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• (1635)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 33 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

The Board of Internal Economy requires that committees adhere to the following health protocols: maintain a physical distance of at least two metres from others; wear a non-medical mask unless seated, and preferably wear a mask at all times, including when seated; maintain proper hand hygiene by using the hand sanitizers provided in the committee room, and regularly wash your hands well with soap.

As the chair, I will enforce these measures and I thank you all for your co-operation.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of January 25.

I would like to outline a few rules to follow. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You may speak in the official language of your choice. At the bottom of your screen, you may choose to hear floor audio, English, or French. With the latest Zoom version, you do not need to select a corresponding language channel before speaking. The “raise hand” feature is on the main toolbar should you wish to speak.

I remind everyone that all comments should be addressed through the chair. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be muted.

The committee clerk and I will maintain a speaking list for all members.

With that said, we will go to today's meeting. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), the committee is considering the supplementary estimates (A), 2021-22, specifically vote 1a under Department of Citizenship and Immigration, referred to the committee on Thursday, May 27.

Appearing before us today is the honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

Welcome, Minister. Thanks for joining the committee today. It's always a pleasure to have you at this committee and to hear about all of the important work you are doing.

He is joined by officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration: Catrina Tapley, deputy minister; Marian Campbell

Jarvis, assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; Daniel Mills, assistant deputy minister, operations; Hughes St-Pierre, assistant deputy minister, operations, and chief financial officer and comptroller.

Welcome, all. Thank you for always appearing before the committee when needed. We will start with opening remarks from the minister.

Minister, thanks a lot once again. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks, and then we will go into the round of questioning.

The floor is yours. Please proceed.

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Madam Chair. It's always good to be back before you colleagues.

[*Translation*]

I would like to acknowledge that I am joining you from the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Nation.

[*English*]

Colleagues, the past months have seen unprecedented challenges and change in Canada's immigration system. Immigration speaks to who we were, who we are and who we hope to be, and where we're choosing to grow right now. That's why last October I was so proud to unveil our 2021 to 2023 immigration levels plan, an ambitious and responsible plan to welcome 401,000 new permanent residents this year.

Over the past number of months, despite all of the challenges that have come our way, we've shown that we're delivering on our plan. While implementing strong border measures to protect the health and safety of Canadians, we created pathways to allow families, essential workers, international students and others to continue to come to Canada. We conducted the largest draw in the history of our express entry system, inviting some 27,000 people who are already here and hard at work to apply for permanent residency.

We launched the guardian angels program, recognizing the incredible contributions of asylum seekers in our hospitals and long-term care homes, and as of May 1, I'm very pleased to report that we've received over 3,800 applications.

We've taken our citizenship processes online, welcoming over 60,000 Canadians at some 10,000 virtual ceremonies, and we've recently become the first country in the world to offer citizenship testing online. We've created pathways to help young Hong Kongers as they cast their eyes abroad to choose Canada. We've made major investments to help speed up processing, and we're becoming more efficient, including through hiring 62 new staff at our office in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

We've also shown compassion in upholding human rights by adjusting policies, including for the survivors of Daesh, which will help more Yazidi families reunite with their loved ones through our adjustment of the parameters of the definition of family. We've offered permanent residency to the families of the victims of flights PS752 and ET302. While those tragedies may have taken place far from our shores, they were also Canadian tragedies, and that's why it is important that we took those steps to give justice to the families.

Finally, we announced the creation of a pathway to permanent residency for up to 90,000 essential workers and recent international graduates. Their status may be temporary, but their contributions are lasting.

It is against the backdrop of this significant progress that I am here to discuss today IRCC supplementary estimates (A).

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

Madam Chair, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's supplementary estimates (A) include only a re-profiled amount of \$24.5M—

[*English*]

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting. The translation has died.

Actually, it's now good. Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's supplementary estimates (A) include only a re-profiled amount of \$24.5M for interim lodging services.

[*English*]

Madam Chair, I want to assure you that Canada will continue to do its part in leading way in world refugee resettlement. We've held that number one spot for the last three years. Throughout the past year, settlement providers have shown incredible resilience and ingenuity in working with my department and retooling their operations so they can continue to help those fleeing war and persecution. Indeed, as my colleague and friend Filippo Grandi often said, Canada was "a bright light in a horrible year".

Before I conclude, I want to take a moment to emphasize the incredible role played by newcomers in helping Canada to get through the pandemic. In our health care system, over one in three doctors, pharmacists and nurses aides is an immigrant, but it's more than just that. From asylum seekers working on the front lines of long-term care homes to temporary foreign workers saving Nova Scotia's lobster season, we owe newcomers so much. We're doing

more than expressing our thanks. With a variety of initiatives, which I've highlighted, we're demonstrating it.

Madam Chair, it goes without saying that the past year has been a tempest for many people. Yet with the arrival of vaccines, the storm is breaking, and there is indeed hope on the horizon. I'm proud of how well we've adapted and innovated over the past year, and I look forward to doing more on immigration, as it will play a vital role in Canada's economic recovery and long-term prosperity.

I look forward to taking your questions and continuing to work with all members of this committee, indeed all parliamentarians, as we achieve that vision.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to our rounds of questioning. Our first round will be six minutes each, with Mr. Hallan starting.

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

As always, Minister, thank you for coming, and, honestly, thank you for being so accessible to us here in this committee.

The estimates have come out. My immediate questions are the following. We have a dollar amount that's been announced, but we don't see real details on what kind of plan we're going to follow to get there. Have you started any consultations with stakeholders when it comes to how you're going to implement this and how many resources it's going to take, and does it cover cybersecurity as well?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, thank you very much to my colleague, MP Hallan, for not only the question but also his ongoing collaboration in this space and his advocacy.

Indeed, my consultations have been ongoing throughout my tenure in this ministry. We routinely engage advocates within immigration. We routinely engage our settlement service providers. We routinely engage parliamentarians, and we routinely engage business leaders so that we can make informed choices, not only with regard to policy but also with regard to the financial resources that are necessary to give effect to that policy. That includes the supplementary estimates, which will ensure that there's \$24.5 million set out for additional relief for asylum seekers in the event there is uptake.

In addition to that, budget 2021, as you know, sets in motion a significant down payment on the modernization and transformation of our immigration system, something I know we're all united in, because we know that immigration will accelerate our economic recovery and drive long-term prosperity.

• (1645)

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Absolutely. Definitely I would agree with you that we do need to modernize. It's been a common theme, but, again, my question was very specific about getting there and what the plan is.

Of course, there have been consultations. What is the actual plan? Do we have a deadline of when we can expect this to happen? That will be one question, but I just want to add to that quickly as well.

All of our offices keep hearing about the same hardships that people are facing due to delays. There's a lack of transparency. People are having to do their own ATIPs, which are lengthy. Family reunification is one that's causing.... They've been going through so much already with the pandemic. They're suffering even more. We all know the mental health issues that it's caused and all the grief behind that.

Again, what is the plan to modernize? What kind of timeline are we looking at? Have we procured anything? On top of that, how are you going to address the transparency issues and the backlogs?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The first thing I want to do, Madam Chair, is to sound a note of compassion for those who have been kept apart as a result of the pandemic. As my colleague knows, that's one of the reasons we introduced a pathway to reunite families during the pandemic. I'm very proud of the fact that we have been able to reunite tens of thousands of families.

With regard to the specific question about a plan, we do have a plan. That plan involves a strategy that will add resources, as I've said—frontline personnel to the front lines of our department. That has not only cast its eyes forward to long-term modernization with budget 2020 investments, but we've already started to leverage technologies now during the course of the pandemic. That has led to concrete results with regard to citizenship, with our welcoming over 64,000 new citizens. With regard to our landing processes, we've moving our processes online so we can achieve the outcomes of landing more permanent residents. Again, as my colleague knows, we've made significant progress in achieving our 2021 levels plan, landing over 100,000 new permanent residents already. That's the proof the plan is working.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Minister, I would have to disagree that it's working, because we still hear about the same backlogs causing all of these issues. Do you have a timeline as to when that will be modernized?

You didn't note that there would be resources needed. How many more resources are needed? How many more people are we hiring inside the department to make that happen?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, again, budget 2021 does set out a significant down payment towards the modernization of our entire immigration system, and that is something that I'm going to be working on with the member and all members of this committee to advance as quickly as possible. We know that in order to keep Canada's competitive edge, one that we have enjoyed as a result of our innovation, we need to take this down payment and turn it into meaningful transformation.

However, I want to emphasize to all colleagues that we have already begun to innovate. We have moved our processes online, not only in citizenship, not only in permanent residency, but also in the work we're doing with regard to resettling refugees. Right across every line of business, we are leveraging existing technologies so that we can implement digital platform modernization both now and in the long run.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you, Minister.

