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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

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• (1615)
[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 3 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Pursuant to the House order of September 23, 2020, proceedings will be made available by the House of Commons website.

So that we are aware, the website will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline some rules that have now become quite familiar to all of you. Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of "floor", "English" or "French".

I understand that we have some members participating in person, so just proceed as you normally would when the whole committee is meeting in person in the committee room.

Keep in mind the health protocols from the Board of Internal Economy.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you're on the video conference, Madam Minister, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those of you in the room, your microphones will be controlled as normally by the highly dedicated, highly trained professionals employed by the House of Commons who are there to support us.

This is a reminder that all comments by members should be addressed to the chair. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

With regard to the speakers list, we'll do our best, between myself and the clerk, with the people who are in the room and online, to keep that coordinated and consolidated.

We will now welcome our witnesses. We have the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion. We have Graham Flack, deputy minister, Employment and Social Development; Mark Perlman, chief financial officer, Employment and Social Development and Benoît Robidoux, associate deputy minister, Employment and Social Development.

Minister Qualtrough, you have five minutes for your opening remarks. Welcome to the committee. You have the floor.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Thank you, Chair and committee members, for inviting us to join you here today.

As was said, I'm accompanied by ESDC deputy minister Graham Flack, associate deputy minister Benoît Robidoux, and chief financial officer Mark Perlman.

I'm here today to speak to the main estimates for 2020-21, which represent a total of \$68.6 billion in planned budgetary expenditures. This is a net increase of \$3.8 billion over the 2019-20 main estimates. This is primarily due to an increase to old age security pension and guaranteed income supplement payments resulting from the planned increase in the average monthly benefit amount and changes in the number of beneficiaries.

These main estimates include funding for seniors pensions, learning and skills development, apprenticeship programming and transfers to provinces and territories. This money is spent to assist students to afford higher education, youth to gain valuable work experience, afford workers with apprenticeship opportunities and provide basic income security to seniors.

I and the officials are happy to speak in more detail to these main estimates.

Mr. Chair, since March 2020, our world has completely changed, but our government's priorities—supporting Canadian workers, investing in youth and helping people overcome barriers to training and working—remain the same.

Since March 2020 we've also had supplementary estimates (A), which were debated in the House in June, and supplementary estimates (B).

Mr. Chair, I will make two specific notes related to the supplementary estimates.

The first is on the Canada student grant program. The supplementary estimates (A) showed \$912 million to reflect the total funding that could have been allocated for the CSSG. Given the cancellation of this program, this total has been adjusted and supplementary estimate (B) is \$0. I note that all monies have been recovered.

Second, supplementary estimates (B) show an additional \$28.5 billion in CERB payments under statutory authorities. This brings the proposed authorities for the CERB to \$88.5 billion, which is for the full 28 weeks of the CERB. This helped almost nine million Canadians during a very difficult period.

I will conclude by highlighting the extraordinary measures we have taken to support workers, youth and persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the pandemic first shuttered our economy in March, we moved very quickly to support Canadians. This began with a moratorium on student loan repayments, the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada emergency student benefit.

We also created thousands of jobs and training opportunities for youth and provided a one-time payment for persons with disabilities.

As of last Friday, payments were made to more than 1,642,000 persons with disabilities to help them with additional expenses incurred due to COVID-19.

As the CERB was coming to an end, we made changes to the EI system so that more people could access benefits, including regular and special benefits.

The EI system is currently the best tool at our disposal to support Canadian workers in this transition from emergency to recovery. Features like working while on claim, access to training and work-sharing provide incentives to work and help keep people connected to the labour market.

For Canadians who still don't qualify for EI, we introduced a complementary new suite of benefits: the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery sickness benefit and the Canada recovery caregiving benefit.

The Canada recovery benefit, just like EI, has a requirement that people must be looking for work and has built-in integrity measures for the application process. Together these new measures are helping millions of Canadians in this challenging time.

Mr. Chair, the appropriations requested in both these main estimates and supplementary estimates (A) and (B) would allow us to continue to support Canadians during the pandemic and beyond.

I would now be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We're going to start with the Conservatives. Mr. Kent, please, you have six minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and I thank Deputy Minister Flack and the other officials for attending with us today.

I agree that discussion and examination of the main estimates tabled in February is through the looking glass, given all that has happened since March and many billions of dollars spent.

First, can you tell us how many of the 25,000 employees of the department, including those who work under Service Canada, have now returned to work or are working productively from home?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Certainly a main priority for us as we moved to support Canadians was to make sure that our employees were safe, could work from home, could be productive and attend to their own individual circumstances while still doing their jobs.

Graham, can you give us the employee details, please?

Mr. Graham Flack (Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): I would say that literally all of our employees are working productively. They might argue it's too productively, given the pressures that have been put on the department. There are individuals, for example, in the passport office area who would have seen a decline in work and have been reassigned to areas like EI. Everyone is productively working.

In terms of those who are in the office, it really varies. Where we can socially distance safely, the Service Canada centres have reopened. We're not back to full occupancy but to socially safe occupancy.

I would say that in our highest offices and our processing centres, there would be up to 25% of employees who would be physically present in the office. At our headquarters—our large building here—our occupancy is about 3%.

