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• (1610)
[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)):
Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome.

I call to order meeting number seven of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

This is a hybrid meeting. Some members are appearing in person in the parliamentary precinct and others are appearing remotely.

I remind all members to please speak at a pace slow enough for interpretation to keep up. The clerk will be tracking raised hands and keeping a speakers list, if needed.

Today we will be continuing our study on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system.

I will take this opportunity to welcome our witnesses.

In the first panel, we have Canadian Immigration Connections, represented by Manprit Aujla-Grewal, immigration consultant. We also have the City of Greater Sudbury, represented by Meredith Armstrong, acting director, economic development. We have the Sudbury Multicultural and Folk Arts Association, represented by Bela Ravi, president.

In the second panel, we have Robert Thiessen, as an individual. From the Hope Welfare Society we have Amit Kumar Verma, lawyer. From Collège Boréal, we have Daniel Giroux, president, as well as Baptiste Alain Bourquardez and Marc Despatie.

I welcome all the witnesses.

The witnesses will have five minutes for their opening remarks.

We will start with Canadian Immigration Connections. I welcome Manprit Aujla-Grewal. You have five minutes.

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal (Immigration Consultant, Canadian Immigration Connections): Thank you, Madam Chair. My name is Manprit Aujla-Grewal and it's an honour to appear before the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

By way of background, I started my career in immigration with the IRCC in 2005, as a service delivery agent at the case-processing centre in Vegreville, Alberta. At that time, I processed in-Canada extensions for visitors, students and workers. I also processed in-Canada spousal sponsorships. After my work experience with IRCC, I went on to work with the Alberta immigrant nominee program, with the Ontario provincial nominee program and with the University of Alberta, as an international student adviser. In 2011, I

incorporated my company, Canadian Immigration Connections, and have been an immigration consultant for almost a decade.

COVID-19 has presented unexpected challenges for IRCC, and of course, for individuals submitting applications to IRCC. COVID-19 has been difficult for individuals looking to reunite with their partners. I can tell you from my first-hand experience working with IRCC that when a reduction in processing times is the goal, additional resources are required to achieve that goal. Processing times for spousal sponsorships will definitely require attention.

I can also tell you from my work as an immigration consultant that when the processing of spousal sponsorships is kept within Canada, these files are processed very quickly. I have seen spousal sponsorships processed in as little as four months, when the path of the file was from the case-processing centre in Sydney, Nova Scotia, to the processing centre in Mississauga. When files are sent overseas for the finalization of processing, we are looking at timelines of up to 12 months or sometimes longer. Therefore, we need to keep the vast majority of spousal sponsorships processing within Canada. This could be achieved through a dedicated and specifically trained business unit within Canada.

Recently IRCC announced updated procedures with regard to visitor visa applications from individuals who have reached stage one approval on their spousal sponsorships. A way to apply this efficiently would be to allow individuals to submit their visitor visa application with their spousal sponsorship. This is already being done with in-Canada spousal sponsorships and their ability to apply for open work permits. COVID-19 has left many parents and children uncertain about when they will be able to reunite. It appears IRCC has not been able to strike the right balance with regard to the parent sponsorship program, as demand has always exceeded supply. We can take the current lottery system and as others have suggested, we could put in a weighted draw to those sponsors who have entered multiple times but been unsuccessful.

COVID-19 has also left many deserving international students with challenges outside of their control. For many international students, the work experience accumulated while on the post-grad work permit is essential for them to qualify for a permanent residency option. Post-grad work permit-holders unable to find employment as new graduates and facing the challenges of COVID-19, those stranded abroad and recipients of CERB or EI would find their permanent residency options limited. Allowing post-grad work permit-holders a one-time, one-year extension would give these individuals additional time to gain the required work experience to possibly qualify for permanent residency.

I also believe that targeted draws for the Canadian experience class under express entry should continue, as this allows those individuals already in Canada a chance to be selected.

Those are my comments today. I welcome any questions the committee may have. Thank you once again for this opportunity.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you for your testimony.

Now we will move on to Meredith Armstrong representing the City of Greater Sudbury. She is the acting director of economic development.

Ms. Armstrong, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Meredith Armstrong (Acting Director, Economic Development, City of Greater Sudbury): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

It is an honour to be asked to present with you today.

I am Meredith Armstrong. I am the acting director of economic development for the City of Greater Sudbury, which is a beautiful city of about 165,000 people about four hours north of Toronto, in northern Ontario. I'm sure MP Serré has boasted of our beauty many times.

We are very proud of our long-standing history in immigration from the roots of our community. We are also very proudly in the Robinson-Huron Treaty and on Anishinabe land, and we try to balance these considerations on an ongoing basis. We also have the third-largest francophone community outside of Quebec.

Given this foundation, immigration has been very important to us. We have been a long-standing host of the local immigration partnership. Bela has been a great partner, and you'll hear from her very shortly. We have also been officially designated, through IRCC in 2019, a welcoming community to francophone immigrants and newcomers. All of these have been very important stepping stones.

On top of this, we have faced a labour gap, and we have a great need for new talent. This has been a long-standing issue. We have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. This has been compounded by COVID.

I would like to say that we are relatively new in terms of being this close to current immigration processes. Our city and our community has really committed to extensive training, because—as you know—immigration is a very complicated sector.

We are a proud participant in the rural and northern immigration pilot program, one of 11 communities across the country, and this has really ramped up our game.

We work very hard to make sure that we're managing expectations because immigration is only one piece of a larger puzzle to address our labour market needs. Within that, the rural and northern immigration pilot is one tool. It's not necessarily the fastest, but it certainly gives us an opportunity to engage employers in a new way, and to engage candidates, who may not otherwise fit very well into an express entry program, in a new way.

COVID has created challenges for all of us. COVID makes it difficult to address all of the administrative pieces for the rural and northern immigration pilot, RNIP. It makes it difficult for us to get out to employers to do face-to-face site meetings and to address their issues.

We were lucky enough in the early stages of the immigration pilot to establish the expectation that we would draw from newcomers and immigrants who are already in the community. This allows us to tap into a really wonderful community of international students at our two colleges and our university. This also helps to establish the ultimate goal of our work, which is retention in the community. We are not a major metropolitan area, but we have a nice balance of quality of life and larger city things going on.

COVID has also made it difficult for some of the administrative pieces. Language testing has been delayed in some cases.

I think it was well stated by the first witness that the reunification of family members continues to be brought forward to us as a concern. Also, the fairness of a lottery system has been questioned. I think the question of whether or not to tweak it would be of great interest. The backlog obviously also creates real issues.

As a municipality, I would say that we have been really thrilled with the support we've been provided by our IRCC contacts. We've had a really great response time. We have a dedicated service channel that has made all the difference because employers are looking for hundreds and hundreds of people at a time, and we can only process people at a certain level to ensure the integrity of the system.

Finally, in terms of messaging, I would say that there are two key things we are working on in Greater Sudbury.

First of all, we recognize systemic racism throughout our community. It makes it difficult for employers who may otherwise not be aware of opportunities to bring in brand new talents, of the importance of new perspectives and of becoming a welcoming community. We're working with our local immigration partnership to start to address some of those pieces.

• (1620)

The other thing is that we are working to ensure people understand that immigration is a crucial piece of our country's economic recovery plan. This is not so easy when people turn around and ask how we can say immigration is so important when we're looking at the layoff of hundreds and hundreds of people.

I think it's really important to be unified in our—

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Ms. Armstrong, your time is up.

You will have an opportunity as we go into the round of questioning.

Now I will move on to Bela Ravi, the president of Sudbury Multicultural and Folk Arts Association.

