Social Development, including Leslie MacLean, Senior Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer of Service Canada; and Cliff C. Groen, Assistant Deputy Minister, Benefits Delivery Services, Transformation and Integrated Service Management Branch.

The next 10 minutes are all yours. Welcome back.

[Translation]

Ms. Leslie MacLean (Senior Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you very much for the invitation to appear before you today.

[English]

Thank you so much for inviting us to speak to you about this important Auditor General chapter on call centres and the service we provide Canadians.

[Translation]

I would like to point out that I am joined by my colleague Mr. Groen, the Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for Benefits Delivery Services.

[English]

Before going directly to the organization's response to the Auditor General's recommendations, I might take a minute or two just to talk about Service Canada and what we do.

For many Canadians, Service Canada is the face of the federal government, providing key programs and services, such as employment insurance, old age security and the Canada pension plan, along with social insurance numbers and passports.

For example, last year we would have received about 2.8 million applications for employment insurance; 99% of those would have been received online. We would have greeted more than eight million people at our in-person Service Canada centres or our outreach sites. We would have answered over one and a half million calls on 1-800-O-Canada, and received a staggering more than 539 million visits to the Canada.ca website.

• (1235)

[Translation]

At the same time, we receive more than 30 million calls per year at our employment insurance, old age security and Canada pension plan call centres.

[English]

Mr. Chair and members, as you're aware, the Auditor General's report on call centres had five recommendations, two of which, in your previous discussions, were addressed to our organization.

The first one stated that we should review how we manage incoming calls to improve access to agents, and it added that we should consider practices such as allowing callers to decide if they would prefer to wait, use our self-service options or have us call them back.

[Translation]

The second recommendation states that departments, including ESDC, should set call centre service standards that are relevant to clients, and that we should consider client feedback in line with TBS guidelines on service standards. The recommendation adds that ESDC should publish call centre service standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent way, and we should verify the results to confirm accuracy.

[English]

Let's turn to the first recommendation on improving access to agents. There have been two limiters on our performance, and I think these came up in your previous exchanges.

The first one is outdated technology. Our legacy technology quite simply limited the number of callers who we could put in the queue. This resulted, certainly at peak times, in callers' being bounced back to our interactive voice response system at those peak times. It also did not allow us to shift calls between our various call centre locations to manage the load.

We secured funding in budgets 2017 and 2019, which provided \$27.3 million to migrate our big call centres from this outdated technology to a more modernized telephone system. As a result, we're well on our way to addressing this issue and are currently in the middle of migrating to a new call centre platform in collaboration with our colleagues at Shared Services Canada.

[*Translation*]

The new platform is called the “Hosted Contact Centre Solution”, and it can provide the modern client-centric services that Canadians have come to expect.

Over the last two years, we have worked closely with SCC and Canadians on the design, build and testing of the new technology.

[*English*]

I would note that in addition to an internal call centre for staff... We went first with an internal-facing call centre. We then successfully migrated first the external-facing call centre, the one for employers, in October 2018, and we are very happy to note that we just successfully migrated our Canada pension plan and old age security call centre on May 11.

Both migrations have been very successful. The employer call centre has now had 100% accessibility to agents since early January. This means that all callers are now able to access a queue to speak with our call centre agents.

We started with a smaller one before moving to the pensions call centre so that we were able to leverage the lessons learned from that call centre and integrate them into the Canada pension plan and old age security call centre migration, which I'm really pleased to say has had 100% accessibility since our implementation on May 11.

[*Translation*]

Our employment insurance call centre will be migrated next. Extensive work is under way for this migration, planned for fall 2019.

[*English*]

Coming to the second key limiter on our performance, we had a significant gap between the call demand volume, particularly at peak periods, and the funding for agents available to respond to those calls. Budgets 2016 and 2018 provided \$200 million over five years to increase the number of EI call centre agents. As a result, we have been able to increase our access to agents every year since.

In 2015-16, accessibility to EI call centre agents was at 31%. In 2016-17, after we received budget 2016 funding, we were able to onboard new agents, and accessibility increased to 43%. For 2017-18 we further increased accessibility for Canadians to 61%, and this past year, 2018-19, we reached 66% accessibility.