Just keeping in line with that, I asked back in March whether there were any data breaches. You had stated there were none at that time. Subsequently, we found out there were 1,793 data breaches. Given all that's going on now, and the recent cyber-attack on the JBS meat processing company and the major concern that a lot of people have about VFS Global in Beijing, what are we doing to secure Canadians' data and make sure that it's safe and secure?

The Chair: Minister, you have 20 seconds.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm simply going to clarify that my friend was asking me about VFS in March. I maintain that there were no breaches then. With regard to the—

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Sorry, Minister, I said “any data breaches”, and you said none at that time.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: To be clear, with regard to data breaches, as I mentioned in the House during question period, we take any breaches very seriously. We work with the Information Commissioner and other branches to ensure that we are implementing any recommendations so that we can be transparent with Canadians.

The Chair: Minister, sorry for interrupting. As the time is up, we will now proceed to Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Sidhu, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning. I will give a two-minute signal and a one-minute signal.

• (1650)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair; and thank you to the minister for being with us today.

Minister, the government has made reconciliation with indigenous people a priority. The need for truth and reconciliation has been highlighted this week with the horrific discovery of the remains of 215 children on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School.

In my riding of Brampton East, there are many first- and second-generation immigrants, and I believe it's important for Canadians, including many new Canadians who have emigrated to Canada, to learn about indigenous peoples.

Could you update the committee on the work your department is doing to implement the TRC's calls to action 93 and 94 and the importance of these commitments?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I'll begin by thanking my colleague for his advocacy, and I thank every member of the committee and all members of Parliament for unanimously supporting the passage of Bill C-8 yesterday in the House of Commons through third reading. I look forward to working with our colleagues in the Senate to ensure that the bill becomes law.

I think all of my colleagues would echo the sentiment that, now more than ever, we need to continue to do the hard work of reconciliation. This past week has revealed the horrifying news of the remains of children that were discovered at a residential school in Kamloops. We would be remiss if we didn't point out that this is not just about a shameful chapter in our history, but that indigenous peoples continue to live this reality today. As parliamentarians, and certainly in my capacity as minister, I will do whatever I can to continue the important work of reconciliation by taking call to action 94 that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had put forward that would allow us to educate new citizens, but also all Canadians, by amending the oath of citizenship to reflect indigenous peoples' traditions, cultures and histories. That is something that I have seen over the course of my tenure as minister in our citizenship ceremonies. This is important work.

Again, we will continue to consult with our colleagues and with indigenous leaders across the country, but it is so important, now more than ever, that we make this bill law.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you Minister for that answer. It's very important, and I definitely agree with you. I'm glad to see heading in that direction.

Minister, in your previous appearances before this committee, you've spoken about your department's efforts to adapt to the changing circumstances of the pandemic with innovative solutions like virtual citizenship ceremonies and online testing. These innovations have made a difference, and there are many other elements of Canada's immigration system that could benefit from those efforts.

I also understand that the 2021 budget included over \$420 million in federal funding over five years to deliver an enterprise-wide digital platform that would gradually replace the legacy global case management system. This investment, beginning in 2023, is meant to improve application processing and support for applicants.

Minister, could you offer any insights into the types of efficiencies and improvements, from a user experience, this will provide in terms of modernizing our immigration system?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I thank my colleague for an important question, because it allows me to highlight how we are investing to transform our immigration system right from top to bottom.

Budget 2021 sets aside \$827.4 million to do just that. With this investment, we are going to create a state-of-the-art digital, touchless and integrated immigration system that will allow newcomers, visitors, students, workers, families and refugees to come to Canada to write that next chapter of their lives. Not only does budget 2021 provide for that vision to become a reality, but it also sets aside important investments to help with client support and to reduce barriers for migrant workers who are already in Canada or plan to come to Canada.

The pandemic has taught us how important newcomers are to Canada. Whether we're talking about our health care sector, our farms and food processing plants, or the building and trade sector, we have seen newcomers step up in ways that are truly remarkable and, indeed, uniquely Canadian.

In order to continue that work and to achieve our goals in the 2021 plan, we need to be sure that we continue to invest in immigration. That's precisely what budget 2021 will do. My hope is that we'll be able to pass that budget in very short order, so that we can make it a reality.

• (1655)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Minister.

In order to provide on-arrival, orientation services and emergency at-risk assistance, community-based organizations have been slated to receive funding through the migrant workers support program.

To your understanding, what are the benefits of outsourcing newcomer orientation and crisis support to community organizations?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The immediate benefits are from our partnering with those working most closely with migrant workers themselves. This is one of the many ways in which our government is looking to collaborate with grassroots advocates and those who really understand what the challenges are for migrant workers.

Let's be honest, as my colleague knows, and as the committee knows, this has been a challenging year for migrant workers because of the pandemic. Through this collaboration and our investments, we're going to do better to protect migrant workers and their rights. That's what we're committed to doing.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Madame Normandin, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Chair, the clerks were to advise you that my colleague Yves Perron will be speaking in the first round of questions.

[English]

The Chair: I saw you joining in, so I thought it had changed.

Mr. Perron, welcome to the committee. You can proceed.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I thank the members of the committee for welcoming me. I also thank the minister for his presence and the officials for their availability.

I usually sit on the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, but I am still familiar with the foreign workers file. There are problems with the temporary foreign workers program.

Minister, I'd like to talk to you about the processing of work permits for sectors deemed nonessential by the federal government. This has been completely frozen in time since the beginning of the pandemic.

Contractors are contacting us all week long, and the cases are multiplying in every riding in Quebec. Even some contractors who are not in our ridings are contacting us to tell us that they are losing contracts and have to pay huge penalties because of delays, and to explain to us that the Labour Market Impact Assessments, the LMIA's, for which they paid are useless because they do not result in the issuance of a work permit.

What can you say to these people today? How is the situation progressing?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, my message is very simple. Temporary foreign workers are essential to our businesses, our farms and our health care facilities. That is why we have facilitated the arrival of essential temporary foreign workers throughout the pandemic.

In fact, last year we welcomed more than 85% of the planned agricultural workers and, this year, we will welcome even more. As far as processing times are concerned, we have made a lot of progress. The current processing time for a work permit is just over 60 days. This means that we are on track to meet our goal. We will continue to work with the Government of Quebec to ensure that it gets all the foreign workers it needs...

Mr. Yves Perron: I am sorry to interrupt you, Minister, but time is running out.

You are talking about the agricultural sector, and we know that special efforts have been made in that area. However, I am also talking about sectors that the federal government sometimes does not consider essential, but that Quebec does. I am talking about people who have contracts with the Quebec Department of Transport, people who manufacture essential equipment for Quebec hospitals in sewing factories. I am thinking in particular of Textiles Patlin, in Saint-Paulin, in my riding, which makes curtains for hospitals and cannot the workers it needs. What do we say to these companies that have sometimes paid LMIA's for nothing?

Will there be compensation for the costs of LMIA's that do not result in the issuance of work permits?

These employers don't want compensation, they want employees. We really need to speed up the processing of claims.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, as I said, we are working closely with the Government of Quebec.

I speak almost weekly with my counterpart, Minister Girault, not only to discuss the immigration file and temporary foreign workers, but also to enable her to welcome permanent skilled workers.

Mr. Yves Perron: I have a concrete proposal, Minister. Have you considered the possibility of collecting biometric data on arrival in the country?

This is something very concrete that could speed up processing.

• (1700)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, we have introduced flexibility into our policies, not only in terms of biometrics, but also in terms of other documents that we need to expedite the process. This is one of the concrete examples of collaboration between our government and the Government of Quebec.

Mr. Yves Perron: So your answer tells us that you are open to assessing the situation. Are you also open to allowing people to work without a work permit, as we have done exceptionally in the agri-food sector, but this time in other sectors?

I take as an example the companies that build infrastructure. I am thinking of a local company that has had problem—Coffrages Synergy, in Lavaltrie. These people build bridges, which is still significant. Are you open to that as well?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, we are listening to Quebec businesses, and what they are asking for is more immigration, not just temporary, but permanent. That's what they're asking from Mr. Legault's government.

As for us, we are always ready to provide Quebec with all the economic immigrants it needs.

Mr. Yves Perron: All right. Let's talk about permanent immigration. You bring me to my next point.

In your introduction, you talked about 90,000 permanent residences and you said that resources were allocated to that end. But according to the information we have, the resources that were put there were taken from elsewhere, from Immigration, when there is already not enough to go around.

