



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 031 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, November 24, 2016

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Chair

Mr. Bryan May

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

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• (0850)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody. I'll give a reminder that we are being televised, so Wayne, be on your best behaviour. You just never know when you're going to be on camera, sir.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, June 13, 2016, the committee is resuming its study of poverty reduction strategies.

I would like to welcome those here with us and also those by video conference. We have with us Mr. Mark Wafer, president, Megleen, operating as Tim Hortons.

Welcome, sir. You didn't bring us any Timbits or coffee or anything.

Mr. Mark Wafer (President, Megleen operating as Tim Hortons, As an Individual): I noticed a few Starbucks cups around the table, though.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: It's what they have at the hotel. I'm sorry; we'll hide it over here.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): We're starting off on the wrong foot.

The Chair: I know; this is not going well already.

Also here via video conference from Meticulon is Garth Johnson, chief executive officer, and Joy Hewitt, chief employment coach.

Welcome. Can you hear me okay?

Mr. Garth Johnson (Chief Executive Officer, Meticulon): Yes. Good morning.

The Chair: You didn't bring us any Tim Hortons Timbits either.

Mr. Garth Johnson: No, but we are drinking it.

The Chair: Okay.

From Metcalf Foundation, also via video conference, we have John Stapleton, a fellow of that organization.

Welcome, sir. Can you hear me okay?

Mr. John Stapleton (Fellow, Metcalf Foundation): Yes, thank you very much.

The Chair: That's excellent.

Also here with us, from the Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee, are Sonia Pace, co-chair, and Adaoma C. Patterson, adviser. Welcome.

We're going to start with opening comments from each of the organizations. We have seven minutes for each of you. Please try to keep as close to that time as possible. If you see me politely waving or smiling or you see that my mike is on, it means we're pretty much out of time and that you should wrap up.

We'll start with Mark Wafer from Tim Hortons.

Welcome, sir.

Mr. Mark Wafer: Thank you very much for having me here this morning.

I've been a Tim Hortons franchisee now for the past 21 years. In that time I've employed 145 people with disabilities in meaningful and competitively paid positions. This is every type of disability in every area of my business, from entry level right up to my management team.

What I have discovered is that when we build the capacity of people with disabilities in real jobs for real pay, we create an economic boom for our business. There is a clear business case for being an inclusive employer. Yes, it's the right thing to do, but when we talk about it being the right thing to do, business owners tend to ignore that. What we've discovered is that by building capacity and by including people in real jobs for real pay, we are creating a safer workplace. We are creating a more innovative workplace. We are reducing costs by reducing employee turnover, and much more. There is a clear economic case for being an inclusive employer. I'll give you one brief example.

In my sector, the quick-service sector, the average turnover rate for employees is about 100% to 125%. That's typical, and that's normal for a well-run operation. In my group of six restaurants, for the past 10 years my turnover rate has been under 40%. The only thing I'm doing differently from my colleagues and friends in Tim Hortons across the country is being an inclusive employer.

Typically, people with disabilities don't leave. It took them so long to find that job that they stay with you for a long time, but more profound is the effect that it has on those employees who do not have a disability. I have 200 employees without a disability today, and I have 46 who do. Of the 46 who have a disability, none left last year. That's great. Of the 200 who don't have a disability, the turnover rate last year was 55%. It's still half the norm. Why is that?

If you look at the demographic of disability across the country, 15% of us have a disability. That's equal to the entire population of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta combined. It's a big number. But it's even more profoundly larger were you to add in the direct family members of those people with disabilities; we are now at 53% of the Canadian population. I have 14,000 customers a day walking into my six Tim Hortons stores, and 7,000 of them are directly affected by a disability.

However, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities still remains extremely high, some believe as high as 70%, with a participation rate of around 18% to 20%. Why is that?

It's because employers, hiring managers, and CEOs are still buying into a series of myths and misperceptions. It's the great fear they buy into that, if they hire people with disabilities, they will work slower, take more sick time, require more supervision, require expensive accommodations, and be less innovative. As I have proven, the opposite is true. It's simply good for business.

If we look at the demographics across the country today with students, students leaving school, 447,000 Canadians with a disability have graduated in the last five years. Those 447,000 have never worked a single day. There are others who have graduated and who have found work, but 447,000 have not found work in the last five years, and 270,000 of those have a post-secondary education.

It's a massive talent pool. It's a massive group of talented potential workers that, today, employers are largely ignoring. They're ignoring them because of fear, the fear of hiring people and having to pay large accommodation costs, which simply is not true. Sixty per cent of employees don't need accommodation at all, and 35% need an accommodation that would probably cost an average of about \$500 or less.

Thank you.

• (0855)

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

You have about two more minutes. I don't know if there is anything else you'd like to add.

Maybe I can ask you something, just very briefly. As the chair, I don't usually take advantage of this, but you've given me a little bit of time. I'm really intrigued with what you're doing.

Have you made any efforts to try to scale this up within the Tim Hortons organization, and have you seen much uptake from your colleagues across Canada?

Mr. Mark Wafer: Very much so. There are a couple of things that I've done. I'm an advocate and I'm an activist. I started talking about this about 10 years ago. I went to a conference as a delegate and the keynote speaker didn't show up and they asked me to speak. The rest is history.

My message is one that was resonating. Tim Hortons, as a corporation, has done some great things, and you can talk about this, but they're like any other large Canadian corporation. It's very slow to make change. Where we have had some success is at the franchise level. Tim Hortons franchisees across the country have embraced

the hiring of people with disabilities, more at the entry level, intellectual types of disabilities, people doing entry-level jobs.

We really need to move away from that. We need to look at our businesses critically, look at every position, and then fill those positions with people with disabilities.

In 2012 I was a member of the federal panel on opportunity for people with disabilities in the workplace. This was set up by former finance minister Jim Flaherty. We did come out with a report that resonated with the business community, but more importantly we were provided resources to start an organization called Canadian Business SenseAbility.

That's a membership-driven organization. It's based in Toronto but it's national in scope, and the idea is to bring in Canadian corporations as members and make them disability confident. We have 28 Canadian corporations now as members of our association, and that began right here in Ottawa with the former minister of finance. Of the 28 corporations, 16 are multinationals, and they represent 800,000 employees.

• (0900)

The Chair: That's fantastic.

Mr. Mark Wafer: So things are moving; things are changing. The message is resonating, and the message is resonating because we're focusing on the economics of it. We've always talked about the right thing to do. We've always talked about legislative compliance.

We have a paradigm shift coming in attitudes towards people with disabilities. If you look back 20, 30, or 40 years and to the Jerry Lewis syndrome, where we had poor Timmy and poor Tammy sitting on Jerry's lap, it taught us that we should only view people with disabilities with pity.

Now we're asking CEOs and hiring managers to look at people with disabilities as contributors—contributors to society, to themselves, and to the economy at large.

The Chair: That's excellent. I look forward to hearing more from you today, sir. Thank you.

Now we have the presentation from Meticulon—and I said that right this time, I think.

Mr. Garth Johnson: Yes, just think of *Battlestar Galactica* and you'll get there.

The Chair: From Meticulon, we have chief executive officer Garth Johnson, and chief employment coach Joy Hewitt, coming to us via Calgary, Alberta. Welcome, the next seven minutes are all yours.

Mr. Garth Johnson: Thank you very much for having us here today. We're very privileged to be here.

Meticulon is an IT consulting firm. We do three of the toughest jobs to be good at in the IT sector. We do quality assurance in the software testing field. We do big data analysis for large datasets, and we do data security and verification work. That's integration and the really hard parts of compliance.

Since we began in 2013, we have worked with 174 people with autism. We employ exclusively people with autism to do the actual work. We have typically abled people who handle some of the other roles in the company, but when it comes to executing the contracts that we take, all of them are on the autism spectrum. They are incredibly bright people.

As you probably know, in Canada, more than 80% of people with autism who want to work and are capable of working do not have a job. Every time we run an intake for potential employees into our process, we receive over 40 applications, sometimes over 60, from people who are advocating for themselves. Most of them are university educated and most have never worked. So far, 85% of the people who have worked for us have never had a job in what they were trained to do. The other 15% of the people who work for us and come through our process had a subsistence level, retail type job. Nevertheless, these people come through our process, become our employees, and we are a minimum of 60% better, more productive, more efficient, more accurate than their typically abled counterparts who they work with.

We work on site, and we offer remote services work to our customers. The biggest challenge we currently have as a business is that in this economic downturn that we're facing in Calgary, our staff are consistently being poached by our customers because they are so good at what they do. The question we have is, why is this the case? Why is it the case that across the country....

We've helped others replicate this. We've created a thing called the Meticulon tool kit, which is basically a small franchise kit that Joy and I work people through on how to replicate our business. It's been done successfully in Vancouver and in the interior of B.C. Winnipeg is about to launch, and we've spent a copious amount of time in Dallas, Texas, working with AT&T because they want to replicate it internally. We know that these people are excellent employees. We have a very hard time getting into businesses in the beginning. Most of our customers are SMEs, because we can sit at the table with the decision-maker, and we can talk to them about the value proposition they're going to get, and we can prove it.

Since we began, we have literally done dozens and dozens of contracts and have never failed on a single one. I've worked in tech for most of my career, and I can tell you that never happens. One in 60 Canadians being born right now will be diagnosed on the autism spectrum, yet we're not seeing a lot of change. Why is that?