We certainly take seriously our responsibility to provide the best possible access to Canadians for this important service within the available resources.

I would note that this boost in accessibility meant that we were able to increase the number of EI calls answered by our staff from 3.4 million to 4.6 million a year. It also—and this is, I think, quite important—allowed us to reduce wait times to speak to an agent from an average of 14 minutes to seven minutes.

● (1240)

[*Translation*]

While these improvements have been significant, and our average wait time is well below 10 minutes, we are still not yet at our target of 80% of calls being answered within 10 minutes.

Concerning the Auditor General's second recommendation, I would like to talk about the efforts we are making to follow up on the recommendation relating to the relevance of our service standards and meeting the expectations of clients, of Canadians. For instance, we have consulted clients through multiple surveys to obtain their feedback. Overall, feedback was positive, with the majority of clients finding a wait time of under 10 minutes to be reasonable.

[*English*]

Moreover, our recent client experience survey in 2017-18 found that 82% of our respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of service received through our specialized call centres.

Currently, we're reviewing our most recent client experience survey—just looking at the preliminary results—and that will enable us to continue to track the performance of our call centres, and of course provide us with valuable feedback on our performance.

I would note that all of that research and results are publicly available through Library and Archives.

In terms of verifying the results and our data, we have high confidence in the accuracy of our results given that the technology we use—and now I'm speaking about the old, outdated technology—automatically tracks that. When the concern was raised about the accuracy of the data, we did go back and look at the period that the Auditor General had identified, which was June 2018 to January 2019. That consisted of more than 7.9 million calls, and our review confirmed that our reported results were extremely accurate within plus or minus 0.05%.

Going forward, we will of course continue to improve the publishing of our call centre service standards and performance results through more frequent reporting.

[*Translation*]

As well, ESDC will continue to set service standards that are relevant to clients. We continue to work closely with the Treasury Board Secretariat to ensure that we comply with the current policy.

We will continue to monitor the performance of the call centres to ensure they are responding to the needs of Canadians, as part of our overall commitment to serve Canadians, whether they choose the telephone, in-person or digital channels.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, we would now be happy to take your questions about the call centre chapter from the Auditor General.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

As always, thank you for keeping within the 10 minutes. That's great.

We turn to MP Barlow for the first set of questions.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate your report, Ms. MacLean. It's good to see you here again.

It's reassuring to some extent that some work is being done to address some of these concerns. However, certainly as MPs—and many of us mentioned today—we deal with our constituents on a daily basis and the largest frustration we hear from constituents is when they are calling Service Canada or the Government of Canada, whether they're waiting a long time or not.

I mentioned in my last question—and I understand you had an opportunity to speak at public accounts—that your data showed that 86% of callers who got through received accurate information but 14% received inaccurate information. That number still concerns me, and I know it was much higher in the CRA audit, twice that, more towards 30% who received inaccurate information.

On the ESDC side, are those numbers accurate?

• (1245)

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I was incorrect. At public accounts I was out by 2%.

I would also note—

Mr. John Barlow: Higher or lower?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I was 2% cheap; our results were better, but that was only for one program.

If I could give a bit of context around the answer, when people get through to our call centre agents, our staff are trained never to make a decision or a determination on the phone. Our starting point is to provide the information that clients need to inform the decision of whether to apply. If there's any doubt, we would strongly encourage the citizen to apply for the benefit. This is part of our standard training. No disentanglement or decision-making happens on the phone.

In our quality program, we provide monitoring to all our call centre agents on an ongoing basis to make sure, frankly, that our training is working.

I'll come to the results by call centre. For the employment insurance program, I'll look to Cliff. Our accuracy was over 88% for the EI program, and we are testing not just for accuracy, but for professionalism, completeness of answers. For the pensions program, our results were even higher. Cliff, I'll look to you; I think it was over 94% in accuracy.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen (Assistant Deputy Minister, Benefits Delivery Services, Transformation and Integrated Services Management Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): That's right.

Mr. John Barlow: Thanks for clarifying those numbers; that's appreciated.