Everyone agrees that the processing of permanent residences should be accelerated. In this crisis, we need economic recovery. You mentioned in your statement that immigration is crucial for economic recovery. That is what our businesses are telling us as well.

Wouldn't it be necessary to reallocate resources? If not, do you plan to hire massively but urgently?

People would like to have dates or a specific program. They would like you to tell them that you are doing it and that you are going to come up with—

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Perron: —a given number of extra employees in their thousands to speed up—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, for our part, we know that immigration creates jobs and long-term prosperity. That's why our plan exists and why we continue to make investments in immigration. That is also why I will continue to work closely with the Government of Quebec.

Mr. Yves Perron: Are you planning on hiring, Minister?

[English]

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Perron.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Perron: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes for your round of questioning.

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

Thank you, Minister, for coming to our committee once again.

Time is of the essence for the people of Hong Kong. The exit ban on the people of Hong Kong will now come into effect on August 1, 2021. While the minister has said that new immigration measures would be announced in November of this year, I'm afraid that they may come too late.

When will the minister announce the new measures and will they include humanitarian measures for Hong Kongers outside of Canada before August 1, 2021?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I appreciate my colleague's question, as well as her knowledge of and experience with this file. I share her concern around the developments in Hong Kong.

As we all know, we are monitoring the situation very closely, but I will say that I am encouraged by the early returns on the creation of this pathway. The fact that we have already 3,600 applications in our system does I believe demonstrate and speak to the opportunity that we are hoping to appeal to young Hong Kongers. I certainly am prepared to continue collaborating with her and all members of this committee to determine whether or not we can see that pathway come to greater fruition going forward.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, I was asking the minister about new measures. I understand that there are measures for young graduates, but there are many people who do not qualify under those measures the minister has announced. We heard that from witnesses. Committee members heard from many people who urged further action. To that end, humanitarian measures for people outside of Hong Kong are absolutely essential, as is opening up family reunification streams for extended families to be sponsored here to come to Canada.

Is the minister considering any of those measures? He said that he was going to announce something new in November. Is he still planning on announcing something new in November?

• (1705)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, that is indeed our intent. As I have I think explained to the committee before, with regard to immigration from Hong Kong, we have seen significant increases in existing pathways, particularly with regard to students as well as family reunification. That, despite the pandemic, demonstrates how important it is that we maintain the people-to-people ties between Canada and the people of Hong Kong, despite the very challenging and complex backdrop.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I know that the minister didn't answer my questions, and they were very specific questions. The reunification streams the minister talks about exclude extended families, so this is critical. I'd love to actually have a further conversation with the minister on this.

I'll have my office set up a time with you with respect to that. I'm going to move onto another area.

I raised this with the officials at our last meeting, and they were not able to confirm it. Can the minister advise if bridging work permits will now be provided to applicants under the new TFW pathway?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Well, Madam Chair, the Hong Kong pathway does allow for those to come to Canada who qualify under the criteria through an open work permit. That is going to be an unprecedented means and vehicle by which we welcome those who have already applied, as well as others. In effect, the open work permit is a bridge.

Now, I have said before that we will reassess where we are at with the program once we begin to receive applicants in Canada, as well as transition those who may qualify and who are already in Canada, but that open work permit is the bridge by which—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, Minister. I actually don't think you heard my question.

I was talking about the new temporary foreign workers program that you announced—this is not related to the Hong Kong program—and about a bridging work permit for the new temporary foreign workers pathway.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I apologize, Madam Chair. There was a bit of a loss of signal there for just a moment.

Indeed, under the essential workers pathway, what we have determined is a set of criteria that does allow essential workers across a very broad range of occupations—approximately 140 occupations, not only in the health care sector but also in other non-health essential sectors—who will be able to apply for permanent residency, essentially on a fast track. By doing so, we will be transitioning some who already possess open work permits and who are employed and transitioning them to permanent residency status.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Minister, my question is about people whose work permits might have expired after they have applied. Will they be provided with a bridging work permit?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As my colleague knows, we have introduced policies during the pandemic to allow those with expired work permits to have them extended until the end of the year. That process is very straightforward. It's very simple. We have a very short turnaround on those extensions. In fact, it's significantly less than our service standard for extensions. By doing so, they will then qualify—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt, but...not if their work permit is tied to a specific employer. If they don't have a specific employer, they would not be able to get renewed.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, in fact, in some sectors, we have created work permit flexibility for those who are here on closed work permits to then transition to other employers under the LMIA regime.

The point I would make, Madam Chair, is that we have addressed policies to reduce the disruption that has been caused by the pandemic to provide greater certainty with regard to status. The essential workers pathway is a monumental step in that direction. It will allow not only the 90,000 who are eligible under it, but also those they may sponsor, to achieve permanent status as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I'm sorry for interrupting.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's not for caregivers.

The Chair: We will now proceed to our second round of questioning, starting with Mr. Seeback for five minutes.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, I assume you're aware that you publish on websites the processing times for the various immigration streams.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Would you agree with me that people who look at those processing times would rely on those processing times and have some expectation that those processing times would be accurate?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Well, Minister, I can tell you that what is being experienced in my office—and speaking with many offices around the country—is that the processing times that are published on the website are not even remotely accurate. In fact, my office has spoken with some people at IRCC who say that they know the processing times on the website aren't accurate, but they don't have the authority to update the processing times on the website.

For example, the processing time for spousal sponsorship is listed at 12 months. Most files in my office are going well beyond 18 months at this point. I understand the pandemic has taken an effect on processing applications.

Will you commit today to having your department review the website processing times and update them with accurate processing times to reflect the current reality?

• (1710)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We will certainly endeavour to ensure that our processing times are always accurate, Madam Chair. I do want to say that there are going to be cases—as my colleague knows because he has experience in this area—that are complex. For a variety of reasons that have to do with the particular circumstances of the applicants, they will fall outside of the service standard. It is often those cases that make their way to my parliamentary colleagues

I would just encourage...and I in no way diminish the anecdotes and personal experiences of my colleague. I know he brings those cases to my office, as do others. We try to work through them. The service standard is there as a goal to encourage transparency and accountability. Of course we always endeavour to make sure that they are accurate.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I just want to be clear. Your undertaking is that you're going to ask your department officials to look into whether or not the websites are accurately reflecting the processing times and if they are not, the websites will be updated.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I don't think we need to get into the legalisms of calling it an undertaking. My point, as my colleague knows, is that my department and my office are always endeavouring to ensure that there is accuracy and transparency with regard to our processing standards. That is something that we do every day.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I want to switch gears slightly.

When I was on this committee before, Minister, there was a discussion about whether or not the decision-making ability was taken away from the Chandigarh office for processing of visa and other applications. Are decisions still being made in the Chandigarh office or have those all been moved to New Delhi, as an official told me around December of 2019?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Certainly, I would say that my officials gave you the best available information at that time. Since then—as my colleague knows, Madam Chair—there have been additional office closures in India as a result of the surge of COVID cases there. That has, without question, had a significant impact on our operations. It may be that my officials may have more up-to-date information in response to the precise nature of your question, but since the last time you asked about it, the surge has definitely impacted our operations in India.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I have one final question for you, Minister.

I have spoken with many members of the Portuguese community who talk about undocumented workers who are living and working productively in Canada. They don't have status. They are looking for an amnesty for workers who are gainfully employed in this country, particularly in the trades, which is an important sector in this country, in the Portuguese community. Have you looked at this: whether or not you will consider granting an amnesty to Portuguese workers in the trades industry who are gainfully employed?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Not only have we looked into this matter but we've acted on it. In fact, we very recently announced the next stage of a pilot program with the Canadian Labour Congress and other labour leaders, including LiUNA, that would allow us to grant status to those who have fallen out of status and who work specifically in the construction and building sector. This is something that I know a number of parliamentarians have been working on for a very long time. I think it demonstrates an opportunity to recognize the contributions of those who helped to build this country with their skills and with their experience but who have fallen out of status for reasons that may have been beyond their control.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed to Ms. Dhillon.

Ms. Dhillon, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning. You can please proceed. The floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank the honourable minister for taking part in our committee meeting today.

There is no doubt that immigration is essential to economic recovery across Canada, including in Quebec. Quebec's business sector is calling for more foreign workers to help alleviate labour shortages.

How can the federal Department of Citizenship and Immigration help them?

• (1715)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I would first like to thank my colleague for her work on this issue, which is very important for her community and for everyone in Quebec and Canada. I also thank her for her question.

As I said when I responded to my colleague from the Bloc québécois, we know that immigration is essential to the economy. We know that many businesses in Quebec, including chambers of commerce, have asked Quebec to increase its immigration targets. As for the federal government, it is working with the provinces on the temporary foreign worker category and that of immigrants seeking permanent resident status, and there is good cooperation.