Madam Ravi, you have five minutes for your opening remarks, please. You can start.

Mrs. Bela Ravi (President, Sudbury Multicultural and Folk Arts Association): Meredith, I could have given you a few of my minutes.

I want to introduce myself. I'm the president of the Sudbury Multicultural and Folk Arts Association.

I've been in this community for 25 years. I'll tell you all it's a gem. I won't say any more than that. I'm sure Marc has informed you of that.

I'm also part of the local immigration partnership. We're showing how immigration matters, the benefits of immigration, and of course the cultural aspect also. Plus over 30% of our population is over 60 years old. We need that immigration.

We are trying to retain our foreign students here and hoping the process is going to give them some leeway. As Ms. Aujla-Grewal said, they cannot get the hours for their work experience to apply for the PR card. They are at a standstill. It is an emotional and financial drain on them, more so now because of COVID. We're hoping we can help. We get a lot of those questions at Sudbury Multicultural and would like to be able to help these individuals.

I'm part of the India-Canada Association. I'm very much involved with all the colleges and universities, and particularly with students.

I'm looking forward to listening to you all, to seeing how we can make this a better process to help our community grow and help us retain people in our community.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ravi.

Now we will start with our first round of questioning.

Mr. Hallan, you have six minutes for your round of questioning.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for appearing at our committee today.

Ms. Aujla-Grewal, in my constituency office, and I'm sure most of the other ones as well, we hear complaints about the length of time it takes to process some of the study, work or TRV applications. In your vast experience—you said you work for IRCC as well—what can IRCC do to provide a standardized processing time across these different visas? How do you see that panning out?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I continue to see a wide range of processing times even within my office. I think we can take two approaches to this problem. Similarly to what I suggested for the spousal sponsorships, perhaps a dedicated business unit within Canada is also required for overseas processing of certain lines of business. The other option I can think of is IRCC perhaps redistributing work among different visa offices so processing times across different visa offices are somewhat kept in line.

• (1625)

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Again, given your experience, what are your thoughts on permanent residency options for people we call low-skilled. For people in the trucking industry who are providing such essential services right now, or people in the health care field who are also providing life-saving services, how do you see a permanent residency path for them?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: From my experience with the different immigration departments, as well as being an immigration consultant, COVID-19 has revealed that all skill levels are equally important, low-skilled, high-skilled, are all important. From truck drivers to hotel cleaners to meat processors and those providing services in health care, Canadians rely on temporary foreign workers for many essential services. These temporary foreign workers come as individuals on post-grad work permits. They may be in Canada on working holiday work permits or they may be tied to a labour market impact assessment, to name just a few. I think all levels are really important as Canadians and permanent residents are reluctant to take certain occupations. For example, a long-haul truck driver has an extremely difficult job and not many Canadians or permanent residents are necessarily lining up for those positions.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Many of our constituents really appreciate your worth, especially for those long-haul truck drivers who we saw in the beginning of the pandemic weren't even able to use washrooms or drive-throughs. They were having many difficulties, and they were going coast to coast risking their lives to provide life-saving supplies.

All these jobs carry an amount of dignity. They take pride in their job, and we take pride in knowing they're doing that job. Thank you for that.

What type of permanent residency program, if you can formulate one, do you see for those people who are providing those services right now?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: Previously, the Canadian experience class seems to be a good fit for these low-skill occupations, as they're called. The Canadian experience class used to be a pass or fail system in which individuals with Canadian work experience, and a designated level of English or French, were able to apply directly to IRCC for permanent residency.

Individuals with Canadian study under work experience, combined with good language skills, are shown to integrate into the Canadian labour market more successfully than those that do not possess these attributes. The previous reiteration of Canadian experience class is something that could be considered for these low-skill occupations.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Do you think that the one-time extension that you talked about should apply to all the post-grad work permit-holders?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: First, an application would have to be made from those individuals who are interested, because not all post-grad work permit-holders may require extra time. Factors such as when the post-grad work permit was issued, and how much time is remaining are factors that can be considered. If the post-grad work permit was issued in 2020, and it is only a one year post-grad work permit, then definitely, I can see where an extension would come in handy. There would be a few factors that can be considered, but generally speaking, yes.

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. Serré, for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the three witnesses for the information they have given us today. It will be a great help to us in determining how to move forward.

My first question is for Meredith Armstrong, from the City of Greater Sudbury.

● (1630)

[English]

I want to first thank you for the leadership you provided to the city in working closely with RC.

You mentioned during your presentation that you have over 2,000 international students, and that you want to keep them in the community. You also launched some of the new innovation programs like the rural immigration pilot project in the area.

How has that benefited the region? What recommendations would you have for us, at the federal level, to make some changes to the program to make sure we look at meeting the labour needs in the community?

Ms. Meredith Armstrong: We are still in the first year of our participation in the rural and northern pilot program, but I have to

say that being part of a network with 10 other municipalities of all shapes and sizes has been one of the biggest points of value of our participation. As I mentioned and as you've reiterated, we do draw on international students.

I think, because the program is designed for communities that don't otherwise have the same numbers of newcomers coming each year, we need to make sure that these communities are supported with the funding and the staffing to ensure that they have the staff who are able to process the applications, ensure the program integrity and also just be available. We received hundreds and hundreds of emails just in Sudbury before the program even launched. That continues to be the case. Those are not only from candidates but from employers.

We've worked hard to make sure, as I mentioned, that we are managing those expectations. It takes a long time to meet a candidate, get to know that person and get to know their family situation, spouse and children. We often look for families with children because they have a much higher likelihood of residing in the community over the long term. So again, it takes time and it takes people. When you keep the same people in those roles over the longer term, because these are relationships.... We take it very seriously that we are affecting the destinies of individuals who believe strongly in taking a jump out of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver and spreading out into other parts of the country.

I think the opportunity to be part of a program has to come with the right funding and support to ensure that the system is in place over a longer term.

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Armstrong, thank you for that, because that leads to my second question to Bela Ravi.

Really, the work that you've been doing in the community for the past 25 years has been amazing. Thank you so much for the work like the Saturday night dances, and the wonderful food.

When we look at your experience, in the past, the multicultural centre used to deal with settlement agencies. The previous Conservative government cut the Immigration RC office in Sudbury. I want to get a sense from you as to what could we do better to support settlement agencies in a community, so that we could attract and retain more immigration levels all across greater Sudbury.

Mrs. Bela Ravi: Thank you for this opportunity. Being at the multicultural centre over the last 15 years, I've been a part of the board there and I have seen the funding cuts that have come in. For us to maintain what we have for the ongoing numbers that we're getting now.... We are very happy to get the numbers, but our funding has been cut down drastically.

Like Meredith said, we need the funding and the personnel to have that relationship to retain and provide the services these people need. My request to you is that our funding get reinstated to a point where we can do what we would like to do. We at Sudbury Multicultural right now have a staff of really one and a half. We have two people who work four days a week to provide the services needed, so that has become a challenge for us.

I hate to say that everyone says we're always looking for money, but that's what lets us provide the services that are needed. We look really look forward to the numbers going up, but....

• (1635)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

Do you have any advice or recommendations for how our government can support you, support the municipality to attract newcomers and integrate them more in the community? You talk about racism. How do we try to do better together and make it more welcoming?

Mrs. Bela Ravi: One of the things that I have heard having conversations with universities and colleges here is that one of the people, Bill Best, said to me, "Not everybody can travel", so we're bringing the world to people. The education and what they get out of that is so important. Bring the world here. They're here already and they're trained, so let's have the tools—

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Madam Ravi. Your time is up.

Mr. Marc Serré: It goes by fast.