Certainly we've heard about the lack of service standards from the Auditor General and through this report, and I find surprising that the departments wouldn't have metrics to measure success. Certainly it was highlighted in the study several times that the departments and the call centres weren't customer-centric. They weren't there necessarily to the benefit of their customers. Canadian taxpayers are our customers and they should be treated as such.

I was surprised to see that ESDC is the only department that has said they're not going to comply with the Auditor General's recommendation from this report on the call centres.

Can you explain to me, Ms. MacLean, why ESDC is choosing not to comply with the recommendations in the AG's report?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: As an organization, we have agreed with all the Auditor General's recommendations. We are changing our practice in regard to one specific issue noted by the Auditor General, which is reporting publicly on the number of calls before we've reached our service standard. Our rationale for that is as follows. We discussed our approach to service standards with the Treasury Board Secretariat, and we would have confirmed the approach we were taking with the Auditor General. If someone hangs up five seconds into the call, those are data we can track internally, and we have extraordinary quantities of data for call centres that we track on a daily basis.

One of the things we try to focus on is the advice from the Treasury Board that the service standard should be pertinent to clients. That is why we are focusing on the service level. Are we meeting our commitment to answer 80% of the calls within 10 minutes? We have changed our approach to our data as of April 1. We are now tracking those people who hang up when we've reached our service standard of 10 minutes. We have adjusted our methodology in that regard.

Mr. John Barlow: Just for clarification, if they stay on the line for 10 minutes but hang up, now you'll be tracking them but not until they've reached that 10-minute point?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: That's exactly right, and our rationale for that is that we haven't had the opportunity to pass or fail on our service standard if someone hangs up 30 seconds in or five minutes in. Therefore, we are absolutely committed to accurate reporting.

We publish our service standards every year in our reports to Parliament for all of our programs against all of our public-facing service standards, and we will absolutely adjust in our next parliamentary report this particular data point.

Mr. John Barlow: Just really quickly since I know I'm out of time here, the AG's report said the lack of benchmarks was a problem, but you're saying you do have standards. Are those relatively easily accessed by the public, and will you commit to ensuring, maybe, the improvement of that side of it so that the public knows exactly what to expect?

• (1250)

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Absolutely, Mr. Chair.

I have two general comments.

All of our reports to Parliament, whether the departmental results framework or other things, include our performance against each of our service standards. If you were to pull up the parliamentary reports, you would find for the employment insurance program or the pensions program our performance against our commitment to answer 80% of the calls within 10 minutes.

Our commitment is to further improve that going forward through that change in methodology we talked about, which will capture the calls that hang on for 10 minutes. If they hang up after that, we'll include those in our numbers.

As well, Cliff has extensive work under way right now consulting Canadians on making sure that the standards are not only relevant but also actually clear to people. Does someone understand what it means when we say we'll answer his or her call 80% of the time within 10 minutes? As part of that, we're looking to make that reporting happen more frequently than the normal parliamentary cycle.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you.

The Chair: MP Sangha, go ahead, please.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the departmental witnesses for coming today. As previously, you have given very valuable input to the committee.

In my riding of Brampton Centre we have enough work for youth in my area. Many of the constituents express their appreciation for the government for providing better services and for bringing in changes to the services through technologically progressive methods.

If they made some changes to the call centres, better services could be provided, other than making telephone calls.

Can you please tell the committee what improvements have been made to the online services to better respond to the increasing demands of the youth?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I would argue that part of providing excellent service to Canadians is making sure there's full access to the information through which you can inform yourself about what you might be eligible for.

In that regard, we've had an extensive program of work to update the content of all our information that's available online. This is particularly important when there's a policy change, as, for example, in the case of the recent change to parental benefits for employment insurance. In that case, the choice that must be made by the family or the parents in question is quite complex. Once the choice has been made, it can't be changed, so we worked really hard on making sure that information is clear, in plain language and accessible.

We've also been spending a lot of energy on making the digital services easier to use. We put out our first app—and we're excited about that—for Job Bank. Members of the committee might remember that when I was here before, I spoke about posting the Canada summer jobs on the Job Bank for the first time, so that all youth between the ages of 15 and 30 could know what jobs were available in their hometown or somewhere else.