In the case of temporary foreign workers, as I said earlier, a lot of progress has been made. We have issued over 1,000 temporary work permits so that Quebec could have access to the workers it needs. We will continue in this way.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you, Minister.

Earlier, you mentioned that immigration creates prosperity. You also mentioned that you would issue work permits in Quebec to help the Quebec economy.

Can you tell us about it, please?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes, absolutely.

It is not just a short-term challenge, it is a long-term challenge. There are demographic challenges caused by an ageing population, and immigration is used to address these challenges. So in the long term, we need to continue to increase our immigration levels. I think the Government of Quebec had chosen to increase its targets. This is good news for Quebecers.

In the short term, we have made a lot of progress. By the end of May, we had already issued over 14,000 work permits to temporary foreign workers in Quebec's agricultural sector. This is another example that shows that we are allowing Quebec to welcome all the immigrants it needs.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you very much, Minister.

Could you briefly tell us what the government is doing to support francophone immigration to Canada and francophone minority communities outside Quebec?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Outside Quebec, we have a strategy to attract more French-speaking immigrants. It aims to strengthen the French fact not only in Quebec, but throughout Canada.

During my mandate, I made several announcements about francophone immigrants. For example, with respect to essential workers outside Quebec, there is no limit to francophone immigration.

This demonstrates once again the efforts we are making to encourage francophone immigration. This is good for Quebec, good for protecting French and good for Canada.

• (1720)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I don't see Mr. Perron, so we will now proceed to Madame Normandin for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you for being here, Minister.

I would like to come back to the questions asked by my colleague Mr. Yves Perron. I would like you to tell us about the situation that prevailed when the program to grant 90,000 permanent residences was set up.

At that time, were the other business lines of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada fully operational?

I am talking about Quebec skilled workers, work permits, visas and family reunification. At the time the new program was created, were these business lines fully operational?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First of all, I would like to point out that when we created this program, we consulted the Government of Quebec. We gave the Government of Quebec the opportunity to participate in this unprecedented program.

I respect the Government of Quebec's decision to choose its policies. However, the last time I spoke with my counterpart, I again offered the Government of Quebec the opportunity to engage in this program.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Minister, my question is about the functioning of other sectors of activity.

I understand that if the minister had had a positive response, if he had been proud of the fact that everything was working 100%, he would have told me.

We somewhat robbed Peter to pay Paul in this context. This leaves everyone a little wanting. So I will move on to another question.

You talked to me about workers who are considered essential. We usually talk about the agriculture, health and education sectors. But there are other companies that employ essential workers. I'm talking about companies that provide services. I'm thinking of Hydro-Québec, which works as a subcontractor for the ministère des Transports du Québec, for example.

Quebec considers them essential. Is the minister prepared to broaden the criteria for those that Quebec considers essential?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I said, we continue to engage with businesses not only in Quebec, but across Canada.

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

[Translation]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We continue to engage with the Quebec government to understand its needs in the context of economic immigration.

In response to your question, we have invested heavily to accelerate the immigration process and meet Quebec's needs. I have given concrete examples of this progress.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Ms. Qunoo fled to Canada because her life was threatened due to her advocacy of Palestinian rights. Twenty-four thousand Canadians have signed a petition urging the minister to issue a temporary resident permit to her three children and husband, whose lives are at grave risk. As recently as May 10, an air strike hit next door to their family home.

Will the minister take action and issue a temporary resident permit for her family?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I want to begin by obviously acknowledging the very profound and tragic state of affairs in the Middle East. To everyone who has been displaced, our hearts go out to them. That is why the work that we do in Canada, when it comes to resettling those who have been displaced, is so important.

There is a system in place that allows those who wish to claim refugee status before the Immigration and Refugee Board tribunal to have those adjudicated independently from the political process. It's something that my colleague and all members would share in the way of principle. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the particulars of any individual case, but obviously I am aware of it.

As part of the broader work that we are doing, we will continue to have a system that is revered around the world for its work in human rights.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I've written to the minister about this, and I'll follow up with the minister about her specific case. I have consent to discuss her case on both the public record and with the minister.

Now while she awaits for their family's PR application to be processed, she applied for a TRV, for which her family was rejected. The IRCC agent cited paragraph 179(b) as the reason for the rejection, which occurred after IRCC's update to dual intent.

The minister has the ability to change this regulation that actively prevents spouses and children from reuniting. This call for action is also supported by the committee, in its most recent report tabled on May 13.

Will the minister suspend the use of paragraph 179(b), as called for by the community and recommended by CIMM?

• (1725)

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I acknowledge my colleague's question. As the members of this committee know, we've issued directions and guidance to the department. Obviously, my understanding is that the guidance is being followed.

In the event that there are cases of concern, my office is always open to discussing them with my colleague.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will end this round with Mr. Allison, and after that, Mr. Dhaliwal. Each of them will have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): I have two and a half minutes, but I have five minutes of questions.

What am I going to do?

The Chair: The first bell has to end, so—

Hon. Marco Mendicino: He can always ask me outside of the committee.

The Chair: And we have to work also on the estimates.

Mr. Dean Allison: The minister said that he'll stay.

Minister, thanks for being here.

Obviously you know about the study we are doing on temporary foreign workers, and agriculture has been raised over and over again in that context—food processing. Food security I think should be key for our country in many ways. COVID just showed us how vulnerable we are when it comes to our food security and our food supply chains.

I met with a group of farmers this week, and I hear over and over again about access to temporary foreign workers, when it comes to the program. My question is not on that. If I had five minutes, that would be the second part.

When we look at 400,000 permanent residents coming in, one of the things I'd like to ask is whether we could get you to champion a national economic immigration program. I believe we need strategies for our critical sectors, and food is one of them. I'm talking to farmers who say, "Listen, we need three people. We're getting one. It's not happening quickly enough." If we don't plant the food, we can't possibly harvest the food.

I guess my question to you is whether there is any way, when we talk about permanent residence of 400,000, that we could be looking at economic streams. I know we have pilot projects, but I am talking about working specifically with sectors. There are a number of sectors that have said they need strategies so they can make this happen. I would like to know your thoughts on that.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, I think there is much merit in what my colleague has put by the way of a question, and I thank him for his advocacy.

What I would say is that we do indeed work very closely, not only with the agricultural sector and farmers—I just recently met with a number of them in Quebec—but right across the economy to create those opportunities, those pathways. Yes, there are some pilots like the agri-food pilot. However, I would also point to the essential workers pathway, which offers an opportunity for many essential workers, in the sectors that my friend referred to, who may otherwise have a harder time staying here.

Of course, we embrace that. We believe that immigration drives the economy forward. It does create jobs. It does create opportunity.

I'm always happy to collaborate with my friend to talk to any of the leaders in his community.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you.

I probably have 30 seconds, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You have 2020 seconds.

Mr. Dean Allison: My final thoughts are on the temporary foreign worker program—and this will come out in our committee report—which has been difficult, challenging and not always timely. I mentioned to the minister that any way we can simplify that to help our ag workers—as has been mentioned today by my colleagues from Quebec—would be greatly appreciated.

I'll leave it there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Allison.

We will end this round and this panel with Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have two and a half minutes for your round of questioning.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like first of all to commend my friend Minister Mendicino for his leadership and the hard work— he and his staff have done during this pandemic. I also would like to echo the comments by my friend Jasraj Singh Hallan, on the other side, that you've been very accessible to this committee.

Minister, we all agreed that immigrants create jobs, help to drive economic growth and will, of course, play an important part in Canada's recovery in the coming months.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected low-wage workers, women, young people and racialized communities. Could you please tell me some of the highlights of the investments you are going to make to make sure that when we have this economic recovery, it is inclusive of all Canadians?

• (1730)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Madam Chair, first let me extend my gratitude to my friend and my colleague for all of the work he is doing in this space and for how passionate he is about it. We share a profound respect and belief that immigration isn't just an economic lever; it is one of the most meaningful ways that we are going to build the long-term prosperity of this country.

With regard to the specifics of his question, yes, of course, the essential workers pathway is unprecedented in its size, scope and speed. It's going to offer a pathway to stay in Canada for many here who are already and giving back in a variety of sectors of our economy, which is so vital, particularly now in the pandemic. That is such an important thing. The pandemic really has shone a light on how newcomers who come to this country, who roll up their sleeves, who are prepared to put their shoulder to the wheel and who want to give back at a time when we need it the most can achieve their full potential. By doing so, I believe Canada will achieve its potential as well.