The Chair: We will now move on to Madame Normandin. You have six minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much.

It is now my turn to thank the witnesses for sharing their experience. This will help us in drafting our report. We appreciate it very much.

I also want to acknowledge the people of Greater Sudbury. A quarter of my family lives there. Mr. Serré, I must say that your neck of the woods is quite beautiful. I agree with you on that.

My question is for Ms. Aujla-Grewal.

Ms. Aujla-Grewal, since you have seen both sides of the coin by working at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or the IRCC, and providing your services as a consultant, I would like to hear your comments on the efficiency in terms of file processing.

More specifically, I want to discuss cases where one or two documents are missing. In the current process, the file is sent back to the sender, and its return is awaited. It can sometimes take several months for the processing of a file to begin.

Shouldn't files be systematically opened and checked for missing documents, so that the sender can simply be asked to send out the missing documents?

[English]

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I have to say that sometimes a document is not even missing. For example, right now I have at least three spousal sponsorships on which IRCC has advised that the use of a representative form is not there. The form is there. We have a copy of the application package and they have advised that they are not able to release the file number because the use of a representative form is not there.

Those types of challenges are incredibly frustrating. There is a web form we can use to submit the inquiry, and oftentimes we have

to submit multiple inquiries and duplicate our work. It's incredibly frustrating.

From the perspective of IRCC, I can see why they want complete applications. If they were to hold every file and then ask for a document, it would really slow down processing times. They're putting the onus back on individuals to ensure the application is complete.

I can understand it from that point, but I do think certain exceptions should be made especially, perhaps, during COVID. I think better attention does need to be paid to the documents that are already there. If certain documents are not essential to the processing of the file right away, maybe that criteria of what gets sent back can be examined.

Other colleagues and I are very frustrated when we get notification back saying the use of a representative form is not there. It happens over and over again, or sometimes documents are there. It's even more frustrating when a file is sent back because an individual loses so many months, and it could be something very minor.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

My next question is for Ms. Armstrong.

Ms. Armstrong, you talked about the economic recovery and the needs to have foreign workers. In my region, employers have expressed concerns regarding the possibility of stopping the processing of their work permit requests and the impact studies on the labour market. They're hearing that the unemployment rate is so high that we do not need foreign workers. One of the arguments going around, for instance, is that it is impossible to turn our unemployed people into welders with an equivalent of 15 years of experience in a short period of time.

I would like to hear your comments on this and on the fact that the labour shortage and the high unemployment rate are two different things.

• (1640)

[English]

Ms. Meredith Armstrong: I think you've made a very good point. In fact, our labour shortage in Sudbury has been going on for quite some time, and it's across all sectors and at all different levels of skills and experience. Our hospitality sector, hotel work, house-keeping, has been mentioned. We're desperate for personal support workers as well as all kinds of welders. We have a mining supply and service sector with hundreds and hundreds of companies and entrepreneurs who are looking for almost all of those ranges of experiences.

People need to understand that there are different approaches needed for different levels of experience. We need to support those entrepreneurs who have worked very hard over the last few years to increase their capacity to go after global markets and to make sure they are equipped to find a specific person with a skill set they're looking for. We also need to make sure employers are equipped to hire 15 housekeepers very quickly, because they're turning away business when they don't have those people in place.

We also see that within a newcomers' audience there's often a willingness to take on jobs that Canadians for one reason or another may not be as willing to take on. I think we are very proud of newcomers who have taken on tough jobs and built a life for themselves, really, built businesses for themselves and hired other people.

It's not one-size-fits-all. The unemployment participation rate is another important number that is misunderstood often. I think there's an education process that is needed for our communities.

Smaller communities that are just getting into this game need some committed time to make sure they have the understanding of the perspectives.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have very little time left, but I would like to put another question to you, Ms. Aujla-Grewal.

Doesn't giving extra points to people who have filed several sponsorship applications for parents or grandparents lead to first-time applicants feeling like there is no chance of their application being processed?

You could perhaps answer me during the second round of questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: I am sorry for interrupting but your time is up.

We will now move to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses. I would like first to go to Ms. Grewal.

On the issue around post-grad work permits, the reality is that many of the students' permits are going to be expiring in the coming weeks, so they are very anxious about that. Given the workload that's before IRCC with the delays in processing, should the government not explore ideas for how they can automatically renew expiring work permits, so that these people can actually have status and be able to have that securely in place during this COVID period?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: Yes. I'm not sure how a blanket extension process would work. I think that could be a little bit troublesome. Having worked with IRCC, I think a realistic approach would be for individuals to make an application. However, the post-grad work permit application process has been fairly straightforward. The number of documents required is not large. They need just a completion letter and their transcripts.

If an individual already has a post-grad work permit, those criteria have already been assessed, so I think for post-grad work permit-holders, making a new application would be quite simple as long as the criteria allowing them to do so were announced.

Similarly to the situation for spouses, we recently announced that if they secured stage one approval, with the changes in the dual intent, it would be very easy for them. They just need to be given a mechanism by which they can submit this extension application.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The problem, of course, is that IRCC doesn't have enough resources. The minister actually announced a 14-day processing time for extended family reunification applications. The 14 days is not being met. I'm trying to figure out what to suggest to the government in terms of how they can scale resources to get on with the process. I'm very worried that for the post-grad applications, people would actually miss the deadline even if it were announced now.

As you know, the government had made an announcement on the guardian angels program. It still doesn't have an application process for the guardian angels, so there is a lot of talk and very little action. I'm very worried about how that will play out.

I am going to switch over to another sector, the caregivers. As a result of COVID, they have lost time through no fault of their own. They have to meet their two-year work requirement. In the meantime, their children are aging out. Would you support the call for the government to accept the lost time towards their two-year work application as well as the proposal to ensure that there be a mechanism to freeze in time the age of the children who are aging out so that they don't end up being outside of the PR application process?

• (1645)

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: That is an excellent question. On those individuals who aren't able to accumulate the work experience before their dependent children no longer meet the age to be dependent, that's a very good point. I think it's definitely an area that the government needs to consider. So, yes, I would definitely support maybe a freeze in the lock-in date of the age. Definitely that is something that should be considered. I agree with that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The other aspect is with the certificate of PR. Many of the folks who have actually gone through the entire process have been approved but, of course, their certificate of PR has now expired and they have no ability to actually get it renewed. Even IRCC staff, when my office has contacted them through the inquiries line, have said that they have no idea when this will happen. So people are stuck. Their lives are completely in limbo. Would you agree that the government should, in fact, just recognize the certificates of PR and honour the expired certificates of PR so that people can get on with their lives?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I can see that presenting some problems.

I think that in some regards, unfortunately, whether you're an immigration consultant, a lawyer, an individual or the department, everyone's patience across the board, for everything, is being tested due to COVID. Unfortunately, there are some areas where individuals will just have to wait until IRCC gets to them. The expired—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. Can I interrupt for a second?

You say that you see some problems with recognizing expired certificates of PR. What are those problems?

Ms. Manprit Auja-Grewal: These are individuals who maybe don't meet a residency obligation and who maybe are trying to use an expired document where they don't meet the residency.... It would be very difficult, perhaps, to determine which individuals don't meet it if they're travelling with an expired document. I guess criteria would have to be established on how expired this document that they're travelling with can actually be—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Expired within the COVID period, because for most of the folks, actually, who were approved during this period and during the COVID period, their certificate of PR has now expired. Therefore, they cannot utilize that document to get into the country, and they don't really have the ability, because IRCC doesn't have a clear process, to be renewing their certificate of PR. I'm not talking about expired certificates of PR from six years ago—

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, I'm sorry for interrupting. Your time is up. Thank you.