We've also been working very hard to make it easy for those who choose to serve themselves digitally online. You noted in my opening comments, perhaps, that for employment insurance, 99% of people are applying online. That's a sign that clearly we've been able to make that accessible and easy for people.

I would also note that some of those people apply online by coming in person into an in-person office and being helped by one of our staff. That's excellent. We're always happy to do that.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Many constituents are new immigrants. They have a lack of English and they're not able to battle through the telephone system. There are other people who are vulnerable, and they want accessibility.

As you know, Bill C-81 has come. What are the improvements you are making regarding Bill C-81 to give better services to the constituents?

• (1255)

Ms. Leslie MacLean: We've been working very hard in advance of the new accessibility legislation to assess our physical infrastructure coast to coast to coast across the country. We have 317 in-person Service Canada centres and 32 stand-alone passport offices. Obviously, it's critical for us to ensure that those are fully accessible.

We've also been looking at all of the digital information and tools we provide to people to make sure we're not just meeting current standards. We're trying hard to lean in, to the extent that our old technology lets us, to be well ahead of it.

I would also note, just going back to the telephone, we have teletypewriter services, and those are fully available.

Cliff, I don't know if there's anything you would add in terms of the work we have under way on accessibility. I know you and your team have been working very hard on integrating things like an online application for the Canada pension plan and so on.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Sure. There are maybe two key elements.

With all of our online applications, we ensure that they are fully accessible. There's a testing that we have to do, and we ensure that we meet those standards.

In addition, consultation with real clients matters as well. It's one thing to set the bar about requirements, but it's also about consulting with Canadians. We've done extensive consultations on service improvements that we've introduced, such as an online application where you get feedback from different clients, including people with accessibility issues. Also, for the CPP disability program, we have a stakeholder round table with both clients and also different advocates for that community, who have provided us with really valuable feedback as well, related to how to make sure that our services are meeting their needs.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: So Canadians can feel that they are going to benefit from the accessibility act bill, which has already passed.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: We're going to continue to do everything in our power to keep up with the expectations of accessibility, and we look forward to the opportunity to continue to expand.

As well, we have had a focus on outreach to vulnerable populations. For example, there were questions around the take-up for the Canada child benefit, old age security, and the guaranteed income supplement. We have now completed a second round of outreach in several hundred first nations, Inuit, Métis and other northern communities, because of our effort to ensure that everyone has access to the benefits to which they're entitled.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Dusseault, please, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today to try to explain the poor quality of service in their department.

In the private sector, you would have been bankrupt long ago. With respect to service quality, unfortunately, government clients have only one choice. They can't choose another company, so they're captive to the services we offer them; they have no other options. It's quite different in the private sector, of course.

I also understand that there are differences between the services offered in the private sector and those offered by the government. That's your reality.

I'm trying to identify the problem and why so many calls are rejected, so they don't go to a call centre agent. You say that call centres aren't able to respond to call volume. Can you explain this lack of capacity in the system? More specifically, why are people blocked and is communication cut off when they call?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Mr. Chair, I would be pleased to answer the question.

In my comments at the start of the meeting, I mentioned our two main challenges that affect our capacity to take calls, especially during peak periods. It's a key element of our challenge.

First, our technology is outdated. It did not allow us to implement many of the improvement options noted in the Auditor General's report, such as the ability to leave a message and ask to be called back. The new technology we are implementing will, frankly, offer us a range of options that we didn't have in the past. So, this is the first element.

The second element is specifically the availability of agents to respond during peak periods—I would like to stress this again. Let's take the example of the employment insurance program. We have two peak periods of work. Canada is a country with seasons. Winter gives us a lot of work for the employment insurance program. A second small peak occurs in the summer when schools close.

I mentioned the average waiting time for our call centres. To give you an idea of the magnitude of the problem, let's look at employment insurance. In peak periods, the average waiting time is about 12 minutes, but in the less busy months, it is about four

minutes. When the volume increases, it's not even a matter of cutting off communication.

In summary, the number of lines was fixed and the technological options available were extremely limited. In addition, as I explained, there was also the number of agents available during peak periods.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1300)

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: I would like to continue on this subject. What frustrates many people is that you have a goal of answering 80% of calls in 10 minutes, but half of the calls are blocked—even more in some cases because your department has several sectors. Of course, when you manage to talk to someone, maybe it happens within 10 minutes, but that doesn't take into account the fact that there are a lot of citizens who can't talk to anyone.