With regard to racialized communities and those who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, I would say that we have introduced very specific measures, and not only to provide support for members of vulnerable populations. There is also a pilot program that we have invested in, again in the budget, that will help women of colour and young women who have come to Canada to start the next chapter of their lives. We are also changing the face—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We'll have to end it here. I'm sorry for interrupting.

With this, the panel comes to an end. Today we are considering the supplementary estimates (A) 2021-22, vote 1a under Department of Citizenship and Immigration, referred to the committee on Thursday, May 27. We will have to vote.

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1a—Operating expenditures.....\$24,500,000

(Vote 1a agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the supplementary estimates (A) 2021-22 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: With that, our first panel comes to an end.

Thanks a lot, Minister. On behalf of all members, I want to really thank you for taking time to appear before the committee and answering the questions raised by members. Thanks a lot for all the work you are doing. In saying so, I know that immigration is an important component of our economic growth.

We will suspend for two minutes to allow the minister to leave. If sound checks have to be done, the clerk will do that for the officials who will stay with us for the second hour.

Thank you, Minister.

• (1730)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1730)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

We will start our meeting with the officials for this one hour.

We will be going through the economic imperative and long-term importance of small rural municipalities outside of major cities retaining new immigrants. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, May 26, the committee is now commencing its study of this topic.

We are joined by officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. I would like to welcome Ms. Catrina Tapley, deputy minister; Ms. Caitlin Imrie, acting assistant deputy minister, settlement and integration; Ms. Marian Campbell Jarvis, assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; Mr. Daniel Mills, assistant deputy minister, operations; and Mr. Hughes St-Pierre, assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer and comptroller.

Thanks to all of you for appearing before the committee. Will you be doing opening remarks, or would you like us to go into the round of questioning?

• (1735)

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): If it's okay with you, Madam Chair, I have some quick opening remarks just to set the stage.

The Chair: Yes, we'll give you five minutes for your opening remarks. Madam Tapley, you can please proceed. The time is yours.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I will endeavour to be quick. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Across the country, communities in rural and northern Canada have told us that immigration is key to their economic and social well-being. It's one of the most important tools to fill labour market skills and shortages. Immigration is also vital to growing Canada's many rural communities.

[Translation]

While the pandemic has slowed immigration, we have continued to welcome newcomers and support Canada's regions through immigration. At the same time, different regions and communities across Canada have unique needs when it comes to immigration, and each community faces its own unique challenges.

To better address these different needs, we continue to design and implement pilots and programs that are tailored to regional economic development and labour market needs.

[English]

As this committee is aware, IRCC launched the rural and northern immigration pilot in 2019. This pilot supports smaller and more remote communities in accessing the economic benefits of immigration. We're currently working closely with the 11 communities in western Canada and Ontario, selected as part of the rural and northern immigration pilot, to customize best practices in place-based immigration for each local environment. All partners have now launched the pilot locally. To date, approximately 41 individuals have been selected, and we anticipate more selections in the coming months.

While we continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on the pilot, many communities are recommending applicants who are already working and residing there.

Flexibility is a key aspect of this pilot. A community-based approach allows partners to adjust to evolving economic realities, including those resulting from COVID-19, to ensure that immigration supports their economic development plans and complements their changing workforce needs. For example, communities may prioritize candidates in occupations that face shortages even in the context of rising unemployment. This includes the health care sector, such as personal support workers and licensed practical nurses.

[Translation]

Having local partners also allows the department to ensure that employment opportunities continue to be available. Our community partners include economic development corporations, chambers of commerce and community futures organizations. Our partners have indicated to us that their long-term labour market needs will continue, in spite of the pandemic.

[English]

The Atlantic immigration pilot has been a great example of how regional economic programming can be successfully implemented to attract and retain newcomers to areas outside of Canada's metropolitan centres. Following a successful evaluation, the AIP is transitioning into a permanent program that will share the benefits of economic immigration with this region, which has traditionally received a lesser share of economic immigrants.

[Translation]

Since the launch of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot, participating employers have made over 9,500 job offers in key sectors, including accommodations and food services, manufacturing and health care. As a result of these offers, more than 8,000 permanent residents have been admitted to the Atlantic region.

• (1740)

[English]

Even amid the economic uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the reality is that Canada still faces demographic challenges. This situation is especially pronounced in our country's many smaller communities.

[Translation]

In addition to the rural and northern immigration pilot and the Atlantic immigration pilot, IRCC looks forward to continuing to work with provinces and territories, as we design a new municipal nominee program.

Provincial and territorial experience in regional immigration will provide valuable insights toward the implementation of a program that meets the needs of underserved areas. This will also help us to support the recovery of the economy, which has been affected by the pandemic.

[English]

Of course, as Canada's core regional immigration program, the provincial nominee program will continue to be essential in responding to local immigrant needs.

The Chair: Please wind up, Ms. Tapley.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I am winding up right now.

Immigration will also continue to contribute to Canada's economy and communities in the long term.

Thank you for that.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Tapley.

We will now proceed to our round of questioning, starting our first round of six minutes with Mr. Seeback.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Great. Thanks very much.

Has the department gathered and then analyzed any data as to what the main challenges are for our small municipalities when they're looking at attracting and keeping immigrants in their communities? What would they say are the largest impediments right now? I can think of some off the top of my head, but they aren't backed by any data.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We've done two things. One, we have done consultations with communities and provinces and territories as we get ready to set up a municipal nominee program. The second is we've gathered good lessons learned from the existing federal regional pilots. I'll come back to that.

One is that smaller rural centres want a role in immigration selection. How do they complement domestic labour market needs? They have dual objectives here, and this is certainly what we've learned under the Atlantic immigration pilot, between economic establishment and retention.

If you will just permit me, I would point out that one problem we tried to solve was the question of retention in smaller communities. When we established the Atlantic immigration pilot in 2017 the goal was to retain more newcomers in the region, as in the provincial nominee program, which I think we would all say has been a success. What wasn't a success in certain regions was retention. In parts of Atlantic Canada I think it got as low as 30% for those being retained, and that's what we wanted to look at.

What do you do as a community with wraparound supports to ensure that newcomers are staying in the community and contributing to the vibrancy of the community? That's what we've heard back from communities themselves on how we do that while looking at some of the other lessons that are there, working with other partners, working with those economic development agencies, the chambers of commerce in the city. It's a whole-of-society effort to make that happen. That's one thing that's come back to us.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I dealt with the provincial nominee program when I was a member of Parliament in a different area, to a significantly higher degree. What we did see is that, for example, if those people went through the provincial nominee program to Manitoba or Saskatchewan, or any other province, after a certain amount of time they would then come into the GTA, because the GTA is where there are large cultural communities. Maybe I'm going to say this in an incorrect way, but there's going to be a comfort level for new Canadians. They want to come here. This is what I'm looking at.

When we look at a municipal nominee program, the challenge is going to be to have them stay in that municipality. I think that's the goal. I guess what I'm trying to ask is, how are we going to try to figure that out? If we have a municipal nominee program, and after a few years almost everyone ends up back in the GTA, it's not really serving the purpose.

• (1745)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, I think those are excellent points.

Again, I'll come back to the oldest of the ones we're talking about. It's from 2017, so it's not that old. If we look at the Atlantic immigration pilot, what we see is a question of how you build settlement support with the employer. This was an employer-focused program. It just wasn't enough—and I think this is what the honourable member is saying—to simply have a job offer and to have a job in the community. It was a matter of, how did you go beyond that?

One hallmark of that program is a mandatory settlement plan. It's not just a settlement plan for the principal applicant; it's a settlement plan for the family. That is the first need. Nobody's going to stay in a community if they don't have a job. The second need is that nobody is going to stay if there aren't supports for their family. What is the school situation for their children? Can their spouse work? Is there a settlement plan for them? What's the capacity in the community to look at other things like recreation facilities or language, and improving those things?

Then there is the third need. I don't think anyone is prepared to stay in a community that isn't welcoming. How is the community prepared to adapt to that? I think we have some good examples out of this program, and I'm sure we will out of the rural and northern one as well, of people getting together with other like-minded people in the communities to look at establishing things like faith circles and faith communities, such as building a local mosque. All of those things became really important as anchors for retention in what we were doing.

The other key one is flexibility. Each program had to have a little flexibility in it to adapt to local needs. That's one lesson I think we're learning already under the rural and northern pilot. Each community is a little bit different. We have to be flexible enough to accommodate that.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I saw the sign, so I have less than a minute now.

As we look to craft a report on this, is there any data you can share or table with the committee or any lessons you've gleaned from these other pilots that we can look at as part of our report?