We think it comes down to one thing. What Mark said about the economic case is absolutely correct. We say to people all the time, "Don't hire us to do good, hire us because we are good." In the beginning of our business, I can tell you that the reason people engaged us was because they wanted to do good. The fact that we were exceptionally good at what we do was a big surprise, a good surprise, but they did not expect that.

We think it comes down to fit. We think that one of the challenges that's happening in the world of disability employment that we've seen is that there's a lot of "warm body principle" practice still going on. An employer has a job, and they want to put someone into it. An agency has a person they want to place, and they just sort of ram a square peg into a round hole and hope it works out.

Our process for on-boarding people is about three months long and includes the training that we do with them for software testing. One month of that is just building out a skills and capacity grid, which tells us who they are, what they're capable of, what their challenges are, and what their interests are. It's a collaborative process that the potential employee goes through with us. We build a very detailed mind map of what they are capable of, specifically related to the jobs. We use that to sit down with employers.

We all know that soft questions get hard answers in the autism world from people, and the on-boarding and interview process is broken. Job descriptions don't really talk about what the jobs are about. They don't talk about what you really need to do those jobs. We have created this process, which we're also hoping to give away and franchise down into a model that allows businesses and employees and self-advocates to more effectively create that fit until we get to the point where we're meeting business needs.

● (0905)

Why did we succeed at Meticulon? It is because we started from the business perspective first. We said, "Where do people with autism have tremendous gifts and abilities so that we can address real business problems and leverage them?" In tech, we knew that was jobs that require precise attention to detail, an exceptional ability to focus with accuracy over the long haul, diligence, the need to be thorough and complete, and a love of doing repetitious and highly structured testing. That is key but it is often not done well, because you and I start seeing what should be there.

We screen for people in our process who don't. We screen for people who have visually eidetic memory skills. We screen for people who can absolutely immediately see problematic flows in test code, and we've had a successful business enterprise so far. We want to see that replicated, and we think that one of the things that needs to happen is that we need to take step back and start convincing employers to do this because it's good for their business, and not because it's a good thing to do. We need to look at what their real problems are, and then go and look at the real gifts and abilities that Mark talked about, which are loyalty and a lack of turnover.

I tell you, there are jobs that these people on our staff are better at than you or I will ever be. We need to take more time in a conversation with employers to talk about fit and when that's right. We've never had a failed placement. I've never had a business where I've placed every single person I've hired into something that's successful. Why? It's because we took the time to build it out. We think that's part of the conversation that needs to happen.

We want to replicate our business. We're looking at moving into Ontario and the Maritimes because we know we are onto something, but we're onto something not to do good alone. We're onto something because we want to make a profit, and we want to help these people build sustainable careers.

Thank you.

The Chair: You're very welcome, and thank you very much for the work that you're doing and for your time today.

I'd like to welcome Bilan Arte, the national chairperson for the Canadian Federation of Students.

I'm glad you could join us today, and the next seven minutes are yours.

Ms. Bilan Arte (National Chairperson, Canadian Federation of Students): Thank you very much.

Good morning, members of the committee, and thank you for inviting me to speak before you. My name is Bilan Arte and I'm the national chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students.

The Canadian Federation of Students is Canada's oldest and largest national students' union, representing more than 650,000 students from coast to coast. Our organization advocates for a public high-quality system of post-secondary education for our country. Today, I am happy to speak, not only on behalf of my generation of students and youth but also out of hope for generations to come.

I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to address this committee, and I'm excited to share students' vision for universal access to post-secondary education in Canada. In response to decades of government inaction on skyrocketing tuition fees and mounting student debt, students across the country held actions in 36 cities and 58 campuses for a national day of action for free education this past November 2. We have built a historic coalition for free education, and we believe the time for government action is now.

Students, educators, workers, administrators, policy-makers, and communities are all in agreement that a strong system of post-secondary education is key to Canada's current and future success. Investments in post-secondary education generate billions in annual income activity, drive growth and innovation, and train and retrain a skilled workforce who can compete globally, foster civic literacy, and promote responsible citizenship.

All students have a right to education, no matter their families' incomes, and all of us benefit directly from the skills and training our population gains through access to education. I believe that we need universal access without upfront cost. By eliminating tuition fees and fully funding indigenous learners, we can build a strong foundation for growth and ensure access to education for everyone, no matter what province they are born in or their parents' income.

I believe that it is time. We need a new approach to post-secondary education because, in 2017, a college diploma or university degree is required for a decent income and a just society. Today, 70% of new jobs require some form of post-secondary education, and for the precarious employment predominant in the remaining 30% of jobs, people want pathways to a better future.

Today's system is failing young people. In 2011, 42% of Canadians between 20 and 29 years old lived in their parents' homes, up from 27% in 1981.

• (0910)

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you. You have lots of time, so I would ask that you slow it down. You're going a little fast for the translators.

Ms. Bilan Arte: Absolutely, I will. Thank you for that.

In 2013-14, 203,887 graduates couldn't make a single payment on their Canada student loan. This claim required reporting pre-tax incomes of less than \$20,000 per year.

Earlier this month, the Canada student loans program adjusted its minimum income threshold for compulsory payments on public student loans to \$25,000.

Members of the committee, I would like to point out that \$25,000 is still earning well below a poverty level income. What's more, we know that our government today is profiting by close to \$580 million in interest from the Canada student loans program in 2015, worsening what is already the plight of the most indebted generation in Canadian history, at over \$20 billion owed collectively to the federal government.

In May, 2016, Canada's parliamentary budget officer noted that post-secondary education is disproportionately accessed by higher income Canadians, with 60% of students coming from the upper 40% of income earners. Those who are left behind include indigenous and racialized people, new immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, young people from low-income families, and too many recently unemployed, or folks working minimum wage jobs who simply want to get skills to improve their lives.

I wish to stress that these statistics are not only numbers and need to be humanized, as they illustrate the stories of thousands of youth who, like me, always believed they could access higher education.

My parents came to Canada as refugees in the early 1990s. I grew up within a family and a community that was just surviving poverty and making it through paycheque to paycheque. I started working as early as I could to help my single mother make ends meet. At the age of 17, despite graduating from high school with honours and being granted early admission to university, I was resigned to give up on my dreams after failing to balance the expenses, because I knew that even with public loans I could never afford higher education.

A few weeks before university started, I received a full scholarship to the University of Manitoba, and my life changed forever. Without the full removal of tuition fees as a barrier to my access to university, I would never have had the opportunity to obtain a degree, develop my skills as a leader, nor much less be presenting to this committee today.

As the first person in my family to obtain a post-secondary degree, I'm hopeful that I can help break the cycle of poverty in my community. However, these days, I'm nervous for my siblings, especially my youngest sister, who is only six. My heart breaks to think how high tuition fees might be by the time she considers attending post-secondary. I only hope that I can be in a position to help her achieve her dreams when that time comes.

Members of the committee, I believe that hope is important, but I also hope that all of us here know today that we are in serious need of ending these cycles of poverty. For that, we need more than hope. We need government action, immediately, to remove all barriers to post-secondary education.

I know that my story is not unique. It is the reality and context for too many of my generation, and for generations to come. Young people across the country who come from low-income, marginalized communities cannot believe that they will achieve their dreams of accessing higher education because of skyrocketing tuition fees that increase every single year.

We deserve a Canada with a fully public system of post-secondary education, a Canada that enables the dreams of the innovators of tomorrow. I believe the cycle of inaccessibility to higher education needs to end now.

Furthermore, we know that income barriers that prevent highly qualified students from accessing public education interact with related forms of discrimination. For indigenous students, it means broken promises, despite an era of government commitment to truth and reconciliation.

The federal government is responsible to fulfill Canada's treaty obligation to education for first nations and Inuit students through the post-secondary student support program. In 1996, annual funding increases to the PSSSP were capped at 2%. For the past 20 years, successive federal governments, including this one, have continued this trend by choosing to maintain a 2% funding cap. As a result of this restrictive cap, funding has fallen far behind the growing demand for post-secondary education, with rising tuition fees and living costs.

The Assembly of First Nations has estimated that last year, more than 10,000 students were on a wait-list because of the backlog of funding. The federation is calling on this committee to follow through on its recent and historic commitment to indigenous students. The Canadian Federation of Students supports the demand of the Assembly of First Nations to invest an additional \$141 million per year in the post-secondary student support program to fully fund all indigenous learners.

The student support must be tied with rival public spending. With federal spending on public services now lower than it was in the 1940s, we believe it's time to reinvest in public education. Recently, provincial governments in Ontario and New Brunswick have taken note of the barriers of high tuition fees and have taken steps to offset these costs for students from low-income families.

• (0915)

However, we need system reform across Canada to guarantee access for everyone, in every province, and across every territory. As

a federal government, you can bring provinces together and enable access to post-secondary education through a dedicated federal transfer to eliminate tuition fees for all.

Canadian businesses will benefit from a society where people are empowered to develop their capacities to the fullest extent possible. A skilled, curious, and vibrant public lies at the heart of any functioning economy. Maintaining high tuition fees, high debt, and a diminishing funding model for post-secondary education does not serve the interests of our society or the entrepreneurs who create within it.