Will this aspect be corrected as well? You say that you have already migrated for the Employer Service Centre and the Canada pension plan and old age security call centres, and that the accessibility rate is 100%.

Also, do you have any figures on wait times?

[*English*]

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: That's what I was saying to the Auditor General: it's fine if 20% of people can talk to someone and the 10-minute target has been met, but it means that 80% of people haven't been able to talk to anyone.

So, when the accessibility rate is 100%, what are the figures for wait times?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I'd like to talk about the fiscal year that just ended. Obviously, it's been a few weeks since your new system has been in operation. We've been extremely happy so far.

[*English*]

It's a game-changer.

[*Translation*]

This completely changed access to agents.

So I'll give you the numbers. Last year, the accessibility rate for pension agents was just under 70%, or 68%. Since the implementation of the new technology, this rate has been 100%.

It remains to be seen how this will affect the waiting time. Last year, the average waiting time for pensions was 5.5 minutes. Because this is a new technology and we want to exploit it to the maximum to improve our services with our current means, we will carry out increased monitoring.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: You don't have the number of wait time minutes for the new system. The 5.5 minutes were for the old system.

[*English*]

The Chair: Very quickly, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Leslie MacLean: These 5.5 minutes were for the year in total. I haven't had any wait time data for a few weeks.

Mr. Groen has something to add.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: I would like to say that, since the implementation of the new system three weeks ago, the waiting period is less than three minutes. There are various reasons for this. Of course, 100% access helps, and we aren't in a peak period for pensions.

•(1305)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Morrissey, please.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Ms. MacLean, you made the comment in your opening statement that you are the face of the federal government in a lot of cases, and I agree, especially to those who are.... As we often hear, and I'll be candid, the system handles the majority well. We never hear about it. It's the small group who are under-serviced that we hear about.

I'll give you a reference to one case. A gentleman on EI called in and said that it had been seven weeks since he had filed a claim. He still had no response back, and it hadn't been settled. Then it went to eight weeks, and his bills were piling up. When he finally reached out to my office, we talked to the agent responsible for dealing with it, who said, "Yes, we see the file, but there is nobody available to look at it. If somebody looked at it, it could be turned around."

Those are the unfortunate situations that give the whole system a negative...and we've heard the Auditor General's report.

I want you to comment. You made a reference to budget 2016. The funding you got there allowed you to begin addressing accumulated problems. What occurred in 2016 that allowed you to begin to address these public issues?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: In budget 2016, our organization received \$73 million over two years to enable us to improve our ability to have agents accessible to answer phone calls. Budget 2018 further sustained that funding, providing us with \$127 million over three years for our EI call centres.

We recognized the great pressure upon our staff. That enabled us to retain or hire an additional 384 staff, and as—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: So there was a personnel issue that was impacting the face of government to the people who need it most in some of these cases.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Absolutely. The additional resources to help us answer the phone obviously made a huge difference as per the improvements I noted in my opening comments.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: You identified almost \$200 million to bring in more personnel to deal with the issue. Was this to deal with the growing...or was this situation caused by a previous cutback? What were the two dynamics that were driving you? Obviously, you needed these personnel. Was it because of a growth in the demand coming to these departments, or was it to fill a void that was created? Was there a shortcoming in the department?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I would speak, if I may, Mr. Chair, to two issues.

One is the importance of timely processing of claims for employment insurance or for pensions. Member Morrissey, you noted in your opening comments the person who was waiting several weeks for a decision.

We recognize that even when we meet our service standards, as we have consistently for the last few years in terms of the processing of EI claims, we're able to process 80% of them within our 28-day service standard.

For the people who fall outside of that, the 20%, they may wait only one more day, or there may indeed be a complexity.

Budget 2016 provided us with—yes—the additional resources in call centres to boost our capacity. It did also provide us with an additional \$19 million to help us with the processing of EI claims, for example. That helps us by providing more staff capacity. It does help us address the issues.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Recently my office—when inquiring about EI claims—has been getting a message from Service Canada telling them to have the client phone the centre, which puts another layer on it.