The Chair: We can have a 15-second answer.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We will table the Atlantic immigration evaluation with the committee. As well, I think we have some important statistics on the current immigration landscape, how many people are staying in cities, how many people are in communities themselves, just as good background information. The AIP evaluation would, I would think, certainly be helpful.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: That's great. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Schiefke for six minutes for his round of questioning.

Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses, the departmental officials, for being here.

Deputy Minister, perhaps you could elaborate a little on the pilot project in Atlantic Canada. I'm really interested in hearing more about it. What is different about it? What is innovative about it? As well, perhaps you can give us maybe three to five examples or parts or components of it that you think have led to the preliminary success that it's seen so far.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you.

I'll come back to some of the comments I made previously.

In this one, it was the role of the employer, but you can't have the role of the employer without having the role of the community. That direct role and that direct stake in wanting to retain the employees who were coming in, the newcomers who were coming in, was key to the success of the program.

The other thing I would say is that—albeit it wasn't quite how we set it up, but how it has worked—there is good co-operation by the provinces. The four Atlantic provinces have been terrific partners in the Atlantic immigration pilot. We've negotiated carefully with them in a very collaborative way as we have been taking the Atlantic immigration pilot from a pilot to a permanent program. It's running through the regulatory process now.

As for other things I would point to as key hallmarks, I've talked about the important role of employers and the community on this, and how you designate an employer, and an employer's understanding of what their responsibilities are in looking at newcomers who are coming in.

There are also a couple differences back at the ranch, back at the department. One is something called the “dedicated service channel”. If we expected employers to step up, then we needed to step up our game vis-à-vis employers. What we created was a dedicated service channel so that employers had a place to call and had somebody to talk to who could help guide them through the immigration

process and guide them through what their responsibilities are. We have received a lot of positive feedback on how well this has worked. It works well for big employers, and it works well for small employers.

The other lesson I would come back to is that when you have a number of players in the process—community groups, employers, the provinces and territories, the federal government and settlement agencies—the field gets a little crowded. One of the things we'll want to look at as we go forward is our governance around this to make sure that everybody understands their roles and responsibilities. Program integrity is always an issue for us in the immigration system, and we want to make sure that continues in how we move forward around it.

This is something that's not in the evaluation, so perhaps these are more my own thoughts on this. Having communities understand the importance of immigration and having that strong burning platform about why it's important that I revitalize my community and that I have newcomers coming into my community and how that contributes to the vitality of my community are key to creating a welcoming society. When the players understand the positive benefits of immigration, their communities are more welcoming of people coming in.

• (1750)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Schiefke: Thank you.

I would also like to know if there are currently any programs that highlight the arrival of new cultures in these communities. You mentioned mosques, in response to a question from Mr. Seeback, but are there any programs or funds currently in place to help new immigrants in rural or semi-rural communities share their culture and take pride in it?

This could encourage them to stay where they are rather than seek out cultural communities in Montreal or Toronto, as Mr. Seeback said. In my riding of Vaudreuil—Soulanges, people often move to the island of Montreal because they find a greater number of people from their community there.

Are there programmes that aim to celebrate the coming of diverse cultures?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for your question and your suggestion, which I think is excellent.

We don't have a programme that specifically meets this criterion, but we do have good settlement programmes.

[*English*]

We work closely with our service provider organizations.

[*Translation*]

However, there are other programs within the Government of Canada. Canadian Heritage's community, multiculturalism and anti-racism program is really important.

[English]

We work closely with our colleagues who are there. I'm old enough, I guess, or have been in the department long enough, to remember when multiculturalism was part of our mandate as well, and how important it is for those things to go hand in glove to be able to have the celebrations you've talked about.

I do want to give a plug for our settlement service partners and how important the service they provide is.... It's not simply about learning English or French or having a—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: —job opportunity. It's about celebrating what's there. It's exactly what you said.

More and more, we find that our settlement agencies are taking that on as part of their responsibilities in the establishment programs or the settlement programs that they give.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schiefke.

We will now proceed to Madame Normandin for six minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Once again, I thank the senior officials for being here. You always provide us with very enlightening answers, which fuel our reflections.

I would like us to address one aspect of retention in the regions. I am thinking here of a Bloc québécois colleague who has just introduced a bill to grant tax credits to students who remain in the regions for a number of years after completing their studies.

Has IRCC considered tax credits as an economic incentive for regional retention?

• (1755)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for your suggestion. I think it is worth considering.

[English]

We've done quite a bit of analytical work in looking at regional trends. We see some positive things and some things where we still think we need work to be able to do this.

Looking back on regionalization trends, here's one of the things that we see as positive. If I look at the change in admissions between 2009 and 2019 by city, the biggest increases are in Moncton, Halifax and Fredericton. I don't think that's any mistake, given the Atlantic immigration pilot that we've had and where we've worked on that.

We still see more than 50% of new immigrants settling in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, but looking at partnering with other agencies as we do this, I'll come back to Atlantic Canada for a minute and the work that we've done with ACOA and how important those regional development agencies are to be able to do these goals.

ACOA has done a lot of work in Cape Breton with the University of Cape Breton on exactly the point the member has raised, which is looking at those students and at what it takes in working together to get those students attracted and anchored in the region.

Those are two off the top of my head.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

You talk about the fact that many immigrants stay in Montreal. But the language issue is what comes to mind. Unfortunately, it is said that it's much easier to speak English in Montreal than in the regions. Francization is an issue. Many people in the regions tell us about the importance of francization, which companies handle themselves by providing francization services to retain employees.

Has this aspect been covered in your analyses for Quebec with regard to retention in the regions? Have there been studies on this subject?

[English]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I'm not aware of studies per se, but we can look into it.

Second, I think you make a really important point for us on the availability of our services *en français hors Québec*. For our settlement services, we need to be able to run quality settlement services in French outside of Quebec for immigrants who are coming to Canada and want to live and work in French and support the vitality of francophone minority communities outside of Quebec. This is key to this department.

We have expanded our French settlement services outside of Quebec. We're working closely with organizations like the FCFA and others, and we'll continue to do this.

I'll double-check, Madam Chair, on studies as we've done this, but that's on our settlement services.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

My last question concerns the new program that allows 90,000 essential temporary workers and foreign graduates to apply for permanent residence.

I heard that this could drain Quebec of potential permanent residents, that they would leave Quebec. I was even told that other provinces were engaging in a form of raiding.

Have officials heard about it?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: First of all, I want to make it clear that this is not the aim of the program at all.

[English]

We have worked with and spoken to our colleagues in Quebec who have raised concerns around this. We're working closely with them. The Government of Quebec has space to increase its own programs in this regard. We've also offered our lessons learned on this because, frankly, it's a bit of an experiment for us on what this looks like and who is coming in. So we've offered to share our work on this. We have, as always, offered to be partners with them if they choose. But no, our goal is not to take immigrants away from Quebec.

The Chair: Mr. Regan, could you mute yourself.

There are 30 seconds for Madame Normandin.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

I will ask my questions, but I may get answers in the next round.

I would like to know, given the division of powers, how Quebec's role is considered.

I would also like to talk about the support that the federal government offers to non-profit organizations, NPOs, that work on regional retention.

These are the questions I will ask you in the next round.

• (1800)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Normandin.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Of course, the immigration process itself is part of the retention process. I'm wondering with the IRCC, are we back to normal processing times with respect to PR renewal, citizenship applications, and the like?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you. I wish I could have a more positive answer for you, Madam Chair.

We've made a lot of progress, but we are not back to pre-pandemic processing times—not yet. We continue to work away on that. We've had good success in working down the number of applications that we have and processing some of them. Work permit times are back within the service standard. I'm happy to give a positive report on where we are at with student applications, and some permanent [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] are a little better than others, but we continue to work our way towards getting back to those pre-pandemic service times and frankly doing better.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I wonder if officials can table with the committee just a quick update on each stream and where we're at with processing times, so that we get a sense of it. I'm sure that other MPs' offices are experiencing the same thing I am. My office is inundated with requests for help, as people are facing delays in processing, whether in urban or rural centres. It's everywhere, and that same applies to PR applications or renewal of PR, citizenships, and so on.

Whenever people phone in to make an inquiry—and this includes our office when we phone the department to make an inquiry—basically the only response back is that it's in process. We cannot get an update, we cannot get a timeline, no matter how long the delay is. For some people this has huge implications because it's tied to their job, for example. Some people may need to travel because of their work; therefore, getting citizenship is going to be key, as an example.

I wonder if I can get an update from the officials on that, which I want to raise as a major concern. I just cannot emphasize enough the importance of this.