Perhaps most importantly, as this committee's goals today are to hear meaningful approaches to reducing poverty in our country, I believe firmly that ensuring universal access to post-secondary education is the best social equalizer at this government's disposal. Students expect and deserve more from a government with the means and power to make education free.

With that, I will welcome any questions you have. I look forward to working with members of this committee to develop an anti-poverty strategy for our country that centres a universal system of post-secondary education as a key framework to help achieve that goal.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, from the Metcalf Foundation, is Mr. John Stapleton.

The next seven minutes are yours, sir.

Mr. John Stapleton: Thank you very much to you and the committee for having me here today, and good day to all the guests.

I've come to talk a little bit about our disability income programs in Canada. First of all, I'll say that I have 28 years of experience working in government as a benefit designer and a policy analyst. I've spent the last 12 years outside of government working for various organizations, mostly in the area of community-based research and policy analysis.

I want to start by saying that Canada, in its different ways, shapes, and forms, spends \$33 billion in disability benefits for approximately two million Canadians.

It's very Canadian of us, I think, that we have 10 different disability income systems. I'll just briefly name them: workers' compensation; auto insurance, going to accident victims with persons with disabilities; our veterans programs for our veterans with disabilities; the Canada Pension Plan disability component; the employment insurance sickness component; the disability tax credit; the registered disability savings plan; social assistance, which has programs that differ in each province; private disability income; and 10th, the disability component of the working income tax benefit. Those programs spend \$33 billion.

There are two important items that you should know about those. Only two of those programs provide ongoing full-time benefits to the age of 65, the CPP disability program and social assistance. The other programs provide time-limited benefits. You should also know that six of those disability income systems only provide benefits based on someone's already having worked; for example, workers' compensation, veterans programs, CPPD, EI, etc.

The important point in taking this inventory of these programs is that they all have different purposes. In many ways I would characterize them as 10 cats in a bag. They have different philosophies; they came in at different times.

I was especially interested in Mark Wafer's comments about the ways we used to think of people with disabilities. Many of the programs that came in to serve people with disabilities are programs that came in at a time when we did not think people with disabilities ought to work. We thought we would pay them income security to stay at home.

We no longer think this. We are very lucky to be in a society in which we all think that people with disabilities should have the opportunity to work. The same is true among people who themselves have disabilities, and governments also believe this.

Why then do we have this array of programs that interact in many ways to thwart the efforts of people with disabilities to work? The social assistance program I'm most familiar with is Ontario's. I know that for approximately 30,000 of the recipients—about 10% of the people on the program—their households have people who report earnings, yet in many ways the programs work to confiscate that income, and, therefore, thwart efforts for people to work. When they do work, they have their incomes taken away from them.

It's important to know that the footprint of the social assistance component is growing across Canada, in terms of the money it's spending, because we are seeing cuts of various sorts in the other programs. The consequence of that is that more people with disabilities are faced with social assistance being the only choice for meeting their needs.

● (0920)

The work that I've done, especially in community-based research, has shown that people, especially those who also live in subsidized housing, which they can afford, and are therefore often closest to an employer's workplace, for every single dollar that they earn, they will, in fact, lose at least half of the income they received from their employer, and then also receive a 30% increase in their rent. It would be difficult for any of us, I think, to be faced with the idea of losing up to 80% of every dollar that we earn simply because a program needs to claw it back in order to be affordable to the public. I think this is very short-sighted.

In terms of the work we heard about from the woman from the Federation of Students, from Meticulon, and from Mark Wafer for Tim Hortons, we are trying to get people with disabilities back into the labour force and make sure that they can earn enough, along with their income security programs.

It's very important to note that when we have this vast array of programs, all with different philosophies, all which in many cases

claw back benefits, what we see is a great reluctance on the part of people with disabilities to actually move into work because they are going to have their benefits otherwise confiscated through these programs. It's important for you to know that social assistance, as a program, deducts all these other forms of income. If someone gets workers' compensation, if they get a veteran's allowance, if they get CPP disability, EI sickness, then those programs are actually deducted off their social assistance at 100%, and at the same time, then, earnings are deducted at 50%.

We have to figure out a way for the very poorest of people with disabilities to be able to have programs work together in a seamless way so that we have a system where people can move into work and be able to meet their own needs.

Thanks very much.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Last but not least, from the Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee, we have Ms Pace.

I understand, Ms. Pace, you will lead us off.

Ms. Sonia Pace (Co-Chair, Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee): Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members of Parliament, and guests. Thank you for the opportunity to present here today.

Adaoma and I will focus our presentation on three recommendations and ideas on the leadership role that the federal government can play to support social and skill development for our vulnerable.

The Peel poverty reduction strategy is a three-year community plan that was created in 2012 to address the growing issue of poverty in our community of Peel, which consists of Mississauga, Brampton, and Caledon. This multi-sectoral table is co-chaired by the United Way of Peel and the Region of Peel. The Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee is a member of vibrant communities, cities reducing poverty, which is a national initiative of 50 communities across Canada.

Why is addressing poverty in Peel important?

With a rapidly growing population, currently at 1,386,000, Peel is one of the fastest-growing regions in Canada. In 2011, there were 17.1% of Peel residents living in poverty. As such, with this level of poverty, our focus in Peel is on the following identified issues that were determined with the community: safe and affordable housing, affordable and accessible transportation, income security, economic opportunities, and food security.

We strongly believe that the government has a role to play. As the economy continues to change and more jobs transform from full time to part time and precarious, federal, provincial, and municipal governments have a role to play in supporting people, beyond traditional social transfer payments and services. Governments have the infrastructure in place to provide training and employment opportunities to Canadians, especially those facing disabilities or multiple barriers and experiencing poverty.

Poverty is fundamentally about limited access to income, supports, and resources. It is also about the inability of individuals and families to live independently, to focus on wellness, and to be involved in community life. Programs and services that are integrated and put people, rather than systems, first are crucial in helping people to get what they need, when they need it.

The following are two recommendations on the federal role.

The first one is to remove systemic barriers. Canadians experiencing poverty often cite how systems prevent them from moving forward. Silo approaches to service delivery at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government make things harder for people to get the supports they need when they need them.

Therefore, our recommendation is to encourage the federal government to mandate all departments that deliver services to work with provincial and municipal ministries and departments to share data, streamline processes, and use a “one-door approach” to delivering services.

As such, we have two examples. First, the Canada Revenue Agency could work more closely with municipal social services departments to ensure clients are receiving the full tax benefits and credits to which they are entitled. Second, employment insurance staff could work with social services staff to ensure clients who are exiting EI and moving to social services programs are better supported during the transition period from one program to another.

Our second recommendation is to address racism and discrimination. There are higher rates of poverty among indigenous and racialized Canadians, which is partly a result of racism and systemic discrimination, which often manifests itself in subtle, hidden ways. The federal government needs to acknowledge the role racism and discrimination plays in preventing indigenous and racialized people from moving out of poverty.

We encourage the government to ensure that the pending federal poverty reduction strategy consultations include questions about racism and discrimination, and identify specific recommendations and mechanisms to address these issues. We encourage the federal government to undertake the collection and analysis of ethno-racially and otherwise appropriately disaggregated data across all federal departments, ministries, and public institutions.

● (0930)

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson (Adviser, Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee): Now I will focus on three ideas we have that really emerged from our community.

The first concerns community benefits agreements. A community benefits agreement provides jobs and other benefits for community residents. It is a signed, legally enforceable agreement, having clear monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

Although this initiative is relatively new to Canada, we believe that CBAs have the potential to create training and employment opportunities, especially for vulnerable Canadians. The target population could be newcomers, youth, or people who have been out of the workforce for an extended period of time. We encourage the government to develop a cross-government policy framework that supports the principle of community benefits. This includes remov-

ing barriers for the various departments that have a role to play in implementation.

The second idea concerns the public service providing employment pathways. The public service can play an important role in creating employment and training opportunities for Canadians facing multiple barriers or struggling to enter the labour market. Who is the target population? It is youth not in employment, education, or training—we call them NEET youth—and social assistance recipients, including those in the disability programs that John referred to.

For example, the Region of Peel recently launched its model employer pilot initiative: 14 entry-level positions were identified across the organization, and people who are in receipt of social assistance were given the opportunity to apply for an entry-level administrative position. Clients were supported through the entire process, from screening to placement, by social services workers. The placement opportunity is for six months, earning the minimum band paid to regular full-time employees, and includes a mentoring component. The rate is above the living wage for Peel region; our living wage for Peel Region is about \$16.50 an hour. Participants will work with a supervisor to develop a learning plan and will continue to receive support from the social services staff throughout the placement so that we ensure success along the way.

The third and final idea concerns affordable transit. In 2012, the Peel poverty reduction committee identified transit affordability as a key barrier to social inclusion and employment. There is a role for the federal government to play in ensuring that municipalities can fund transit infrastructure and programs that are targeted to low-income individuals and families. In fact, there are many communities now, at the municipal level, in which those affordable programs are being funded.

Here is another example in our community. The Region of Peel and the City of Mississauga through its MiWay transit department launched the affordable transit pilot program, phases one and two. Results from phase one participants showed an increase in visits to employment support services, volunteer opportunities, food services, recreational spaces, and medical services.

One participant noted, “Due to this pilot, I find that I have more balance in my life. I now visit family and am able to attend church since there is no additional stress about how to get there. I also have expanded my job search area, since travelling farther from home is now more affordable.”