We will now move to our second round of questioning. We will have MP Saroya for five minutes.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for the good advice they're giving us.

I heard the words “labour gap” from Sudbury. I hear “labour gap” in Toronto all the time. The issue is that we have the people. What possibly can be done?

Five years back, about 5% to 10% of students were working in the restaurant industry or the transport industry. That became 20% and then 30%. In many industries, they're about at 80% to 100%. Only the students are working. What can be done for them? They're here. They speak the language. They understand the Canadian culture. They are perfect for Canada.

What can be done? What would you recommend to make sure that we can keep these students in Sudbury, in Toronto, in B.C., in Montreal or on the east coast.

We can start with Ms. Armstrong, please.

Ms. Meredith Armstrong: I think that's a really good question. We know that there's no one silver bullet and that it can't be done by any one organization.

Here at the city, we have a leadership role, but we are in a close partnership collaboration with our three post-secondary institutions, because they're the main drivers for a decision made by a student internationally or even domestically in coming from a different part of the country to Sudbury. We need to make sure they have the support they need to continue the programs, particularly at the college level in the applied programs that are needed by the industry.

We need to make sure that we continue to support employers in considering the talent pool that we have right here in the city. As you say, they are here. They love Sudbury. They want to stay for the long term. We actually have quite reasonable housing rates, although I have to tell you that we've had a really busy year for home sales.

Some employers really get it and are long-standing partners. They have trained what has become a wonderful alumni of students who go on to become really talented employees. Other employers haven't necessarily considered that pool yet.

We need to support our colleges through folks like our chamber of commerce and through our local immigration partnerships to ensure that employers understand that they can and should consider hiring international students. I think that programs through both our provincial and our federal partners that provide internships, funded internships, are a wonderful way, and pretty low risk, really, for an employer to consider taking on for a short period of time someone who is new. A combination of these things, hopefully, will start to secure that talent for those employers.

• (1650)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you.

Manprit Grewal, since you know the problem from both sides—from the IRCC and as a consultant—what can be done? How can we or the government help out these students? Those people, when they get their immigration, are going to be here for the next 30 years. They're 20, 22, 23 or 24 years old. Again, as I said, they speak the language, they understand the Canadian culture and they're absolutely willing to work hard for a number of years.

Manprit, if you can, tell us what can be done from both sides so that they can stay here for the long term.

Ms. Manprit Auja-Grewal: Mr. Saroya, if I understand your question correctly, it's about how we can retain international students.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely.

Ms. Manprit Auja-Grewal: With international students, perhaps we also need to consider, again, offering them the ability to apply under low-skill occupations as well. I see many international students as new graduates. They're not necessarily right away able to work in a skilled position, so many international students are working in NOC C or D occupations. These individuals have Canadian education. They have the language. By working in those NOC C or D occupations, they will eventually become skilled, but their starting point might be at a lower skill level.

For example, some international students might be doing the occupation of long-haul trucking because financially they find that very lucrative. Maybe they don't have a spouse or children, so they're able to perform this occupation.

With regard to international students, if we allow them some permanent residency options under NOC's lower-skilled occupations, I think we would be able to retain more international students in Canada.

Mr. Bob Saroya: In the GTA, I've seen the same thing as—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Regan, you have five minutes.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Aujla-Grewal, what have you seen as the major trend in the immigration consulting profession since the beginning of the pandemic?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: Right now, the major trend is that individuals want to reunite with their family members. We're getting a lot of inquiries on individuals who want to reunite with their spouses or their parents.

There were a lot of questions regarding when the parent sponsorship program would come out, because there was a delay due to COVID. When it was announced, that alleviated some concerns.

Spouses are probably the biggest concern. Whether the individual is in Canada as a Canadian citizen, a permanent resident or an international student, or even an international student who's looking to come to Canada, a lot of the questions I get are around how they can bring their spouse.

The biggest issue I see right now is probably spouses.

• (1655)

Hon. Geoff Regan: You're probably aware that last year the government introduced changes to the regulation of immigration consultants, and of course, as I imagine you know, this will involve creating a new regulatory body mandated by statute and making updates to the compliance regime and educational requirements.

Do you see those changes as something that will help you and your colleagues in your roles?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: Yes, definitely, any increase in standard to the profession is a benefit.

I see an increase in the education standard, and that will definitely be positive. There were a number of smaller schools that were opening as well. With this new school, it seems to be more confined or contained. It looks as though it will be a better program. I think we're headed in the right direction.

Hon. Geoff Regan: You're probably aware that family and spousal reunification, which you mentioned, is one of the government's priorities. The recent announcement on spousal sponsorship increases, of course, increased the IRCC staff assigned to spousal sponsorship cases by 66%. The government says this is on track to lead to 49,000 decisions by the end of the year.

Do you think those measures will help speed the process, and what other innovations should we push for?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I thought it was absolutely an excellent announcement and I am starting to see the files moving. However, the long-term goal has to be to add resources, because usually, if we're increasing processing of one stream or one line of business, I worry that another line of business will suffer. Which line of business will be suffering?

My concern is that it's great we're doing that, it's excellent. It was a really good decision, but we need to add resources so that other lines of business are not suffering, especially with the increase in immigration we're set to see. I personally would really like to see an increase in individuals processing those applications so we don't see, then, another line of business suffering from longer wait times.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Let me go back for a moment to the legislative changes for consultants. Of course, this arose as a result of some cases of fraud and abuse, including some here where I am in Nova Scotia. It affected the reputation of the profession, obviously.

Do you feel that this will allow your professional self-regulatory body to have more power to pursue unscrupulous consultants? What challenges did you see with the former system, in terms of what was there before to regulate the profession?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I would certainly love to see the reputation of immigration consultants increase. I welcome any changes. I think one of the problems with the previous regulatory body is they didn't have enough resources to pursue criminal charges or investigations. There was not enough of a punishment for those individuals who were engaging in illegal behaviours and taking advantage of immigrants.

I believe that a certain amount of funds needs to be allocated to the individuals who can pursue the allegations, such as CBSA. Once it's made clear that there will be criminal charges and that there are consequences for actions, I really think that those involved in that type of behaviour may think twice.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we will move on to Madame Normandin for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I will use this to put my question to Ms. Aujla-Grewal again.

You suggested awarding extra points to people who have already filed their sponsorship application for parents or grandparents through the Canadian immigration lottery program.

How can it be ensured that a first-time applicant would not be under the impression they have no chance of their application being processed in the first round?

Can you propose options for us to consider?

[English]

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: If I understand your question correctly, Ms. Normandin, I think what you're asking me is if an individual will be discouraged from submitting an application if it's only their first attempt. Is that correct?

I think IRCC is trying to find the right balance. It's difficult because the demand is far greater than the supply. I think we continue to try new things to see which one will be the best fit.

There are other items, perhaps, in the weighted draw that could be considered, such as the length of time you've been apart from your parents or maybe the age of your parents. Maybe other things could also be entered, but adding any additional variable could complicate it.

I think it's just trying to be as fair as possible. Because it's a lottery, if someone is not selected they may feel their luck isn't working. Perhaps we try this and see if this will be a little bit better suited.

• (1700)

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: In any case, it would be a good idea to consider the preliminary screening option based on certain criteria if we were to keep the lottery idea. Did I understand correctly?

[English]

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I think pre-selection based on income could be difficult because there are a number of variables, such family size in Canada or abroad. A sponsor's family size in Canada can change based on if they have a new child or have a divorce.