With respect to another aspect of processing, I'm just wondering about IRCC's capacity. We're now experiencing applications that are being returned. In one instance, I had a case in my riding where someone had applied for spousal sponsorship and they clearly indicated in their application that this was a common law relationship and not a married relationship. Their application was returned after six months of its having been sent in, because IRCC says there is no marriage certificate associated with it. You can imagine the frustration the couple is dealing with.

Our office is trying to help with that. In those instances, I am asking for the IRCC agent to accept their application and to put them back in the queue on the envelope. Is that possible to do?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Each case is different. I'm sorry about this case, and for the misunderstandings that were there. Being able to put it back in the queue is something that we can certainly look into because I think you raise a good point around fairness.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Maybe I can follow up with you on that case.

I also have another situation where an application has been sent in by one of my constituents. It is a refugee sponsorship application. In that application, it is the father, the sister and the children of the sister who are privately sponsored. For some reason, IRCC has processed the application separately. The father has been approved, but the sister and the children have not, which is kind of odd. I'm not quite sure why that is. The other complication, of course, is that the father is elderly—86 years old—and the family is entirely uncomfortable with him travelling on his own on a long journey like that.

Again, in those situations, what can be done? Why are applications being processed separately like that?

• (1805)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: It's hard for me to comment on a specific application, Madam Chair.

We don't tend to process private sponsorship applications separately. We tend to look at the application as a whole. That's our practice. There may be issues where clearance may come back for one individual more quickly than the other, which would cause us to take a look at it that way.

I'm joined by Dan Mills.

Mr. Mills, do you want to comment on that? I don't believe that's our practice.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Mills (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you very much.

Indeed, it is not our practice to deal with these applications separately. As the deputy minister mentioned, there may be an aspect that is specific to this application. We can check it, find out exactly what was done in this case and why the family members were separated.

Having said that, it is unfortunately impossible for me to specify what happened in this case.

[*English*]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps I can then also follow up with you, Ms. Tapley, on that case.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When I spoke to IRCC, it said there is no reason why they are separated.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Mr. Allison for five minutes of questioning.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you, Madam Chair. I may be splitting some of my time with Mr. Hallan.

Officials, thank you very much for being here and for answering our questions.

I want to go back to, Ms. Tapley, what Mr. Seeback was talking about: retention. I'm always fascinated by that. I don't know if you're going to share some of that data, but could you share some of it now—maybe your high-level understandings and keys? Did some provinces do better? The more rural you were, the more remote you were, does that make a difference? Was the retention there less? Anything you could share with us on that would be great.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you.

Madam Chair, we're happy to share things.

Yes, some provinces do better than others. When we start with the provincial nominee program, I think—if I may make a suggestion, Madam Chair—that it would be worth looking at what Manitoba has done under its provincial nominee program. Manitoba was, more or less, first off the mark on the provincial nominee program. It created some strong anchor communities. When the Alberta and Saskatchewan economies were going absolutely full bore and attracting Canadians from all over the country, Manitoba managed to keep its base, to keep good retention around newcomers who had come into the province. I think it's worth a look at some of the successes that Manitoba had and why it had those successes. That's part of what we've tried to pick up in other places.

I'll come back to Atlantic Canada. With the four Atlantic provinces, when we set up the program, retention was a real issue. I

believe that in Prince Edward Island—and I'm happy to be corrected—the retention rate had dropped to as low as 30%, so seven out of 10 newcomers who were coming to P.E.I. were leaving the province. Nova Scotia, as I recall, was about the best. New Brunswick and Newfoundland were somewhere in the middle. None of it was great.

How could you set that up? What were the tricks to try to be able to do that? I have spoken to a bit of it.

I would say that the western provinces have had good success with the provincial nominee program and being able to distribute provincial nominee programs. However, all provinces struggle a little with the question of how we persuade immigrants to go further than Edmonton and Calgary. What are the other things we would want to look at?

Mr. Dean Allison: Thanks.

I'm just hoping that as we expand the program...and I realize that southwestern Ontario is not exactly northern and remote, but certainly there are rural communities. I have to put in a plug for southwestern Ontario—outside the GTA, of course.

I'll turn it over to my colleague Mr. Hallan.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you, Dean.

First and foremost, I want to wholeheartedly thank each and every one of the officials for not just being here but also putting in all that work throughout this entire time. It's not been easy. This is just another wholehearted show of gratitude to each and every one of you.

My first question is about procurement. I know that going forward we have these numbers with regard to people we want to bring in. When it comes to modernizing, do the officials have any word on how far we are with procurement on this new system?

● (1810)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We are so excited to have been given a big plug in budget 2021 to finish the work on our digital platform modernization. It's in three phases. We had secure funding for the first two phases, which are really about technical debt reduction on our system, which tends to break a lot, and better disaster recovery on our system.

The third phase is the big phase. The third phase is the transformation phase. That is the \$800-and-some million in budget 2021. We need to go about the process now of securing those dollars through a Treasury Board process, but we also need to do the good front-end work on this system we're building. We need to build a modern immigration system going forward. It's not just about replacing the IT from the global case management system. It's about actually building a system that can transform our business, that can do better client service, that can do better integrity and that really lets us be quicker, faster and more competitive with what we're doing.

That is not going to turn on a dime. I anticipate that you'll see the long funding profile on that if you look at budget 2021. It's a five-year funding profile. We'll go through it carefully in phases. What we don't want to do is fall into the trap that others have fallen into on new IT builds. Those good lessons learned from systems like Phoenix are really important to us. To invest in change in transformation, to invest in the dialogue with clients, to invest in good conversations around this, it feels like a really important step that—

The Chair: Could you please wrap up, Deputy Minister?

Okay. Thank you.

We'll now proceed to Mr. Regan for his five-minute round of questioning.

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

Ms. Tapley, you said at one point that you wanted to come back to Atlantic Canada.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Geoff Regan: Well, that's a very popular sentiment across the country, as you can imagine. A lot of people are wanting to do that. As cases drop across the country, I hope that more and more people will be able to do that—and that we'll be able to go elsewhere, such as visit my in-laws in the Warton, Ontario, area.

On an earlier question to the minister on the temporary resident to permanent resident pathway, which of course is important in rural areas, it kind of gave the impression that resources are being diverted from perhaps one part of the department to that. Is that what's happening in that regard?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, let me first ask the member if my mother put him up to that question.

We always move resources around in the department. Frankly, we want to be able to do that better and more seamlessly. Moving away from a paper-based system to a proper modern digital system lets us do that, so that we don't have pockets of people who don't have a ton to do versus people who are really overworked, and we're able to move those applications seamlessly.

Your question was around the TR to PR. We have moved some areas where people work in the department. For instance, on temporary resident visas, where individuals are not allowed to travel now for discretionary purposes, we have moved some work from that to focus on other lines of business, to focus on those who can travel. We have not done it at the expense of important lines of business, such as spousal or parents and grandparents. Those things are very important to us, that we're able to reduce those processing times and have better service in those areas.

I'm not sure I answered completely, Madam Chair. Sorry.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I think that gives me what I'm looking for.

By the way, I did not hear from your mother, although I'm sure she's looking forward to your visiting as soon as possible.

[*Translation*]

I would like to clarify the issue of integration support services in the country. The agencies that provide these services are very important. I am very familiar with the services that are provided in Halifax.

How are the costs of these services determined?

I'm under the impression that things work differently in Quebec than in the other provinces. I am thinking here of transfers and so on.

• (1815)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: You are right. The model in Quebec differs from that in the rest of Canada.

[*English*]

There is a very specific funding model in the Canada–Quebec accord. It relates to overall rates of government spending minus debt servicing. Then there's a formula for numbers of non-francophone immigrants who arrive in Quebec. That's the formula for Quebec.

For the rest of Canada, it is an appropriation model, as it is with other departments. The funding available for settlement services outside of Quebec has increased in recent years to keep up with the increases in the number of level spaces we have.

Ms. Imrie, I wonder if you have the amount for settlement services outside of Quebec.

Ms. Caitlin Imrie (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Settlement and Integration, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): As to the amount for settlement services outside of Quebec, in 2021-22 the government will be investing over \$876 million to support the needs of newcomers and refugees. This represents an increase of 5% in comparison with 2020-21.

Hon. Geoff Regan: What about inside Quebec?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: For Quebec, as I recall off the top of my head, for the last year it was a little over \$600 million.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I want to ask about how the modernization of the system is going. I'd like you to have five minutes to talk about that, but maybe you could do so for a few seconds.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Our focus right now is on phases one and two of good technical debt reduction so that our system will be able to do some of the things we've done over the last year. Frankly, I think we've done more over the past year with our system than we thought we could, which is great news. We need better ground-to-cloud technology so that we can do digital applications and digital intake. Our focus has really been on that. Then we will get on to the great part.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed with Madame Normandin for two and half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

I'll come back to Mr. Regan's question. I'm thinking of a local organization whose representatives will be appearing before the committee. This organization, called L'Ancre, recruits people in Montreal, takes them on guided tours of my riding, invites them to stay and shows them the benefits of doing so. That is the approach that this organization uses to keep people in the regions.