In closing, we want to emphasize that the Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy Committee understands that income is the root cause of poverty. A sufficient, stable income allows people not to have to choose between paying rent and buying food. However, other important interventions take advantage of what is already in place, whether it is employment and training opportunities that all levels of governments can provide through existing departments or removing silos to put citizens at the centre of our services, regardless of which level of government is delivering them. We need to think and act differently to achieve better outcomes for our most vulnerable Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to get started with questions. First up, we have MP Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming today.

I just have an initial comment to Bilan. I'm a person who formerly went to university. I have two degrees, so I know what it's like to live close to poverty, or at poverty. We had four children when I was in school, so we had a lot of Kraft Dinners. I've told this story many times to this committee, and they're getting bored with it now.

But I just wanted to give you a little bit of information. Federally, taxpayers spend \$12.3 billion on education per year. That's federal-only alone. It looks closer to \$35 billion if you include the provincial contributions to education. Our national debt is almost \$1.2 trillion when you take into consideration the federal and provincial components. At \$1.2 trillion, that's about \$36,000 of debt per Canadian. It costs Canadians about 11.1% of every revenue dollar, so every tax dollar that people spend, it takes 11.1% of that dollar to service the debt, which adds up to \$30 billion per year.

You mentioned the government was making a profit from student loans. I don't see it that way from those numbers. The federal government has to borrow that \$12.3 billion, the money used to pay for that education, and there's a debt cost. If you look at a percentage in terms of interest, it's about 6% to 7%, but you could say it's an effective tax rate of 11%. You could look at it that way. It still costs government to borrow money to give to students to go to school. That's what I'm getting at, so it's not free.

I think the perception from your organization is that education should be free, but it's certainly not free. I guess what I'm concerned about is, as taxpayers, we talk about poverty reduction strategies. That's the focus of this study, but I'm concerned about Joe and Jane Taxpayer who are asked to contribute more and more every day so somebody else gets something for free. As a concern for poverty, what I'm concerned about with Joe and Jane Taxpayer is that we ask them for more and more every day, and pretty soon they're in poverty. These people who go to work every day, they go do their best for their families and for their kids, and we're asking them to bear more tax burden and debt burden every day.

That's just a comment to you, Bilan, to consider for your organization.

I want to talk about taxpayers, and I want to get to Mark and your presentation, because I think what you're doing is excellent, not to mention that you make great coffee. I have it regularly on weekends when I watch my daughter play hockey.

I want to ask you, in terms of poverty—you see a lot of people who work for you—what is the number one thing that you think is most important to getting somebody who's in poverty out of poverty?

● (0935)

Mr. Mark Wafer: Number one is a paycheque. A paycheque changes everything. Right now, people who have disabilities who are on all of these pensions that John was talking about are a drain on the system. By taking an individual off those benefits and putting them into the workplace, it's a win-win because you're saving the taxpayer the cost of the benefit, and you're also creating a brand new taxpayer.

If you take 5,000 people here in Ontario off the Ontario disability support program, if those 5,000 people are making the maximum amount of benefits, and you put those 5,000 people into the workplace making a living wage, the combination of the savings from ODSP and the contribution in taxes to the government is about \$70 million. There's a huge benefit in removing people from ODSP or other types of benefits across the country and creating new taxpayers. In fact, the only way in which a person with a disability can live a full life is with a paycheque. That is the most important thing.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I think one thing we talk about often is poverty, having money, and having a paycheque, etc., but as a former teacher and as a parent and coach of kids, I think there's something to be said that what's more important is the prosperity of a person. You see the smiles on people's faces after a hard day's work or after somebody, who hadn't been able to get a job before, finally gets one. That's the kind of stuff that probably makes you feel the most rewarded for what you're doing.

Mr. Mark Wafer: Yes, absolutely.

I have one quick story I want to share with the group about a young lady I hired five years ago who is profoundly deaf. She met me at a presentation, and she asked if she could come and work in one of my stores. I asked her for her resumé, and she had an MBA. She had graduated from Queen's University three years prior to this meeting, and she had never worked. Imagine that, being in the city of Toronto with an MBA and not working for three years.

She did come to work for me as a baker, a production worker, and she was an excellent worker, but she was only working three hours a day at that time. She was travelling five hours a day in order to work three hours, so that shows the desperation that's out there.

As I said, it changed her life, the fact that it was her first job. She's not with me anymore. She's now working for Deloitte, using her MBA.

• (0940)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: There you go.

Mr. Mark Wafer: But this was the springboard in order for her to get there.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go over to MP Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

I thank our witnesses for coming in this morning. It's great to see so many passionate advocates on poverty and helping those in need, so again, thank you.

My first question will be for you, Mr. Wafer. I read with interest some articles on you, about what you've done with people with disabilities. In the articles, some of the statistics were staggering: an unemployment rate of 54% for people with disabilities. When you include those who have probably given up looking for work, it can be as high as 70%. Again, I commend you for what you're doing at your Tim Hortons. I think it's a fantastic good-news story.

From a federal government perspective, are you able to give me some opinion or thoughts as to what we can do federally to help those businesses improve accessibility and safety for people with disabilities? What can we do as a federal government to help you and to make more people with disabilities able to get jobs in the workplace?

Mr. Mark Wafer: Thank you very much for that question.

Let's start with what we shouldn't do. Right now, the federal opportunities fund, which is that \$40 million, is being used largely for direct-to-employer wage subsidies. This is a huge problem. The way forward in getting businesses to open their doors, getting businesses to get over their fear of hiring people with disabilities, and getting rid of the misconceptions and misperceptions and the stereotypes, is through education and awareness.

When I stand before a group of business owners and I tell them about my story, one or two or three always come up to me at the end and say, "I want to do this. How do I do this? How do I get started?"

Governments can't solve this problem; neither can social service workers solve this problem. The problem can only be solved by the private sector because the people in the private sector are the ones who have to open their doors. How do we do that? We engage them. We educate them. We show them that by being inclusive employers they will reap the benefits from a P and L and bottom-line point of view; no more discussion about charity, no more discussion about legislative compliance, no more discussion about anything other than the economic case.

So what can the federal government do?

Mr. Wayne Long: Right.

Mr. Mark Wafer: The federal government can use those types of funds, like the opportunities fund. The gentleman over here on the right this morning said, "We don't want to go back to taxpayers and ask them for more money." We don't need to do that. The resources are already there. The money that's being used for wage subsidies right now should be used for those engagement programs instead of having social service agencies take a cheque for \$5,000 and give it to an employer to hire somebody with a disability. That is a very dangerous thing to do. Yes, it gets that person in the door, but it's not sustainable. The attitude of the employer has not changed. He or she still sees that person as somehow broken, not whole.

If the wage subsidy runs out, which invariably it will, what happens to that position after that? Also, positions in companies that have a wage subsidy component are rarely real and meaningful positions. They're made-up positions that have been suggested by a social service agency.

Mr. Wayne Long: I guess I would jump in to say that certainly in Saint John–Rothesay I could give you examples where wage subsidies have been very effective in helping people get that leg in or that first step, but I respect your opinion on that.

Again, I would just say congratulations on what you're doing. I think it's fantastic and it's certainly a model that other organizations could use across the country.

Mr. Mark Wafer: Thank you.

But could I just add, Wayne, you're absolutely right. There are places and times in which a wage subsidy has worked very well.

Mr. Wayne Long: Yes.

Mr. Mark Wafer: But not for people with disabilities.

Mr. Wayne Long: That's good to know. Thanks.

Mr. Stapleton, it was a great presentation. I read it out of interest again. You were 28 years in social assistance policy and operations with the Province of Ontario. Again, I say this every time we speak at this committee. We're here to help our department, Minister Jean-Yves Duclos especially, come up with a national poverty reduction strategy, and to aid him in helping those in need.

Mr. Stapleton, can you give me some insight as to what plans and policies are effective at reducing poverty from a government perspective? What have you seen?

• (0945)

Mr. John Stapleton: The programs that are effective are the ones that help with the transition. I was especially interested in listening to Mark talk about giving someone a paycheque, but as someone transitions from those few hours a week and gets more into the full-time labour market, we have to remember that full-time minimum wage, at least in the Province of Ontario, is about \$20,000. A program like the Canada Pension Plan disability will cut you completely off benefits at about one-third of that minimum wage, so there's a perfect example of a program that doesn't really work in the way that it should to help people get back into the labour force.

Mr. Wayne Long: But just—

Mr. John Stapleton: It's also....

Yes?

Mr. Wayne Long: Go ahead and finish.

Mr. John Stapleton: The same thing is true when we look at our social assistance programs. Again the federal government can take a leadership role with the provinces in trying to get some national standards in place.

We need to have programs that allow people to transition to the workforce and not try to take money away from people as they make that transition. Our current disability system with those 10 different disability systems don't work together. They all came into place at different times. Especially in that area is a place where we can start to look at that.

Let me give you one example.

The Chair: Very quickly, go ahead with your example.

Mr. John Stapleton: On social assistance, for example, if someone has reported their income for the month—if they are working part time and still need to be on benefits—and then the boss calls them up and says, “We want you to come in for an extra shift that we hadn't counted on.” That immediately becomes an overpayment in that system. It's way too closely managed, and there is much too much confiscation of benefits.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Now over for six minutes to Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you.

Thank you to all of our witnesses today for your very insightful testimony on our study on poverty.