I'm not quite sure that a system can be developed to capture the things that just naturally happen in life and change in family size. I'm not sure how much more we can request up front.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Aujla-Grewal, the time is up.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to just touch on the issue around additional resources for IRCC. Ms. Aujla-Grewal, I think you are absolutely correct to say that if we don't increase staffing resources we're going to be really caught out with the backlog. Otherwise, moving resources from one stream to another doesn't ultimately help the problem.

Is this something, then, that we should be wanting to see by way of additional resources? Do you have any suggestions of how much, by way of resources, the government should be putting into the system?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: Unfortunately, I can't say how much because I'm not sure as to the numbers of staff at the offices. I think IRCC would be best suited to say that. Additional resources

need to be added to the point where processing times are not being affected too much. I think that would probably be the best.

I'm not sure with regard to resources, but maybe with the use of technology now—we're all being forced to use technology—this will result in some natural efficiencies as well. Perhaps it won't even necessarily be such a great manpower.... It may be that even the use of technology and other efficiencies can be utilized.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Speaking of efficiency with technology, I know that for testing of citizenship, for example, we have not yet actually moved into using technology to do the testing. That's something people have been calling for and wanting to see. Is that an area that the government should explore and should in fact move in that direction to allow for testing to take place through such technology as Zoom and the like?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I think it could definitely be explored when we are exploring technology for so many other areas, such as hearings. We could also introduce it for spouses who require interviews. Yes, definitely, technology has to be something that is definitely considered. We don't know how long this pandemic will last, and we do need to try to get things somewhat back to normal, hopefully soon.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With respect to cases or files that are sent back because something is missing—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan. Your time is up.

Based on the time that's left for this panel, we have two minutes for the Conservatives and two minutes for the Liberals.

Mr. Saroya, you have two minutes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

My question is for Bela Ravi in Sudbury. Sudbury is a beautiful town.

First, as you mentioned, what can we possibly do to keep the students and other workers in Sudbury? Second, you said your funding was cut. Have you received any more funding in the last five years from this government?

• (1705)

Mrs. Bela Ravi: No, we have not. Our funding, in fact, has been going down over the years. I feel that to keep the students here, we have to show them that there are opportunities for them.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely.

Mrs. Bela Ravi: Like Meredith said, maybe there could be a co-op or an internship working with the businesses. There is hesitance, which I have seen personally, to hire somebody who's from outside of Canada, but remember, these people have been trained here. As you said, they know the language and they know the culture—they know our weather for one thing, right?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely.

Would it be possible for you to give the committee in writing what sort of funding you need to make sure we can do our part to keep those students and keep the housing prices up and keep Sudbury beautiful?

Mrs. Bela Ravi: Definitely. I could get that to you ASAP.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Ms. Aujla-Grewal, you know both sides. I have two people working in my office basically on these immigration files. From time to time, after four months, we still won't get the initial message saying that they received the application. You mentioned that the application can be done in Canada in four months and can take up to a year overseas.

What would you advise? What would you tell the committee needs to be done so that the applications are done in a decent amount of time?

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: Mr. Saroya, this is already—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Saroya. Your time is up.

To end our last round of questioning, Madam Martinez Ferrada, you have two minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

As you know—and you have all brought this up—the pandemic has suddenly affected many employers and workers, especially temporary foreign workers.

We have actually implemented a temporary policy to help foreign workers who are starting a new job and those who had closed permits by allowing them to obtain open permits. That gave us an opportunity to deliver those permits earlier by reducing the processing time, which went from several weeks to 10 days.

In what way do you think that policy has been useful, especially during the pandemic, and what else could we do in terms of rapidly delivering open permits to foreign workers in sectors that need them the most, especially the agricultural sector?

[English]

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: I think IRCC has adopted things quickly where they can.

With regard to applying for open work permits or an extension, or the post-grad work permit issue I spoke of, I referenced those things because I think those things can be done. There are certain things that are realistic and that IRCC has tried to do. I believe they have tried to deal with the pandemic as best they can. The situation keeps evolving and changing.

I do think that something could be done for individuals who require open work permits in essential sectors.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: What do you think we should be doing?

• (1710)

Ms. Manprit Aujla-Grewal: Again, the associations have to come to IRCC to advise what the issue is, present their case with what the situation is. We have to make IRCC aware of who is struggling.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up.

I would like to thank our witnesses from our first panel for appearing before the committee.

If there is anything you would like to bring before the attention of the committee, you can send us your written submissions. We will take them into consideration as we continue our study on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system.

I will suspend the meeting for two minutes to allow the witnesses for the second panel to log in and allow the clerk to get the sound checks done.

The meeting is suspended for two minutes.

• (1710)

(Pause)

• (1715)

The Chair: I call meeting number seven back to order.

I will take this opportunity to welcome our witnesses for the second panel. We have appearing before us today Robert Thiessen, as an individual. The second witness for today is Amit Kumar Verma, representing Hope Welfare Society. We also have representatives from Collège Boréal, Daniel Giroux, president; Baptiste Alain Bourquardez, director, immigration programs and services; and Mr. Marc Despatie, director of communications.

Welcome to all the witnesses.

All the witnesses will have five minutes for their opening remarks. I will start with Mr. Thiessen.

• (1720)

Mr. Robert Thiessen (As an Individual): Madam Chair, thank you for permitting me the opportunity to take part in this committee.

My name is Robert Thiessen. We are an adoptive family. In March of this year, we were in Accra, Ghana, desperate to get home. Ghana had closed its borders to all travel. The Canadian High Commission was organizing a repatriation flight for Canadian citizens. We were anxiously waiting for our newly adopted son's facilitation visa to be processed by the Canadian immigration office in Accra. We had submitted his application on August 29, 2019, and since September 9, we had not received any update from the immigration office.

We had travelled to Nigeria on July 3, 2019, to adopt our second son, Samuel. In preparation for our trip, we ended all of our employment, sold our house and put all of our belongings into storage. Our expectation was to be in Africa for at least six months to complete the adoption and wait for his facilitation visa to be processed. Our expectation was based on our first son's adoption from Ethiopia in 2015. We received Solomon's facilitation visa three months after we submitted his application.

Between September 11, 2019, and March 16, 2020, we made four personal inquiries to the immigration office via the prescribed channels. Our MP made three inquiries via the portal. In early March, when the situation with the COVID virus was serious, we tried to phone the immigration office three times. We received automated replies to our email inquiries. Our MP received an initial response that the ministerial inquiry unit had requested the immigration office to expedite our application. This did not happen. Five months later, our application had yet to be reviewed.

On our flight to Nigeria, we met a family from the Netherlands who were also adopting from Nigeria. Four weeks after their adoption was completed, they had all the necessary visas to travel home. In mid-March, Ghana's borders were closed, and we watched Prime Minister Trudeau urge Canadians to return home. We made a consular appointment at the Canadian High Commission. In the appointment, we emphasized that we needed advice on how to proceed. We didn't know what the status of our son's application was despite multiple inquiries, and now our government was urging all Canadians who could to return home.

The individual at the Canadian High Commission was unaware of the Canadian government's advisory and was oblivious to our concern. We were assured that someone from the immigration office would contact us within two days. Nothing happened. To be in Africa was our choice. We had expected to wait and be patient. We had no illusions of receiving any special treatment. We expected that we would need to be diligent in contacting the immigration office. The situation was different now. The immigration office was not responding to any of our inquiries, and the consular office was unaware of the Canadian advisory, so we decided to take action.

We started an email campaign. With the help of our friends and family, we sent out letters to MPs, explaining the urgency of our situation and asking them to help us in our case. The response was terrific. We also reluctantly shared our story with the media. Given our situation in a global pandemic—trying to get home—we felt that there was nothing to lose.