When an MP's office reaches out, they become the client through the signing of a statement of waiver.

Could you check into that because it's just putting an unnecessary step in the process. Once an individual reaches out to the MP, we are the face of the government as well. When we do reach out on these clients' behalf, this is an unacceptable answer from Service Canada to be advising an MP's office to have the client call. The reason they are calling the MP's office is because they didn't get service in the first place.

I would like if you would follow up on that because there has been a subtle change over the last number of months I've been told, or number of weeks.

The other area you referenced is the in-person Service Canada centres. This is an area where, again, I get complaints from people dropping into Service Canada centres and not getting service. You referenced that they would be assisted in helping file their claims. A lot of the time, they are simply told there's a computer over there, and they should go and fill out the forms.

That's an issue I would like you to address as well because, again, that's all the face of government.

•(1310)

The Chair: I'm sorry, but very briefly.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Very quickly, we do maintain, as I'm sure everyone in the room knows, dedicated lines for members of Parliament to phone in. We get about 44,000 calls on that a year, and we absolutely understand that the MP is representing his or her constituent at that point. I will follow up on that.

In terms of people not being supported to apply online, computers are there for people to completely self-serve if they wish, or to have coaching and support from our staff if they wish.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: It's a matter I would like you to focus on.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I would be happy to follow up. If there are specific locations, I would welcome the information off-line.

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Do you want to add anything else because you're sharing your time?

Mr. Robert Morrissey: I'm happy with the answers.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you for being here today.

I'm going to keep going on the line with the Auditor General this morning.

I understand the service standards portion of it, but it almost seems that there's a disconnect between the Auditor General and, for instance, your department. They are saying that your numbers might be skewed because you were looking at it in a different way, or you didn't take into consideration dropped calls.

If we're going to move forward, when you do an audit the most important thing is to make sure that both sides are on the same page as to what the criteria are.

In your opinion, is there a disconnect between the criteria, or is that something you now can move forward with based on the recommendations that have been given by the Auditor General?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I would note that our direction on service standards across the Government of Canada comes from Treasury Board and their policy of service. I would also note the criticality of the direction that the service standards be relevant for clients.

Call centres are an excellent example of where we have extraordinary quantities of metrics that we track. We track average handle time and how long are people spending on the phone. We track first contact resolution. We track all of these things that might not help a citizen actually receive the service. We have for public reporting purposes a wait time for our call centres and we report against that. We work very closely with the Treasury Board Secretariat to ensure we're faithfully applying the service standards.

As per the earlier testimony, there was discussion on this particular issue in terms of why public standards are being captured. The Chief Information Officer of the Government of Canada undertook to ensure that call centre standards would be part of what would be updated in the next direction from Treasury Board. We will absolutely comply with that. We've been reporting our service standards publicly for a very long time, and it's very important for us to ensure that the data are accurate, that we are transparent, and that we're complying with Treasury Board policy.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

I'm still not sold on why there seems to be a disconnect there, but we'll move forward.

Two of your call centres were audited, right? I understand that both of those call centres had service standards in place.

• (1315)

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Yes.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: How did those service standards that you had in place match up to the actual audit? Were they meeting the criteria? Were they below the criteria?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Mr. Chair, I might ask for a precision of the question. Are you asking for the results of our performance against our service standards?

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Four call centres were evaluated. Immigration is not your department, and with immigration, I would imagine that people are on the phone for quite a while because there are lots of questions.

You have said that you divide your numbers by different criteria, so if somebody is calling for EI, and somebody is calling for a different.... I'm just trying to get a sense of the two call centres that were evaluated. Did they take into consideration the different criteria that you were putting in place based on why people were calling, for example?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Thank you, I've got it. I appreciate the clarification.

For the two call centres that were audited, we did not meet our service standards. Our published service standard is that we will respond to 80% of calls within 10 minutes. Our most recent public report, which I think I have here somewhere, makes it clear that we fell considerably short for employment insurance whereas, as I noted earlier for members, there has been steady improvement over the last few years.

For pensions, we came very close to meeting our service standard, but we did not fully meet it.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: There have been eight call centres that have been upgraded. Have any of yours been upgraded?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I will speak to our plans, absolutely.