Ms. Arte, I want to begin with you, and thank you for your very powerful presentation here today.

The message that you made very clearly is that times are changing for young people in our country. You raise some shocking statistics that 42% of young people live in their parents' basement, a number that has skyrocketed over the last 20 years. You talked about how the amount of debt owed collectively by young people in this country, and by some older young people, is over \$20 billion. You talked about the average student debt being \$28,000.

I am an older millennial and having graduated from university with my first degree over 10 years ago, this reality is different from what I experienced. It's clear to me that, year after year, young people in Canada are paying a higher price to simply do what we expect of them, which is to get an education.

Today we're talking about how we can come forward with a strategy to support Canadians who are trying to get out of poverty. We've heard from you that for a lot of young people, getting an education means struggling in poverty and not seeing a way out, given these levels of student debt. This is a reality that we've never seen before in this country.

I want to thank you for raising those alarm bells, alarm bells that those of us who spend time with peers hear about on a daily basis.

First of all—and I realize it came up already in the question of how we could possibly afford this—given the work that you've done, along with so many organizations that support the vision that you've brought forward today around free education, I wonder if you could talk to us a bit about where the money will come from.

• (0950)

Ms. Bilan Arte: Thank you for that.

I really want to appreciate the emphasis that this is the most indebted generation in Canadian history. I believe we are in a crisis when it comes to access to education; furthermore, when 70% of new jobs require some form of post-secondary education, students are put in a very difficult position when they are unable to afford it.

When we understand the question around public funding for post-secondary education, it's important to know that public funding for public services such as education is at an all-time low, particularly when we compare funding levels of today with those of the 1940s. Generations before us enjoyed a much more publicly funded system of post-secondary education.

Oftentimes we look at how much politicians had to pay for their post-secondary education. We know that our Prime Minister paid close to \$1,700 when he was attending post-secondary. The premier here in Ontario, where there are the highest tuition fees in the country, paid closer to \$700 per academic year when she was attending university.

Evidently, when we look at today, the national average for tuition fees is well over \$6,000. In Ontario, it's well over \$8,000 per academic term. To attend is very unaffordable and inaccessible to young people.

On the question of where the funding comes from, I think there was a time when our federal government actually prioritized funding to post-secondary education. That was over 60 years ago. Today our generation is facing the consequences of progressive devaluing and disinvestments for post-secondary education.

I think budgets are about priorities. We could and should invest in a progressive taxation system in this country that doesn't benefit the wealthiest, that doesn't provide tax incentives and tax loopholes for Canada's wealthiest corporations to evade billions of dollars in taxes every single year. Beyond that, I also think our government has been able to prioritize funding on the military, for example, when it has found that to be a priority.

I think that investing in youth, investing in the next generation, adequately providing young people with the skills, education, and training they need to be successful in today's labour market should be the upmost priority. From a government that spoke a lot about youth issues in the last federal election, the young people expect and deserve more when it comes to funding for post-secondary education.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

You talked about the 2% cap on the PSSSP, something that has come up a number of times in this committee. Could we hear a bit more about that? Perhaps you could share some feedback, whether personal or systemic, concerning how this cap has impacted first nations, Inuit, and Métis people's ability to access their treaty right to education and their right to education, and what the repercussions are on indigenous people in communities

The Chair: You have about one minute.

Ms. Bilan Arte: I'll be very quick, then.

Removing the cap on the post-secondary student support program, which I would emphasize is a federal program for public funding of first nations' access to post-secondary education—a guaranteed treaty right, and something that is very much cited within the truth and reconciliation process, a process that this government has signed on to, historically and I think very proudly from the perspective of our federation—is a commitment that has yet to be actually fulfilled.

When we think about the lack of funding for first nations, Inuit, and Métis learners to access post-secondary education, this can look like the very reality that despite having had access to high school, despite having the grades, the will, and the passion to perhaps bring back a skill from university or college to their communities, too often indigenous learners are not given the opportunity to attend post-secondary education because of lack of those funds.

Beyond that, because of limited funding as well, band councils are making very difficult decisions with the very limited pool of funding, such that they are choosing to send students for smaller programs for shorter years. I've met too many young indigenous learners across the country who have been funded for perhaps a year or two of their education and who have been forced to drop out because they no longer have funds to allow them to actually finish their education.

That's a snapshot of those opportunities, but I think there is a missed opportunity to invest in the future of indigenous youth, particularly when we consider they are the fastest-growing population in our country today.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now we go over to MP Tassi for six minutes, please.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): I would like to begin by thanking each and every one of you today. I have to say that the presentations were absolutely fantastic and very inspiring for me as a member of this committee.

I'm hoping to get through three questions. My first two are going to go to Ms. Pace and Ms. Patterson, and they have to do with women in poverty, asking you to talk about your experience first of all concerning the issues and obstacles women are facing.

ESDC states that more women than men live in poverty. What are the factors that contribute to this?

● (0955)

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: Because part of our work includes the social services programs in Ontario, we see, all the time, the impact that poverty has on women. Really, it's the time off that they have to take when they have children, child care, making a decision between whether they pay for child care and transportation or stay home with the kids. Most communities have a wait-list for affordable child care, so often they're having to sacrifice careers.

There are unique circumstances that many women face if they're leaving or having to escape domestic violence. Other things are wait-lists, finding appropriate housing, safe housing that will take them and their children, often outside of their community.

Again, it comes back to wait-lists for affordable housing. Many communities have extensive wait-lists, even for people who are experiencing domestic or other types of violence. Women are making choices to stay in a situation that's not safe, or to go to emergency shelters. We know that often the conditions in emergency shelters are not the best.

When they're ready to get back into the workforce, what is that first opportunity? They may not have recent experience.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Right.

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: They may be in a new community. How do social services departments like ours help to facilitate that?

The example we provided of government providing those initial placements, those entry-level opportunities, particularly for women is a great example of a role we all could play. That can happen with any level of government.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay, I want to focus on the aspect of child care, because I know that affordability and finding good-quality child care is important. For my own experience, I lost my nephew at 18 months. He was in a private child care facility. This is extremely important for women.

What do you think that the federal government could do to assist women who are trying to access affordable, good-quality child care?

Ms. Sonia Pace: That's a very good question. Certainly, we would all love to see universal child care, but that gets to the fact of the cost and who's going to pay for all of that. Affordability is a factor.

I know in Peel we try very much to keep the rates down. We are the system managers for early learning and child care. Most municipalities have that role. That's something we play a key role in. Certainly, quality is a huge concern. We spend a lot of time ensuring that practices are such that quality is there.

We have to compliment our provincial government with respect to the Ministry of Education. There has been quite a modernization and transformation in the early years' sector to have consistent programming, etc.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: What do you recommend the federal government do with respect to this issue?

Ms. Sonia Pace: There certainly is a push to make child care more affordable. It doesn't mean it has to be universal. That will not happen overnight, but there certainly needs to be a dropping down of those rates. As you know, there are mortgage payments for the young folks.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay, thank you.

My next question is going to go to the Meticulon group. Everything that I've heard today with respect to the hiring of individuals with disabilities has been absolutely fantastic—from Mr. Wafer, with your contributions, as well as those from Mr. Stapleton.

I'm intrigued about what you suggested you do at Meticulon, this process that you've come up with. I think that's brilliant in order to determine the fit. We know success is going to depend on that fit and it working.

What can the federal government do to help businesses buy into hiring persons with disabilities? We know that if the fit is right, it's a win-win. What recommendations can you give to this committee in that regard?

Mr. Garth Johnson: Joy has some great insights about how it works. I think what the federal government can do is this. We can work together with other businesses that are engaged in this process, that are trying to get people with disabilities working and out of poverty, to document the real business returns. We can help work with the social services agencies and the other people who are already working to place people, to provide more resources around meeting real business needs with these folks. It's not just putting people into work because they need to work.

If the federal government were to reinvest some of the funds that we've put currently into some of the social services programs that we operate, and say, "Okay, let's work with people with disabilities

to not only find out what they want to do, but what they can do", then you could go to the business community and say, "Okay, here's what's happening. We've tooled these people up. They're educated, they're not educated, but here's their skill set. Here's what they can really do."

I'm on the board of the Canadian Association for Supported Employment. One of the biggest challenges that the social services agencies in this country have is actually finding the right job for the right person.

• (1000)

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Okay.

Mr. Garth Johnson: If there were more proof that was quantified and demonstrated that it works from a business perspective, that would motivate businesses to do this. The federal government has the resources to do massive studies to document and prove the business return for doing this. Then, if those trickle down into "How do you actually do this? Here are some resources. Here are best practices. Here is the way this really works in getting the right fit", that would be a resource that industry could use and take from the federal government, because the federal government has the resources to invest in that process.

The Chair: Actually—

Ms. Joy Hewitt (Chief Employment Coach, Meticulon): I think you've been echoing some of—

The Chair: —we're running out of time. Maybe we can get back to you guys.

Ms. Joy Hewitt: Sure.

The Chair: Sorry to cut you off, but we have to go MP Robillard next for six minutes.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by commending all the participants, especially you, Ms. Arte. As a former teacher, I want to say what a fine job you did on your presentation this morning. I encourage you to run as a candidate in the next federal election.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is that in your riding?

Mr. Yves Robillard: It could be. I'll be her mentor.

[*Translation*]

My question is for Ms. Pace or Ms. Patterson.