Finally, on March 24, the Accra immigration office requested additional information. Six months after receiving our application, they were finally reviewing it. Two days later, we received Samuel's facilitation visa, and on March 30, we boarded a repatriation flight back to Canada.

We waited six months for Samuel's application to be reviewed. While we waited, the Accra immigration office was indifferent to every inquiry we made. It was literally impossible to reach anyone by the prescribed channels, such as by email, by phone, through our MP and by consular visit. It took a global pandemic, creating noise through an email campaign, going to the media and having the deadline of a repatriation flight for the immigration office to re-

spond. The transparency and communication from the immigration office is not acceptable by any standard. Canadians deserve better.

We were lucky and had Samuel's application processed, but there are other Canadian adoptive families who are in limbo. They need assistance in having their applications processed in a timely manner. Canadian families need to be treated with respect and given some form of priority. Adoption comes with many challenges. Dealing with an agency of the Canadian government should not be one of them. Future adoptive families can't afford the current level of service while they wait to be united with their children and to bring them home to Canada.

Thank you for this opportunity.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you for your remarks, Mr. Thiessen.

We will move to Mr. Amit Kumar Verma representing Hope Welfare Society.

Mr. Verma, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Amit Kumar Verma (Lawyer, Hope Welfare Society): Thank you, Madam Chair, and committee members. It is my pleasure to appear before this committee to speak about the impact of COVID-19 on our immigration system.

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented changes globally, as well as for Canadians. I would like to draw your attention to the very important issue where immigration services were halted for everyone. It caused further delay for processing files for visitors and international students and to spousal sponsorship applications. It has even affected citizenship ceremonies.

In the meantime, some workers came to Canada on their temporary foreign work visas. They arrived in Canada, and they wanted to work for their employers, but due to the pandemic, their employers' businesses were shut down. They were shut down in such a way that they—

Mr. Marc Serré: Madam Chair, point of order. There is no translation. I don't know if it's just me or not.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Serré. We will allow the clerk to look into it.

Mr. Verma, the interpreter is asking you to speak a bit louder, and have the microphone near your mouth.

You may start again.

Mr. Amit Kumar Verma: Thank you, Madam Chair, and committee members. It is my pleasure to appear before this committee to speak about the impact of COVID-19 on our immigration system.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Chair, I also have no access to the interpretation, but colleagues are telling me they have access through another system. My assistant, who does not use Zoom, has access to the interpretation. So this seems to be an issue related to the Zoom platform.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Verma, please try again. Please speak a bit louder and have the microphone near your mouth.

Mr. Amit Kumar Verma: Thank you, Madame Chair and committee members. It is my pleasure to appear before this committee to speak about the impact of COVID-19 on our immigration system.

As all immigration services were halted during COVID-19, such as our refugee claim hearings, refugee eligibility hearings, visitor visa processing and issuing visas to international students, citizenship ceremonies and delays in landing permanent residents to Canada.

The COVID-19 situation has brought an unprecedented situation to Canadians and the rest of the world. This is a time that we should digitalize and innovate in order to meet the end objectives of the immigration act.

On this particular issue, I will talk about the family reunification and the amount of time consumed in order to process their applications. There is a substantial delay in issuing temporary resident visas to foreigners and processing applications of—

• (1730)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Madame Chair, can you ask the witness to hold up his mike? We're not getting translation.

The Chair: Mr. Verma, we're having some issues.

Can I request that you turn your video off? We might get better audio quality. Can you also have your microphone closer to your mouth?

Mr. Amit Kumar Verma: Okay, I will keep it nearer to me.

Due to COVID, there are different situations that have arisen for the immigration department, as well as to individuals who are in the process of obtaining their necessary paperwork. For example, the refugees file their refugee claims online, and it's taking them more than the usual time to process their applications. Reaching their eligibility hearing is taking a long time. I would request some changes to it, for example, the eligibility meetings can be done through Zoom using the app.

There could be digitalization of applying for post-graduation work permits. They should create a portal through which students

can put their information rather than to add on or upload any paper-based applications. The e-mail portal should be designed in such a way that they automatically send an e-mail to the concerned educational institute in order to verify their transcripts or any other related matter.

It would reduce the workload from the immigration department or case processing centres, and it would work towards our advancement so that students could get their work permits as early as possible.

That's all of my introductory part about the immigration matters that I'm seeking to talk about.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Verma. I'm sorry for all these technical issues.

I will just say it again, if you could please speak a bit louder and keep the microphone close to your mouth, that would be great.

Now we will move on to Collège Boréal, being represented by the president, as well as the director of immigration programs and services and the director of communications.

Mr. Giroux, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

I think you will be sharing your time with your other colleagues, so please start.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Giroux (President, Collège Boréal): Good afternoon, everyone.

I thank Marc Serré, member for the Nickel Belt riding, which is located here, in the City of Greater Sudbury.

My name is Daniel Giroux, and I am the president of Collège Boréal. Collège Boréal has 38 institutions in 26 communities across Ontario. In addition to offering 80 post-secondary programs and ongoing programs in French at the collegiate level, we provide training in skilled trades, continuous education and a number of other related services.

Collège Boréal has been focusing on the accelerated institutional, economic and social integration of newcomers for 15 years. The programs and services available to newcomers include integration and settlement services, language courses, French tests related to permanent resident and citizenship application files, as well as bridging programs.

The funding of those programs was renewed for a five-year period last April. Services were provided in Sudbury in 2017, and in Timmins in 2020. Those communities are taking in more and more immigrants, mainly owing to an aging population and migration toward large urban centres. Collège Boréal has welcomed over 3,300 individuals in 2019-2020, spread out throughout 11 of the province's communities.

Our rapid labour market integration programs, which are bridging programs, have an employability rate of 84%. We are taking in all newcomers, regardless of their mother tongue, thanks to our settlement and socioeconomic integration services.

According to recent figures, 78% of newcomers choose to settle in large cities. Collège Boréal is one of the innovative forces in relation to the immigrant regionalization concept to attract newcomers outside large urban centres. For a number of years, the rate of francophone immigration outside Quebec has been estimated at less than 2%. In 2019, the rate reached 2.82%, but the target of 4.4% the federal government set to be achieved by 2023 is far from being reached.

The number of dismissed applications concerning francophone countries in Africa is high. We are wondering what the reason for that may be.

According to data from the Democratic Republic of Congo, from January to May 2019, the applications for study permits from non-francophone countries had an approval rate of approximately 63%. That rate goes up to 68% for India and China. Applications for study permits from francophone countries had a rate as low as 36%. That rate goes down to only 26% if France is excluded.

According to Collège Boréal and a number of other stakeholders, it is certain that the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to a number of challenges. Language training, which is provided only remotely or online, is also presenting major challenges for us. That clientele needs the support of the 25 or 30 other students and clients, as well as the possibility to network. That is absolutely crucial.

Another element is giving rise to many challenges, and that is the shortage of part-time jobs, as it has been mentioned. For us, that creates nearly a 30% drop in the number of international students. We have three major objectives: improving the rate of study permit obtention for francophone students, fostering francophone immigration and facilitating access to permanent residency.

We are issuing five recommendations. First, we recommend adding human resources in study permit processing offices, especially in Dakar, Senegal.

Second, a direct stream should be established for studies, which would help accelerate the processing of study permit applications filed by people from specific countries. That should be provided everywhere, and not only in Senegal and Morocco.

Third, we recommend access to existing federal settlement services for temporary residents—in other words, holders of study and work permits.

Fourth, investment should be made in francophone international students, the quotas of acceptance for applications from francophone countries should be increased, and steps likely to facilitate the acquisition of permanent residency should be created.