I would note that, of the eight call centres that are part of the first wave of the hosted contact centre, we're responsible for half of them, and CRA is the other big chunk.

In testimony at the public accounts committee last week, my colleague from Shared Services noted that the focus for the first wave of technology was to migrate the biggest centres that would reach the most Canadians to have the highest impact. For us, we have now migrated an internal-facing centre that I spoke about earlier. That's one where we take calls for help with our technology inside.

The second centre was migrated in October 2018. That's the employment call contact centre. Employers can phone in there for help with records of employment.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: I have one quick question before I get cut off.

Is there a marked difference between the upgraded call centres and a regular call centre? Do you see a big difference, a notable difference?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: There is a remarkable difference for us between the old technology and the new updated technology. Probably the best example is the pensions call centre that we've just had in place for three weeks where we not only have a number of tools that will consider the best use, like callback and leave a message, but we now have 100% accessibility to people who want to wait to speak to an agent.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

The Chair: MP Falk, please.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you both for being here.

Ms. MacLean, I just want to follow up. I know you've been here a couple of times before today, and I know I had brought up Canada summer jobs. There were constituents in my riding who were having the problem of calling and getting a voice mail saying the voice mail was full.

I reached out to you personally. Our first interaction was May 7; my office reached out on May 7. I got an acknowledgement email May 10. I did a follow-up email on May 22, and it's June 6, and we still don't know. They also cannot get any answers.

I'm just wondering if this seems to be a common thing. We just need answers. My constituents need answers on the application process, so if you can connect with me offline or return my email, I'd really really appreciate that so that we can get answers for my constituents.

Also, I'm sure you're aware that this committee completed a study on supporting families after the loss of a child. We heard witness testimony from parents who had suddenly lost an infant while collecting maternity or paternity benefits. We heard that the way Service Canada employees had interacted and responded with these grieving parents was completely unacceptable and uncompassionate.

What I'm interested in knowing is how ESDC plans to address these issues by providing adequate training for families who are grieving.

● (1320)

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I'll respond quickly to both questions.

I apologize unreservedly that we have not yet closed the loop with you on your question on Canada summer jobs. We will do so promptly.

In regard to your second concern, it is a very important issue. All of our staff who interact directly with the public, whether it's in person or by telephone, receive training and refresher training on dealing professionally, appropriately, and certainly in the circumstances that you would note, compassionately with people.

If there are specific issues, any time there's a concern in person, the citizen can ask to speak to a manager. If there's a concern raised in terms of dealing on the phone, our staff will gladly provide not their first and last name, but their contact number, and we will always follow up on those concerns.

I apologize if there were any instances of inappropriate or unhelpful service.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Since we finished that report a few months ago, I just wonder if the department has received it and if they're taking it seriously, about additional training or having conversations with employees in general.

I know when the department was here before, they had said there was training provided, but there seems to be a gap there. Having lost a child and then being told, because your child ceases to exist, your benefits cease to exist, is absolutely inappropriate.

Therefore, I hope it is a report that's taken seriously and that we don't have that situation occurring. As Mr. Morrissey said, that's the face of the government. It's absolutely unacceptable to have people talk to people who are grieving and not empathize or be compassionate.

That's all. I just want to make sure that it's taken seriously.

My next question is in regard to the Auditor General's report, where it indicates that ESDC has not set call centre service standards that are relevant to clients. That is what the report had said, that the department's standards do not meet Treasury Board service standards. The department's response in the report rejects this assessment by stating that established standards are already relevant and consistent with client expectations.

Where is the disconnect between the AG's report and the department?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I believe the earlier testimony noted that some of our colleague organizations have different levels of detail, or indeed, service standards.

I would go back to my earlier comments. We work very closely with our colleagues at the Treasury Board Secretariat to ensure that not only are we measuring the right things internally, but that we're reporting properly externally.

I did also note the change in methodology that we made, further to the Auditor General's recommendation. Given the size of the large programs we are delivering, such as the old age security program, which will be \$50 billion this year, or the pensions program, which will be about another \$50 billion, we take extremely seriously not just the accounting for public funds, but the reporting on results to the public.