Federal initiatives such as labour market development agreements, Canada job fund agreements, labour market agreements for persons with disabilities, and the targeted initiative for older workers, meaning those between the ages of 55 and 64, are provided to Canadians to support their employment. Do these initiatives fully meet the needs of the community? Are there ways to improve them?

[English]

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: Thank you for the question.

Part of the challenge is that when you design programs nationally, they don't often take into account the local context, so when we suggest the need for federal, provincial, and municipal staff to work more closely together, it's really to address what's happening on the ground. Municipalities deliver services. We are closest to folks who have the day-to-day need, so when a citizen is accessing a federal program and then has to still engage with a provincial or municipal program, you see where the gaps are. You see what doesn't work.

Programs do work. They don't necessarily work for every population, but really what's needed is more of the local context so that programs offer enough flexibility to be able to adapt to what's happening locally.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: What successful strategies have you put in place to help members of vulnerable groups find employment? Why were the strategies effective?

[English]

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: The example that we provided in terms of the Region of Peel offering the model employer initiative is an example of success because it provides mostly for women who have been out of the workforce. They have trouble getting that job that pays a living wage. They may be able to get employment, but it's underemployment. They're getting part-time work, working a few hours, working contract. It doesn't meet their child care needs, so they have to turn it down.

That type of example is a good one that can be easily replicated anywhere as something that provides both the employment opportunity but also support, help, mentoring, life skills, understanding the workplace, really getting the foot in the door, and being able to have something current on the resumé.

The key to it, though, is the support, the hand-holding, and the mentoring that has to accompany that, so while the placement is six months or a year, and doesn't extend beyond that, it at least allows them to do a job search that matches their skills. It really is a way to get them some meaningful employment that meets their needs with the income they need and the opportunity they need.

For most people, it's the opportunity. They don't have the networks that you and I have, so for most jobs it's networking. Again, that's another example of what works, particularly for those who have had to struggle to get into the workforce.

● (1005)

Mr. Yves Robillard: Do I have more time?

The Chair: You have two minutes, approximately.

Mr. Yves Robillard: I will leave it then to my colleague, Mr. Ruimy.

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy, you have about a minute and 45 seconds.

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): Great, thanks.

Thank you very much everybody. I only have a short period of time, so I'm going to jump right into it.

Mr. Wafer, congratulations. I spent the last 30 years in the QSR industry. I know how tough it is and I think you're doing an amazing job.

The question I have for you is, how can we get more businesses on board? Are you involved with initiatives such as the Peel...? Maybe not necessarily that one, but are you involved with organizations like that? How do we encourage more businesses to get on board with this?

Mr. Mark Wafer: The unemployment rate has not changed really in the last 30 years, so we know that the initiatives that we've had to date have had limited success. Where we see the most success now is when we talk about this from an economic point of view. More importantly, who is going to communicate that message to businesses? It has to come from businesses themselves.

As a small business owner with 250 employees, I can have a conversation with the CEO of General Motors, for example. We understand each other. Yes, it's on a completely different scale, but we understand each other.

Three years ago, I co-founded Canadian Business SenseAbility. That was the first real national organization that was created for business by business. We're having those types of conversations with Canadian corporations.

Just a few days ago in Canada, Diversity 50 was announced. I happened to be at the reception, and the discussion around diversity in corporate Canada is still on the low-hanging fruit. They're still talking about women in executive positions. They're still talking about culture and LGBT. That's wonderful, but we need to move the conversation toward the other end of the spectrum of diversity, and that gets harder and harder to do.

Indigenous people, first nations, and of course, people with disabilities are largely being ignored. All of that is based on fear. CEOs tell me that all day long. They are very fearful of stepping into what they believe is a minefield.

Education is the key. Awareness is the key. Explain the message of the economic benefits of inclusion, not only to the company but to the economy at large and to the individual.

The Chair: Thank you sir. I'm sorry to cut you off. We do have to move on.

You have six minutes, MP Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): I want to thank the witnesses. I'm incredibly inspired today. I wanted particularly to have Meticulon, Mr. Stapleton, and Mr. Wafer here because of the work they have done in the area of employing disabled people.

I think there's nothing more reprehensible than the idea of writing people off, saying that someone is different, therefore, they can't work. We'll just send them a cheque, and they can sit in a rocking chair and go into a long-term care facility from age 25, and that's the way they will live the rest of their lives. That is appalling. That's why I'm so inspired by what you are doing, starting with Mr. Wafer, putting your money where your mouth is, paying people a full salary. This is not a subsidized wage. It is not below minimum wage. It is not a sheltered workshop, where you pay \$1.50 an hour. It is a full wage, doing the same work and getting the same money as everybody else. That should be our goal.

In Ontario, the government has made a decision to phase out sheltered workshops. It is a decision you supported, Mr. Wafer. I think this provides both an opportunity and a risk. The risk is that the private sector will do nothing to replace it, and the government will do nothing to replace it. Therefore, the people who would otherwise be going there will have no opportunity to do anything whatsoever except to go into some sort of day program, if they're lucky.

The opportunity, though, is that we can have more stories like yours, that instead of paying people \$1.50 an hour to do work, we will pay them a full wage that is consistent with the value that they're adding.

We have an opportunities fund in Ottawa. We have federally mandated labour market agreements for persons with disabilities. How do we marshal those programs to carry out a successful transformation of our labour market to get these people into full-paying, private sector jobs, like the ones you've created in your workplace?

• (1010)

Mr. Mark Wafer: I think what we need to do is repurpose the resources that we already have, the opportunities fund being a start, federal-provincial transfer funds being the other. The federal government sets the rules. It's the government that sets the rules, and then departments within the provinces, such as the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, follow suit based on what the federal government is saying.

It's very important that the federal government set the tone and set the intent of what these monies are to be used for, and how we do interviews and how we educate employers, so that when we do shut down the sheltered workshops, 50% of people who are in sheltered workshops today, who are employable, actually find a job. We can only do that if we open doors. We can't do it by increasing social services or increasing taxpayers' money. None of that will have any effect on this. The only thing that is going to work is if employers see that there's a valid reason to open their doors.

There's one important thing I want to mention about the sheltered workshop, and that is that human beings tend to judge people who have a disability. It's normal; we all do it. I do it. I see somebody who comes into my business with a disability and I do a sort of litmus test. That's even someone like me who has a lot of experience. I think I know the capacity and the capability of that person who's coming through the door. I've hired 145 people in the past 21 years, and I was wrong 145 times about the capability and the capacity of those people, especially if the individual had an intellectual disability.

We do not see the capacity and capability of people who have intellectual disabilities until they receive a paycheque, and that is why people with Down's syndrome and autism are languishing in these sheltered workshops, because nobody has yet seen the capability of those people. That's why we have to get them into the workforce.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's what Meticulon is doing, unlocking this hidden genius.

How do we get employers to hire the kinds of people who you bring to the workforce, Meticulon? That's for Garth or Joy, whoever.

Mr. Garth Johnson: We have to start with what they really need. We have to start with where they have problems in their company that people with gifts, like people with autism or people with Down's syndrome or other things, can contribute to. That's a conversation that is bigger than, "Hey, let's do some good."

When we began we got sent to the corporate social responsibility departments of every company that we tried to pitch to. It was big. We didn't want to talk to them. We wanted to talk to the operations people and line managers. It's been said again and again today that education is the key, but it's not education about disabilities; it's not even education necessarily about what autism is or any other challenges that people with disabilities have. It's education from the people who are in the trenches doing this who have had success, both from the self-advocates, as well as from people who are working.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Garth, if—

Ms. Joy Hewitt: And I think—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry, go ahead.

I just have one last question after that. Do I have time?

The Chair: Thirty seconds.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Can I just direct this question to Joy, then?

Ms. Joy Hewitt: Yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Stapleton has written an amazing paper called “Zero Dollar Linda”, about a disabled person going into the workforce and actually being almost no better off, in some cases worse off, because of all of the clawbacks and the taxes and punishment that the system metes out on somebody for the crime of working. Everybody should read that paper and it should be submitted to our committee records.

Has Meticulon seen the pernicious effect of benefits, clawbacks, and taxes on autistic people attempting to enter the workforce?

• (1015)

The Chair: We're out of time, but I'm going to give you a few seconds just to come up with a brief answer on that one.

Ms. Joy Hewitt: Yes, we've definitely seen that here in Alberta. We are trying to work around that, at Meticulon, for people who are on supported incomes, by keeping their benefits available to them, but it cuts back their possibility of earning potential.

I just wanted to make a quick note to that. I think that job-fit analysis piece is going to be the key component for finding people successful positions in work that they not only enjoy doing but have phenomenal abilities to continue doing for different businesses and different sectors. It's finding something like Meticulon in different niches.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have Mr. Ruimy for six minutes.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you again. It's back to me.

Just as a side note, my younger brother is intellectually challenged and working with the government and the private sector. He's had a job for the longest while where he has been able to excel, and that showed in his whole mentality. He was prouder. He was able to go out and do something, so I agree with you that it's up here that we have to educate ourselves better than that.

I'm going to focus on the Peel poverty reduction strategy. Would you consider your program a success?

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: Yes. We have several initiatives, such as transportation, for example, which we've subsidized and are helping people with. Yes, it's a success.

Are these programs sustainable is the question.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: The answer I wanted was to hear was that yes, you are being successful in it.