Fifth, francophone quotas should be implemented in pilot immigration projects for rural and northern communities to satisfy the needs in terms of bilingual qualified workers and maintain the current demographic weight of francophones.

• (1735)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Thanks to all the witnesses for their opening remarks.

We will now move to the first round of questioning, and we will start with Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Thiessen, I want to ask you a number of questions about your experience. I greatly appreciated your remarks. I thought they were very clear. I really feel terrible for what you and your wife and children went through.

I would like you to share with the committee your thoughts on how specifically the government should be improving its immigration system concerning parents who are adopting from anywhere. Particularly, we're hearing a number of concerns with adoptions in Africa. If you can share specifically the changes that you feel need to be made, that would be greatly appreciated.

• (1740)

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Thanks a lot.

The first thing that comes to mind is some transparency so we would know where our application is in the system.

Secondly, for us—and for many of the other families—it comes at quite a significant cost to travel overseas to build or grow our family. To be able to receive some form of priority in having our visas processed would be very helpful.

Those are the two things that would really help.

It's one thing to know that it's going to take six months and five days for your visa to be approved. It's another thing when, at every attempt at communication, you receive a form. You email back. Your MP receives a form. You email back or nobody answers the phones. You show up at the high commission....

We purposely stuck to the protocol that had been laid out by immigration on how to communicate with them. On all of those avenues, it was literally impossible to get any kind of communication to let us know where we were in the queue as far as getting our application processed.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You mentioned that you've been following all the protocols and that you did everything you were supposed to. Were you surprised by the response from the federal government?

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Yes, we were. It took us doing an email campaign to start raising a lot of noise. When we left, there had been a family that had previously created a lot of noise.

This was our choice to go to Africa. We weren't going there and expecting any kind of special treatment, but when the delay became so extensive and then we had COVID coming down on top, the country was shutting down and we went to visit the consulate and they didn't even know about Prime Minister Trudeau saying that we should be coming home.... All of that was very disturbing.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You mentioned in your remarks that on the plane you spoke with someone from the Netherlands, I believe. Can you share with us what their experience was with their home country with adoption?

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Coincidentally, we sat on the flight to Lagos, Nigeria with a family from Amsterdam. They were doing the same thing we were doing. Their adoption process in Nigeria followed in line with our adoption process. We both completed it at the same time.

Four weeks after they submitted to the Government of the Netherlands, they had all their travel visas to bring their children home. We didn't get our first response until six months after.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: You said it took four weeks for them to get a response and for you, with an incredible amount of pushing, calling various MPs and friends, and email and media campaigns, you finally got a response after six months. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Yes, that's correct.

They had their visas in four weeks. They were on a plane.

It's kind of rubbing it in. At that time, we were having a great time in Africa. We had a great time all the way through, but we were getting desperate when borders shut down and we were being told to come home and we couldn't get any response from our government agency that's supposed to be there to help us out.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We spoke with a lawyer in the committee meeting last week who had dealt with a couple; I believe you may have met them. They were adopting a child in Nigeria as well, but their daughter in Nigeria was sick. They are just now getting home—I think on Wednesday—after almost a year of being stranded.

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Yes, they got their visa today, so it was pretty exciting for them.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Good. When we spoke with them last week they said they were anticipating getting it today. I'm glad to hear the news that they have it.

Do you have any words of wisdom for others who are pursuing the same avenues as you? Do you think it should be viewed as a cautionary tale, or do you think it's because of the pandemic that this is happening? I'm just trying to figure out what we can do to improve the situation, so that others don't become stranded in foreign countries.

Your savings are dwindling.... I can imagine, when speaking with the family from last week, that there came a point where they felt they would never get home. They had sort of lost faith, a number of times, that the Canadian government had their backs.

Do you have any thoughts on that?

• (1745)

Mr. Robert Thiessen: The part that was discouraging was that when we applied for a visa for our first son, that visa came to us in three months and it was processed in Nairobi, Kenya. We used that for our planning when we prepared to go over there. We figured three months, plus or minus. Even if it were four months and then two months in Nigeria. At six months, I think we were being very generous—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Thiessen. Your time is up.

We'll now move on to Ms. Dhillon for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses for joining us today.

My questions will be for the Collège Boréal representatives.

I would like to begin by letting you know that our government has implemented measures to encourage student enrolment in Canadian institutions and to facilitate online learning. Among the most recent measures, of note is the establishment of a list of approved and designated educational institutions. These are institutions that have had their COVID-19 response plan approved in the targeted provinces.

What has been that measure's impact on the accessibility of students who had study permits to come to Canada?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Thank you for the question.

It is certain that the decision to allow students to complete 50% of their studies online or remotely has had a very positive impact at Collège Boréal. Since September, we have received a number of students, and we have been surprised to see how many of them could continue their studies online or remotely. We predict that from 25 to 50 students will continue their studies in January.

Depending on the clientele, there could be a lack network or internet access, for instance, which could have tremendous repercussions for the clientele. Depending on the country, access to technology can be a major challenge.

This is indeed a big step in the right direction. Since November 17, 24 colleges in Ontario have been put on the list that will help students complete up to 50% of their studies online or to come study in Canada. That is good news.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: That's excellent.

Our government is looking for innovative approaches to help newcomers and better support them in their integration process.

Do you think we should continue on the path to improving employment support and take advantage of new technologies? Also, how do you think your organization will benefit from the changes made by the Department of Immigration?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: I would ask our expert in this field, Mr. Bourquardez, to answer the question.

Mr. Baptiste Alain Bourquardez (Director, Immigration Programs and Services, Collège Boréal): Thank you for the question.

Concerning the innovative approach, Collège Boréal is fairly innovative in terms of the settlement services provided. We provide settlement services in a number of cities in Ontario, be it Windsor, Sarnia, Chatham, London, Mississauga, Sudbury or Timmins. The approach we use is not only based on basic needs, but also on economic integration planning, which takes into consideration newcomers' skills, know-how and experience before they even arrive in Canada.

The idea is to be able to support newcomers toward their chosen careers and sustainable employment. I am getting to the vision you are trying to implement within the federal government. Employment-related services will be essential for this economic independence, which is very important. The COVID-19 pandemic has somewhat destabilized settlement services. A number of those services were made available online very quickly. That was our case.

Since mid-October, we have come back with the hybrid model—in other words, we provide in-person services to people who do not have the technological equipment and those who do not have the ability to contact settlement services owing to a lack of connectivity, for instance. We have returned partially to give those people access to that service.

In terms of language training provided to newcomers, they can enrol in the language instruction for newcomers to Canada, or LINC, program. We have also transitioned 35 classes and 535 people attending those courses within a week.

Even before the pandemic, we were planning to implement self-paced and virtual training. That was developed last year, and this way of doing things is currently operational. It gives us an opportunity to offer this online approach to people with a job or other family obligations, taking into account their geographic zone. So that kind of an approach will help us go further and continue to provide those services efficiently.

• (1750)

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you very much.

My respected colleague Mr. Serré has a few comments to make. So I will give him my time.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Ms. Dhillon.

I just want to thank the Collège Boréal representatives for their dedication and their commitment to francophones across Ontario and in terms of immigration. That's so important.

Thank you for your five recommendations. We will consider them closely, as we have to reach our targets to attract more francophones.

[*English*]

Is there time left to ask a question?

The Chair: There are only six seconds.

Now we will move on to Madam Normandin for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

It is now my turn to thank all the witnesses for their testimony, especially on time frames. We will spend a lot of time on that issue in our report.

I have many questions for the Collège Boréal representatives.