If I understand correctly, these organizations are funded solely under the Canada-Quebec Accord and according to the number of immigrants to be francized.

Did I understand correctly?

[English]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: For settlement services in Quebec, the member is absolutely right: settlement services in Quebec are the responsibility of the Government of Quebec, and they are funded under the agreement from the Canada-Quebec accord. The funding formula under the Canada-Quebec accord for these services is related to the overall rate of spending of the Government of Canada minus debt service charges. There is a second part to the formula. There is additional compensation for the Province of Quebec related to the number of non-francophone immigrants who arrive in the province.

It's those two things together that make up the funding under the accord. The floor in that funding re-establishes itself every year, and we go forward from there.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

Services are another aspect of regionalization. I'm thinking of Service Canada points of service, for example, which are often not very accessible in the regions. I know that this is not the responsibility of IRCC, but is this a criterion that your department considers?

• (1820)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: This may not be exactly what we are talking about, but I will make a few comments all the same.

[English]

Services available to newcomers, whether in Quebec or in the rest of Canada, are really important. It's important that we look at this as a whole in terms of what government services are available to newcomers. That's why it's so important that we work closely with our provinces and territories in terms of who is providing what services to whom. A better coordination between those services and the work we've done with PTs on that is really important.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Tapley.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

First, I have a quick question about the new digitizing process. When do the officials anticipate that work will be completed?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: The work on digital platform modernization that we speak about in budget 2021 is just beginning. We anticipate that it will probably be a good five years by the time we're able to launch our brand new system. We have important work that we have to do upfront on this. The lessons learned from other large IT projects are really not to skimp on that good project definition, on what you need and what resources you need to invest where, to create the system that you need at the other end.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Wow. When is phase three? Is it months away or years away?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We are starting phase three now. Now that we have a strong indication from budget 2021 that we will actually have money for phase three, we're starting now.

We need to finish phase one and phase two. There's a lot of work under way on disaster recovery and our technical debt reduction with the system we have, because we need to remember that we'll be using the global case management system for the next five to seven years. It's important that we continue to work on the system we have.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would just raise this issue because, of course, we're all waiting for the system to be up and running, but in the meantime, there's a huge backlog as a result of COVID-19 as well. That has really added to the existing delays. Unless there are new resources put into the system to deal with those backlogs, we are going to be faced with ongoing serious delays in application processing.

Could I get the officials to provide a quick update on when we can expect the new citizenship guidebook to be released?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We're happy to provide an update.

I'm sorry. I thought you were asking for it in writing.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's no problem. We can get it in writing.

In terms of resettlement services, I wonder if we can—

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, your time is up.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Chair, can I just finish my question quickly?

The Chair: I'll give you two seconds to wrap it up if you can.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I wonder if we could have submitted to the committee the breakdown of the resettlement services. If you have it community by community in the rural areas, I think that would be really helpful for us to see the bigger picture.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We will now proceed to Mr. Hallan for four minutes.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I'm looking forward to having tabled by the officials the processing times and what the effect is. Given all these new programs coming up, there is a huge concern about backlogs.

I want to know from the officials what we are going to be doing to address those backlogs. Do we have a timeline as to when those backlogs are going to be cleared up?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thanks, Madam Chair.

We have a number of applications that we are holding onto, because as you know, the border remains closed to new permanent residents. We continue to accept applications and are happy to accept applications. We continue to [Technical difficulty—Editor] and express entry, because we have a three-year levels plan. The levels plan for 2022 and 2023 will see increases. We'll go to 411,000 and 421,000. I need that inventory to be able to process and to be able to make sure that we meet those targets.

I would be a lot more worried about being able to clear those backlogs, once we have the border reopened, if I didn't have really good levels space as we move ahead.

• (1825)

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: -Thank you for that.

Again, are we going to be concerned that more more and more applications are going to be piling in? Are we going to address that with more resources and how many? Do we have a plan or an estimate for how many more we think are going to be coming in and how many resources it's going to take to clear those up?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: The year 2021 has been a strange year for so many different reasons. From an immigration point of view, the minister has said previously that it's the ultimate paradox that we're trying to run an immigration system and keep the border closed at the same time. This year we have pushed and experimented with some new things. That includes the TR to PR pathways. It includes what we've done in express entry on those Canadian experience class draws.

I will come back to express entry. Express entry gives us a lot of control over what we're able to do and the number of applications we are bringing into the system. I would also point out that in budget 2021 there was a very small item on express entry, giving us a go-ahead to try to secure some additional flexibilities in express entry. I think that's going to be a really important component of doing it.

As for resources, the department did receive additional resources with the levels plans from the previous two years as we saw the levels go up, so that there is a corresponding increase in resources for the department to be able to handle that.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: That you for that.

I've heard many times through even my own office—and there was a report on this as well—about how returned applications don't always have a tracking number when they get sent back. In some cases, for constituents of mine, the return mail has gone to the wrong address.

When we're talking about modernizing the system, do we have something to address this? What are we doing to address that now?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Moving away from paper-based applications is going to be key in that modernization. With respect to the member's previous question, I would point out that we are processing more per month now, in many cases, than we were doing in 2019. The processing efforts from the department have really expanded in 2021. We learned some important lessons from 2020.

That's just to give some assurance to the committee, Madam Chair, that we really are focused.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you for that.

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Hallan. Thank you.

We will now end this panel with Mr. Dhaliwal, who will have four minutes for his round of questioning.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to commend the officials for the long hours they have invested in this committee over the past few months and for the great work they have done and the information they are providing to committee members.

Madam Chair, recently the ATIP management action plan was announced, which will improve and modernize the system and provide faster response time to the clients.

The number of ATIP requests is increasing year after year. I would like to know about this action plan. What are some of the initial and promising results that have been shown so far?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Let me start by saying that we have serious challenges with access to information and privacy in this department in terms of volumes. We are a department that is committed to upholding our obligations under the act, and we are working closely with the Office of the Information Commissioner on this.

We receive more access to information requests than the rest of the Government of Canada combined. Those numbers have grown significantly over the last few years, so we are prepared to try just about anything to make sure that we're able to stay on top of our service standards. In that regard, one of the things that will be most important to do is to have clients access, in a real way, their own information, and to expand the work in the My Account portal.

I'm happy to report that one of the biggest successes we've had is with the recent announcement of a better tracker on My Application. We have started with citizenship applications. We are watching closely how this is working and how it's going. Our intention is to absolutely move this to other lines of business. We would be only too happy to come to give the committee a bit of a demonstration on how this works and what we've done with it.

Second, there is our own action plan on this. It's also to look at technology and where we can use technology as our friend in automating some of the processes to improve our processing times. We have worked closely with the private sector on this in using bots inside our own system to retrieve information and bring it forward.

What is really important for us to do, as other members have indicated previously at this committee, is simplifying IRCC's online request form through the use of drop-down menus, and enhancing our website to improve the transparency of how processing times are communicated.

We've gotten better in our capacity to push and notify clients' targeted information, but there's still room for improvement and to really move forward on this.

The final thing is that we do a dance with legal considerations and providing more information to clients. When we have rejected applications, we should be clear with clients on our reasons for doing so. We continue to look at that and how we craft those letters, so that they are in plain language.

• (1830)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: This past Monday there was an express entry draw that invited nearly 6,000 candidates with a score of at least 380—which has come down from 400—besides the 27,232 and another 5,000 applications.

I would like to hear a response from the officials on how IRCC is prioritizing candidates already in Canada. How will we continue to

admit record-breaking numbers of new immigrants over the next few years to meet the minister's mandate?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: The Canadian experience class is largely composed of people who are already here and working. We continue to focus on that as part of our draws on express entry. As that pool replenishes, we continue to draw from the pool.

Even though the score may have dropped to 330, I'll point out that 330 is a very high score in terms of human capital. Strong language, strong education and good work experience, all of these components are there.

The Chair: Thank you. With that, our panel comes to an end. I want to take this opportunity to thank all of the officials for appearing before the committee.

On behalf of all of the members of this committee, I want to thank you for all the work you are doing. I know it has been very difficult over the last 14 months, so we really thank you. You had to adapt to so many changes with the pandemic, so keep up this good work.

The meeting is adjourned.

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