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: Yes.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: You've mentioned a lot of things: your three-year plan, safe housing affordability, transportation, and economic and food security.

When we look at poverty reduction strategies, this is actually the first time I'm actually seeing something, and I love that on your website you have a giant circle with everything in there. When I look at this, I look at the challenge that we, as a national government, are facing, because there are so many moving parts here.

Along that line, if the federal government were to develop a comprehensive poverty reduction plan, how would we take what you've done, with those unfortunate challenges when you first start-

ed because everybody was against you, and how would you advise us as a government? What could we bring to the table?

Ms. Sonia Pace: It has to be a shared goal, a common goal that everybody has together. In the Region of Peel, we are an upper-tier government. There's the Region of Peel, and there are the three municipalities: Brampton, Mississauga, and Caledon. But collectively we have a strategic plan, which has just been put in place this last year, that goes out for 20 years.

This council has put priorities together. There are about five or six priorities, but the first one is reducing poverty. We have engaged our mayors and all the local and the regional politicians, along with our core capacity-building agencies, such as the United Way, our school boards, etc. The big stakeholders in the community are on the same page. That speaks volumes to where we want to go with this initiative; our priority is that.

Everything we're doing in social services in our human services department is focused on reducing poverty. The other one that we also have is to reduce our wait-list for affordable housing. Our deliverology is focused specifically on that.

There is the will to do this, and the energies are going to it.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Where is that will coming from? Is it coming from Peel poverty reduction? Who's driving this?

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: I think a big part of it is the community. The community has said that this is important, and we can't ignore it anymore. All of the players, then, the organizations and the stakeholders that are required to move the needle on it, have to work together. You can't leave the people out, including the people with the lived experience.

• (1020)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: You're already into this, but has there been resistance from the provincial or the federal government, or have they willingly said, let's jump on board?

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: Initially, I think the provincial government also identified it as a priority, and their call to action was an opportunity for local communities too to mobilize. Once there was this recognition provincially that we needed to tackle this together, it was easier for us to come on board.

Now that the federal government has said there's going to be a national strategy, that's just further impetus to say this is important. With those folks whom we haven't been able to engage—some folks from the business community, for example—I think it's easier now to open the door and to have that conversation, to say that we're really concerned about people who are not able to stay in the labour market, who are not able for such long periods of time, and to ask what role we can all play.

We all need to be there. It's not just government and it's not just community organizations.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: How do we duplicate the drive that started off with your community? How does the federal government put that into this strategy? We just can't say, "Okay, you guys have the drive; go out and do it."

How do we duplicate what you're doing as part of our strategy?

Ms. Sonia Pace: I think that, as Mark said, you're going to set the tone with your policy or the mandate of your national focus on poverty. With that, you will have to ask us, the various levels of government, "What's your plan? In x amount of time, bring forward what you've done to move the needle." We have to be accountable.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Can you talk to us about measurables? How are you measuring your success?

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: In the plan, we did lay out, over three years, some of the things we want to achieve. What is the contribution we can make?

The challenge you're going to face, that we all face, of course, is that poverty requires everyone to participate. How do you account for your contribution? Can we say that the Region of Peel reduced poverty by 5% or 10%? No. Have we created some specific interventions that help people? Yes.

On the things we're measuring, we've had to be careful about attributing more than is actually there. You have to build in the accountability from the beginning, identify those things that you want to tackle, which really should be based on the needs, the gaps that the provincial and local governments.... What's missing from those plans, and then what are some targets? Provincially, in Ontario, it was reducing child poverty by 25% in five years.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Can I ask just one quick one?

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: You mentioned community benefit agreements. Would you be able to submit a copy of that just so we have it on file?

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: Absolutely.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go over to MP Warawa. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

To the witnesses, this is a very interesting morning, and thank you for your testimony.

My focus is on seniors, and the unique needs that they are faced with, and the surprising disabilities they did not have previously, but now have. Maybe it's the loss of a partner, a spouse, a loved one, and their world has changed and they find themselves in poverty, with maybe some challenges and disabilities. How do we help them? The focus at this point in our study is employment, education, and training.

I was quite impressed with the testimony of each of you, actually, but Meticulon particularly, focusing on those with challenges of autism, and the genius within these young people. If we can see

where their talents are, their skills, their interests, their love, and then put that to work and put the square peg in the square hole, and have a fit....

Can any of you comment on how we can help seniors in maybe the last 20 years of their lives, where they've been out of the workforce but because they need to, they have to get back into the workforce for their own dignity and well-being, but also to get a paycheck? Can anybody comment on how we can help Canadian seniors who find themselves in vulnerable positions?

● (1025)

Mr. John Stapleton: I would like to make a comment here from Toronto, if I could.

The clawbacks that we find on seniors' benefits are quite profound. For example, under the guaranteed income supplement, you might be aware that one can only earn \$3,500 before benefits are clawed back. With the changes that have come in this year, those clawback rates go as high as 92% when somebody is just making a third of the minimum wage.

When you think of older people working in the Tim Hortons and in the Walmarts, etc., those people are facing a situation where they can only work from January to St. Patrick's Day before they start to lose 50% to 92% of their guaranteed income supplement benefits. One assumes that they'll be receiving the guaranteed income supplement because they need the money that badly. That's an area where you could certainly start, by raising that \$3,500 exemption so that seniors would be able to work and actually keep a bit of the money that they get.

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: We're currently working with the Canada Revenue Agency on tax benefits and making sure that folks are receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. We assume that everyone in Canada is getting all the child benefits, the working income tax benefit, the OAS, for example. We are finding that this is not true, that there are people who are falling through the cracks.

We're just embarking on this initiative now, but we think that what it does is allow the conversation to happen with seniors, who are sometimes isolated. Once we figure out whether there is money that they are entitled to—that's the first step—are there other things, such as even having a conversation about the implication for their benefits of their going into the workforce? It opens the door to other conversations and to providing supports.

We recently met with some seniors. For them, isolation is a big factor, even just getting out, whether it's to paid or to volunteer work. Also it's supportive housing, not wanting to leave where they are or to leave the community in which they are, and sometimes they have to because there is no affordable housing in their community. Those are the things that compound the issues of income.

How do we provide the aging in place, allow people to get the supports they need where they are, in a place in which they feel safe and comfortable, and then make sure that, if there's money through the federal tax program that they should be getting, they are getting it?

Mr. Mark Warawa: I just have a quick comment that we really need to seriously look at training in geriatrics and in palliative care for our aging population, so that people can age in place. There are huge job opportunities in the future.

The Chair: Thanks, Mark.

We'll go over to Ms. Ashton for three minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Great. Thank you very much.

I'd like to go back to you, Ms. Arte. It strikes me that while we're having some really powerful conversations here, obviously the goal of this committee is to bring forward recommendations to the federal government. We certainly want to encourage work that's happening on the ground, but ultimately our mandate is to instruct the federal government on the leadership it ought to take.

Bringing that focus back, then, Ms. Arte, at a national forum we organized on the impact of precarious work on the millennial generation—a trend that we know is becoming more and more serious—we heard about the unique compounding factors that millennials face, including rising student debt and the high cost of tuition fees. We heard one of the speakers state at this forum, and I'm paraphrasing, that we understand that businesses require significant investment up front, so we gear a significant amount of our programs and financial support to businesses when they are starting out; however, we don't apply that same logic to people, and particularly young people.

I'm wondering whether you agree with that statement and what you believe is the most effective and efficient use of resources—again, federal resources—when it comes to funding the post-secondary education needs that young Canadians have.

• (1030)

Ms. Bilan Arte: Thank you for that question.

I think that, again, budgets are about priorities. There is an opportunity for a federal government with the power and the resources to fully fund a universal system of post-secondary education to do just that. When we talk about education and training, skills development, and development of an entire generation, we're talking about giving young people the same opportunities that were afforded to generations before us to be able to adequately achieve the degrees we need to be competitive in today's labour market.

We've talked about some of the stats around the requirements for a university or college-level degree, just to be successful in today's society, but when we think of us in the long term, with the compounding impacts of not being able to find stable, non-precarious, and long-term employment—as a generation of young people that have often been forced to take on short-term contracts and a lot of unpaid internships, non-remunerated work—and the expectation and standard that has been set by employers, young people are not going to have access to the same entry-level positions that afforded stability to a generation before us.

The long-term impacts of that can look like young people going back to live at home, taking longer to be able to think about starting a family, not buying a home, and not being innovative and thinking about starting their own business because they have too much debt to be able to think about investing in their own ideas.

I think there are very long-term impacts that inhibit the success of this generation, if the governments continue to refuse to provide the investments that our public post-secondary education needs to provide young people with the opportunities, skills, and training that they deserve for a better future.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that insight. Quite honestly, if you're our future we're going to be in good hands, so thank you.

We have almost exactly 12 minutes left, so in the spirit of giving every side an opportunity for some final comments or questions, we're going to give everyone about four minutes. If we can keep it directly at four minutes, we should be able to end on time.

We're going to start with MP Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

I'd like to go back to Mr. Stapleton and his important work on marginal effective tax rates for the lowest-income people. I had the Library of Parliament do a study on the marginal effective tax rates of disabled people earning minimum wage.