The first is about places reserved for students in your institutions.

Are you managing to fill all the places international francophone students could fill or are some of them left vacant?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Thank you for the question.

When it comes to targets in terms of international students, we are talking about global targets. Collège Boréal still has room for students in a number of areas.

For instance, we have programs in agriculture, technology and business administration. We have room to increase the number of international students in a number of programs.

Ms. Christine Normandin: That's excellent.

We often hear about time frames and complexity related to building a student file so they can come study here.

Do you feel that makes you less competitive internationally, especially with regard to other francophone institutions?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: We always rely on facts. For example, around 25% of participants are accepted and come to Collège Boréal. We're therefore at a disadvantage if you consider the number of students who apply and come to Collège Boréal compared to other students from countries such as China or India, for whom the percentages are much higher, that is, 65% to 70%.

The situation is indeed unfavourable in terms of the percentage of students who end up getting their visa.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

On the subject of visas, several steps are required, including obtaining biometric data. This service is not available in all countries, and students sometimes have to travel to other countries to be able to provide this data.

What do you think of the solution that has already been suggested, which is to collect biometric data upon arrival in Canada?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: I will give the floor to Mr. Despatie, who knows biometrics much better than I do.

Mr. Marc Despatie (Director, Communications, Strategic Planning, and Government Relations, Collège Boréal): Thank you, Mr. Giroux.

I think it's a very worthy solution, especially for us. Our students come mainly from West Africa, where travel is rarely easy and public transportation is not available. Travelling from one country to another is also dangerous, because the countries don't get along very well in some cases. In addition, travel is expensive for these individuals, who are not always wealthy.

It would be nice to be able to collect biometric data upon their arrival. Of course, that carries certain risks because we don't know if these individuals will pass the tests and if they will ultimately be able to begin their studies.

Collège Boréal is not at a disadvantage compared to other francophone institutions. All francophone institutions in the system are at a disadvantage in relation to anglophone institutions.

• (1755)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I would like to continue on the subject of complex paperwork and the issue of internships.

We often hear that students would like to come here not to study, but to complete internships. If they wish to do so, they must get labour market impact assessments done, which is a very complex thing. This puts up obstacles not only for students, but also for local businesses seeking a skilled workforce, and perhaps hoping to make them want to settle here for the long term.

Do you have any comments about internships?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: You make an excellent point. I'd like to point out that 90% to 95% of Collège Boréal's programs offer internships as part of the curriculum. Before graduating, students must complete a mandatory unpaid internship. I feel one of the great advantages of our programs is that we've integrated the internship into our educational approach. Collège Boréal is very proud of this. We have set up a series of mechanisms to support students in carrying out their internship. However, when it comes to co-op programs where internships are paid, the situation is more complex. On the other hand, internships that are part of academic programs are very successful.

Ms. Christine Normandin: So it would be a good thing to facilitate the process for paid internships. Is that right?

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Absolutely.

Ms. Christine Normandin: You talked a lot about the integration principle. Do you feel that putting these individuals through CEGEPs and vocational training institutions first is really a way forward if we want to promote regional and francophone immigration? These are often young people who will build a social network and may want to start a family later on and stay in your lovely part of the country.

Mr. Daniel Giroux: Absolutely.

I will let Mr. Bourquardez answer that question.

Mr. Baptiste Alain Bourquardez: Thank you for the question, Ms. Normandin.

You are absolutely right. I feel the community college approach is essential to socio-economic integration, as it provides access to referrals and available community services, as well as short-and

long-term training, which promotes the individual's full independence and development in their chosen field.

I will come back to the bridging program model. These are short courses also offered by institutions such as colleges. They offer five months of training and reduce employability barriers by providing language training, some technical training, cultural skills and an internship with an employer.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up.

We will now move on to our last round of questions before we end this panel.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and I thank all the witnesses for their presentations.

I'd like to direct my question to Mr. Thiessen.

First congratulations. I'm super happy for you and your family. You made it back, and that's wonderful news.

I too had a horrible experience with the adoption case of one of my constituents, Mr. Gary Lam. Back in March he and his family tried to get a permanent resident's application in and what they needed was the unique client identification number. They started this process back in March and by June they were getting no response whatsoever from IRCC. That's when they reached out to my office and we tried to intervene.

When we contacted IRCC, we were amazed to find that adoption was not deemed to be a case that would require urgent processing. That's what we were told.

I'm going to pause here and ask for your thoughts about that, because I was quite taken aback. If they did not proceed with urgent processing, they could lose their adoption placement and that's a serious thing for a family.

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Yes, I'm definitely biased in this so take it with a grain of salt, but we're trying to make a better life, at the risk of sounding like.... We're here to form a family, grow our family, and to be put into limbo particularly with some of the adoptions out of western Africa, where you have to travel there and remain there until it's processed.... To find out that as Canadian citizens doing this you're not given any form of priority, that you're in the same queue with everybody else, to me—again, like I said it's a little self-serving now—it doesn't seem right.

I would say the number of people, Canadians, going to do these types of adoptions is not a staggering number, it's a small number, a small percentage of people. To warrant them some form of priority I think is the right thing to do.

• (1800)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes.

The IRCC office told us that the scope for adoption fell outside of “critical functions” for the office to expedite processing.

We, of course, escalated the matter and brought it to the minister's attention. Through that process we also discovered that a series of errors had been made. In fact, my constituent was given misinformation and contradictory information.

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Yes, that's not uncommon. We weeded through that too with our second adoption. We were veterans and we helped a lot of other families, including the two families who were there with us.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That raises a serious question. People follow the instructions from IRCC and then only months later discover they were given misinformation; they should not have followed that advice and here's another thing they should be doing. I can't imagine the anxiety the family would have to endure in that phase. What can the government do to fix this aspect of the issue?

Mr. Robert Thiessen: I'm not sure if there's a government fix for that, because we used the website, which is basically accurate. We had an adoption facilitator who helped us here in Ontario whom we relied on strongly. To me it was specific to the office in Accra in our case. Misinformation was coming out of that office. The other thing is my partner is very tenacious so she knew what was on the website. She knew what the facilitator had told us. We had to become our own advocates, continuously going back despite information being given to us. I don't know if there's a government fix for that. That's the unfortunate thing, if people are giving out the wrong information. Even though there is information out there, you have to hunt for it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm a little troubled by it. I wrote to the minister about this entire situation, asking for the case to be expedited. Eventually I began this process myself through my office back in June. My constituents started the process back in March. We even-

tually just made the deadline so that family did not lose the child. They managed to bring the child home at the end of August. That's when the application was finally processed, when they were able to get their unique identification number.

I wrote to the minister about all of this back in July, and the minister said they would look into it, especially on the issue around contradictory information. I have yet to receive a response from the minister on that specific case. On cases like this and in other situations, we had a family sponsorship coming through where people's applications are constantly being rejected because the dual intent measure doesn't really work for people. People have been calling to say there needs to be some sort of independent complaint process to look into these kinds of matters. Would you support the idea of an immigration ombudsman so people can go to that person and have these kinds of issues dealt with effectively and efficiently—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt, Ms. Kwan; your time is up.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe I can get a quick yes or no.

Mr. Robert Thiessen: Yes, absolutely without a doubt.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: On behalf of myself and all the members of the committee I want to thank all the witnesses for appearing before the committee and providing important recommendations as we continue our study on the impact of COVID-19 on the immigration system. If any one of you feels that you need to put something to the attention of the members, please send the written submissions to the clerk of the committee and we will take that into consideration as we continue our study and compile the report.

With this, I thank everyone. Stay safe.

The meeting is adjourned.

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