I would again thank the committee for its work on the important report around that extraordinarily and unimaginably difficult time when someone loses a child. I will follow up and confirm my understanding that additional training is available.

● (1325)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I have just one quick question. I know you let everybody else go over time, so I am going to go over time.

The Chair: Please be brief. You're already over time.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I don't know if you can speak to this or not. Do departments not have the same service standards amongst themselves? Are they each set individually? Is that what I'm understanding?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: That is exactly what you should understand. I would even note that, for Service Canada, we have different service standards, depending on the nature of the service being offered.

For example, 1-800-0-Canada is a general information line, so the agents require much less training and our service standard is much faster than it is for pensions or EI where the staff have a great deal of required training in order to support Canadians.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

The Chair: Dan, I understand you want a couple of minutes?

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Yes, I would like a couple of minutes.

I want to quickly come back to the call centres that have been upgraded. From what you have said, they seem to be doing extremely well. The previous testimony from the Auditor General said that there were no plans to upgrade the remaining 213 call centres.

Can you speak to that?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Mr. Chair, with deference to the committee, the planning for that work is with our colleagues at the Treasury Board Secretariat and Shared Services Canada. However, I could repeat what they said in this regard at public accounts last week, with the Chair's indulgence.

Very simply, the commitment by the president of Shared Services was to have a plan for the next wave of call centres, with this new technology.

If I could speak to our experience as an organization, we have other call centres that we'll be looking to include in this next wave of updates. For example, we have only one centre in the country, in Bathurst, that takes calls from people about their social insurance number. We know we'll want to be upgrading that—that's an important service to Canadians. Their commitment at public accounts, according to my memory, was to have that plan in place for the fall.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you. I have one last question.

We keep hearing about calls that are dropped. What can you tell me about dropped calls?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: This is where I will look for help from the experts. In those peak periods, I would note that we have 100% accessibility for people who want to, or are able to, serve themselves through the automated system. For EI, for example, 65% of people self-serve, and never seek to speak to an agent.

In those very busy periods, in our current system, we have a finite number of lines. It's not just that we have a finite number of agents; we have a finite number of lines. That's what the improvement in

technology has given us—the ability to have a national queue, not just a site-by-site queue.

Cliff, could you pick up and complete my thought, please?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Certainly.

There has been a lot of use of the term “dropped calls”. There are a couple of things we'd like to make very clear. We do not hang up on clients. Clients may choose to hang up. As Leslie described, there are times when a client might hang up after 10 seconds, or five minutes, etc.

During our peak periods, when the call volume dramatically increases, it will happen that clients have to wait quite some time, and we'll see the number of people who choose to hang up increase.

The other piece related to this issue is that under our old technology, when all of our lines were full, if clients would press 0 to speak to an agent, at times, if all those lines were full, they would get a message saying, “Unfortunately, all our lines are full. You can choose to go back to the automated response system, or you can call back later.” Then the client had that choice. Under our new telephony system, that limitation of having people not be able to get into the queue has been addressed.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: With the AG's comments, it's actually a technology problem, not a manpower problem. Is that correct, to an extent?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: They are interrelated pieces. Certainly, clients not being able to get through, and waiting, is a technology problem. How long they have to wait ties to the technology, but also the availability of staff.

•(1330)

The Chair: I'd like to thank you both for being here once again. I've lost count of how many times you've been here, but every time, we learn something, and are better off for it.

I hope the committee will indulge me for about 30 seconds here. As we have no other scheduled meetings, today may be the last opportunity that I have to chair this committee.

I'd like to thank all of my colleagues, especially the vice-chair, MP Barlow, for the work that we've been able to accomplish together. On behalf of all the committee, I'd like to, as I often do, but especially today, thank the analysts and the clerk, both current and past, for the unbelievable amount of effort and dedication to this committee.

Of course, I thank the translation and technical staff, so that we can be heard, not just in this room, but all over Canada and the world.

I'll say a personal thank you to my staff, Andrew Cowie, who I'm going to embarrass a bit. His work and dedication to this committee has been amazing. Without him, we would not be where we are today. Thank you very much, everybody.

We are adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <http://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.noscommunes.ca>