Marginal effective tax rates, for anyone listening who is not familiar with the term, means the amount of money people will lose in taxes and benefit clawbacks on the next dollar they earn. So if an Alberta-based disabled person earning minimum wage, who works 40 hours a week, were to get an extra dollar raise, he or she would lose \$1.15. If the person decided to work and earn, let's say, another \$100 in a week, he or she would lose \$115 in combined benefits, clawbacks, and taxes. In other words, the effective tax rate on the next dollar earned is well over 100%.

I remember the leader of the NDP said he thought it was confiscation if someone would pay a tax rate of over 50%. He was referring to millionaires at that time. But somehow we think it's acceptable that the poorest and most vulnerable people effectively pay a tax rate that is well over 100%.

My question is for you, Mr. Stapleton, because you have been pretty much the leading voice against this injustice. Do you believe the Government of Canada, the federal government, has the jurisdictional right to lead a solution to this problem with other levels of government, given that these effective tax rates are the result of combined policies at multiple levels of government?

Mr. John Stapleton: Yes, I think it's only the federal government that has the position of leadership, that can look to other levels of government, whether it be the municipalities or the provinces, and look at all those programs together. They're all in silos and they all stick to their own knitting.

It sounds very good on the one hand, but when you have taxation at the federal and provincial levels that combines benefit clawbacks that reduce every dollar that people get—especially from earnings, thinking of the discussion this morning, that result in clawbacks and taxes of over a dollar on a dollar—something is wrong; something is broken. I think it's only the federal government that can actually convene all of the provinces and municipalities and those various programs that do that.

I'll give a plug to the late Mr. Flaherty, who made sure by talking to the provinces that the RDSP, the registered disability savings plan, was not clawed back by other social assistance programs. The same is true of the working income tax benefit that was brought in in 2007, so you see good examples where care was really taken to do this. For those who believe that the federal government can't have influence, there are two particular, pungent examples of where the federal government did lean on the provinces and made sure that those clawbacks did not take place.

• (1035)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The working income tax credit effectively gives people a raise of about 25% on income earnings between, I think, \$3,000 and roughly \$12,000; and then it is also clawed back at a rate of 15% as you get closer to \$20,000 in earnings. It has to be clawed back at some level or else you'd be giving it to millionaires.

But do you have any suggestions, Mr. Stapleton, on how we can improve the working income tax benefit so that it always leaves people better off by working?

The Chair: We're actually over time, but I'll give you about 10 seconds if you have a thought there.

Mr. John Stapleton: It's just to convene all the provinces and make sure that all of the clawbacks together—that 15%, which of course has to be there—ensure people always receive a benefit for each marginal dollar earned.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go over to MP Sangha.

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

My first question will be to Sonia Pace. I live in Brampton and I had my business in Brampton. I know that area is a growing community, the whole Peel, Mississauga, Brampton area of Canada. Thank you very much for coming today and giving us information regarding the Peel region.

With the growing communities such as new immigrants, and we have all the youth problems, and we have all the problems regarding seniors, what steps would you see as Peel region priorities? As a poverty reduction group, what steps would you take for vulnerable groups like immigrants and others? What are the major steps you are taking?

Ms. Sonia Pace: I'll speak to one group, and it's our recent newcomers, the Syrian refugees. We have a working group together that's knitted by a number of settlement agencies, etc., and faith communities, and whatnot. We are now entering basically what we're calling “month 13”. Many of our newcomers have been here

for the one year and have received the federal allowance for the first year, but many are not ready to move on. They've not been able to find employment, etc., for various reasons, and I won't take up time with that. However, this is where we are talking about the transition. There is a federal allowance right now, but after the first year, which is the 12th month, for 13, they have to move into another form of social assistance.

One of the key areas that we're working on is making that transition as seamless as possible, because it's not seamless the way it is now from federal to municipal. We are actually going out there and speaking to all these groups and the faith leaders and meeting with the agencies to be able to successfully transition. If someone loses that opportunity of that one-month allowance, they'll lose their housing, and then we're into shelters. The trickle-down effect is immense.

Those are the kinds of things that we're talking about. Different silos and different levels of government have to talk to each other and make those transitions smoother to not put people in a completely traumatic situation where they aren't housed, etc. That's one example of one group that we're working with right now.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Thank you.

My question is for Adaoma Patterson. You have talked about the local level, those who are working in the communities at the local level, and at provincial, municipal, and federal governments. I agree with you that without connecting with the communities, you can't make any progress in this field.

At the same level, what would you suggest the federal government do for their part in this in the communities?

• (1040)

Ms. Adaoma C. Patterson: I think a big part of it is looking at what's missing, and what's in common. Most communities have wait-lists for housing. You recently launched a national housing strategy, so what will that do at the provincial and local levels to make sure that people have adequate housing? There are two key areas for people who are experiencing poverty; they are income and then housing. What role does the federal government play in addressing those issues of income? It's the income supports. It's removing the silos, as John talked about, in terms of the marginal tax rate. It's working with the provincial and municipal governments to make sure that your rules around child benefits aren't in conflict with the provincial rules around child benefits.

That silo thing seems like a small thing, but it's huge. For decades, we've worked in our boxes at different levels of government. We rarely come out of those boxes. You have rules around EI; we have rules around social assistance and disability. Who do those rules benefit? Why is it that it's so hard for people to get out of poverty or to move forward? It's because of the rules we put in place.

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to move forward. I'm sorry to cut you off.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: The federal government is working towards that—

The Chair: MP Sangha, I'm sorry. We're long over time.

Ms. Ashton, you have four minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

Again, thank you to all of our witnesses.

Ms. Arte, I have two questions for you.

First, I'm hoping you could speak to the most important actions the federal government could and should take to ensure Canadians get access to the education and training needed to succeed in the job market.

Second, in addition to those concrete recommendations, I'm wondering if you could also perhaps begin by telling us how seriously we should be taking both the demands being made by the Canadian Federation of Students and the reality facing our generation today.

Ms. Bilan Arte: Thank you for that.

To start with your second question, when I shared my own experience of access to post-secondary education, I shared it not because I think that scholarships are a sustainable model for ensuring access to low-income communities. I shared it because I want to draw attention to the fact that I likely wouldn't be here had it not been for the removal of that barrier.

I don't think that we need to get to a place where we're sustaining our education system, particularly for those who are the most marginalized or the most low income and who come from backgrounds like my own, so that the opportunity or chance given depends on a risk such as whether or not you're able to access a scholarship. I think this idea and denotation of a deserving poor has meant that an entire generation who looked just like me wasn't able to access university or college. I think that is a particularly heart-breaking story for our country.

In particular, in thinking about the obligations our government has to indigenous learners and youth, I'm going to quote this number again. The Assembly of First Nations estimated that 10,000 students were on a wait-list for funding to post-secondary education. These are 10,000 indigenous youth who had the grades, the passion, and the will to attain a post-secondary education and who were failed by this government when it came to access to funding.

Our government is a wealthy government. There are 27 countries around the world that have fully-funded, public, universal access to post-secondary education and have prioritized funding for youth. Our government is also a signatory to numerous international conventions that guarantee the right to education as a fundamental human right.

When it comes to what we can do, this idea of free education is not new to Canada. We have a working system of free college-level education in Quebec, and we've seen the benefits of it in that province. We also already have an understanding of universality when we talk about health care. We understand that if I get hurt in Saskatchewan, I shouldn't have to pay more or less for care depending on which province I end up being in at the end of whatever journey my injury has taken me on.

I think this patchwork system that we have around access to post-secondary education means that, disproportionately, young people who come from marginalized backgrounds, low-income backgrounds like my own, are the ones who are ultimately falling through the cracks of a system that is not designed to uplift them.

When we talk about student financial aid, we're talking about a system today that primarily relies on providing more debt instead of upfront grants and upfront access. We need to completely overhaul this system. We need a universal one. We need to abolish tuition fees. We need a dedicated transfer to post-secondary education. We need to meet the provinces' investment through the creation of a national post-secondary education act that guarantees that, from British Columbia to Newfoundland and Labrador, young people can go to university and college and pursue their dreams of being who they want to be and contributing to the society as they would like to.

• (1045)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, I have to wrap it up there. Before I do so, I offer a huge thank you to everyone who came out today. This was an exceptional panel, and I think I speak for everybody here. We learned a lot and definitely took some inspirational notes today.

Before I close, I just want to advise the committee of two things.

First, we have attempted—and I don't know if we were successful or not—to arrange a shuttle to greet us, timing-wise. To those of you who would like to avail yourselves of it, I hope there will be a shuttle waiting for us. It is a slippery day out there.

Second, we're obviously not going to get into it right now, but I can inform this committee that we have received approval for the full amount of our request for travel—good news there.

Mr. Warawa, you have a point.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you.

Today, coming to 1 Wellington was particularly a challenge. I have a mobility disability and the buses weren't available. If we can stay in 228, I think it works, or in Centre Block, because there are limited buses coming here. We came here so we could be on camera, but I think normally if we can stay in 228, or in Centre Block, it makes it easier for everyone.

The Chair: I agree.

Unfortunately, Centre Block is not an option, if we are going to have video conferencing as well. My hope is that the new facilities are going to be opening up shortly. I don't know if we have a timeline on that, but that would make life much easier to go to the other Wellington address in the future. I do agree. That's why we arranged for the shuttle as well.

Thank you everybody.

Again, thank you to all the committee members and all the techs and the folks that help me out to my left and right. Thank you.

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