That has necessitated a massive investment in our network. To give you a sense of it, Mr. Kent, pre-crisis we would have had four employees working remotely on any given day. We average over 25,000 employees every day now.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

Minister, you mentioned the supplementary estimates (B) and the \$28.5 billion in new government spending over the rest of the year for CERB, which actually terminated at the end of September.

I wonder if you could explain how those funds are being spent or were spent.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you. I will get Mark to give the more granular details.

We had originally invested approximately \$60 billion in the CERB through supplementary estimates (A) and we added an additional \$28 billion through supplementary (B)s, because we were both further along in the calendar year in the months that were covered and also because we added an additional four weeks.

Mark, can you add some further detail?

Mr. Mark Perlman (Chief Financial Officer, Department of Employment and Social Development): Yes, Minister.

In supplementary estimates (A), we provided the estimate of what we were expecting to spend. Because it was statutory, it was for information purposes only. For supplementary estimates (B), we brought it up by the \$28.5 billion to get us to the funded amount. This is an up-to amount; it is based on what we are projecting to spend.

As of September 30, we'd spent just over \$77 billion. We were projecting spending another \$3.3 in the schedule that came in the Bill C-4 schedule. This is an up-to amount, and it's whatever we're planning to spend.

The other element is that people still have the ability to apply for the CERB up until December 2 and go retroactive to that period, so this is to be able to cover that amount.

• (1625)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

Minister, thank you for following up on the question I asked you last Thursday.

You informed me on the weekend that issuance of the notices of debt were to resume this week to lawyers who are holding severance packages in trust until back payment of EI claimed, and the same to employers.

Can you tell me if those notices have gone out, and how they are being circulated?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks for the question. It was really important for me to get you further details.

As you said, as part of our effort to support Canadians during the pandemic, in March we put a pause on collection activities for all ESDC debts until the end of September. This meant that notices of debt were not being issued.

As we transition back to a different, simplified EI system, we resumed issuing these debt notices on November 1. However, the big caveat, as I explained, is that all debts will be removed from collection activities until February 2021.

Graham, or Benoît maybe, could you explain the process of issuing these notices and how they're actually delivered?

Mr. Graham Flack: Minister, I believe it's through email communication principally, when we have that with the individuals, but it's also through letters.

The letter does make it clear that the individual can work out a sort of payment schedule with us when they owe the resources. I would say it's softly written in a way that's designed to be flexible, given the context that we're in.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack. Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Next we're going to Mr. Dong, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): I want to welcome the minister this afternoon, as well as Deputy Minister Flack.

My question is in two parts. The first part has to do with the Canada recovery benefit. There are a number of items seen in the supplementary estimates that address the various supports for people facing economic hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now that the CERB has ended, Canadians have migrated to a simplified EI program and the Canada recovery benefit. Could you explain how these two initiatives tie into our government's larger economic recovery strategy, including the changes to the EI program, as well as how these initiatives are better suited to recovery than CERB?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question. There a lot to unpack there.

When we put CERB in place, it was at a time when we asked people to stay home and not go to work. We effectively shut down the economy in the interest of public health. We weren't able at that time to use the EI system to deliver as quickly as we wanted to or to as many people as we wanted to help.

Public servants have been working non-stop to get the system ready to transition unemployed workers back to EI. As I said, it's the best system we have, and it has robust integrity measures and work incentives. We made the eligibility criteria for EI more flexible. We set a uniform unemployment rate across the country that set standard eligibility criteria. We gave workers hours of credit and we set the minimum EI weekly amount at \$500.

We also wanted to continue helping workers who still didn't qualify for EI, like gig workers or the self-employed. We recognized that many workers would continue having ongoing care responsibilities, and we wanted to support workers who were sick or had to self-isolate because of COVID. We wanted a longer runway for Canadians to provide certainty for the next year in terms of the benefits they could access. Canadians know that these benefits are available to them should there be outbreaks or waves like the one we're experiencing now.

We also wanted to ensure equity between EI and the new recovery benefit. For example, the minimum number of EI weeks is the maximum number of the CERB weeks. The minimum EI weekly benefit is the amount of the CERB, and we wanted to address concerns raised over disincentivizing work. Basically we wanted to send the clear message that there's an expectation to work if you're able to and it's available, but that if you're not or if you don't have a job, we want to make sure that we have your backs as well.

• (1630)

Mr. Han Dong: That's great. Thank you, Minister.

My second question has to do with support for students. I know our government, in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has introduced the Canada emergency student benefit to provide direct income assistance to students. I know that at Seneca College in my riding, for example, the students there were counting on this type of income during the summer to pay for their expenses, their rent or their tuition in the fall. The CESB was very helpful in providing that support. Can you also discuss the packages or measures other than CESB that the government provided to support students, and anything else you'd like to include or tell the committee about the support for students?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We have invested \$8 billion in measures to support students, which included, of course, the CESB at \$1,250 a month, or \$2,000 a month for students with dependents and disabilities. We also made investments in job creation and investments that allowed students to continue their studies. This included things like expanding employment, skills development and youth programming, including thousands of jobs, as I said, through Canada summer jobs; the student work placement program; and the support for students learning program. Then we immediately put a temporary moratorium on student loan payments, doubled the Canada student grants and enhanced the Canada student loan program. All of this was an effort to provide a wholesome package of measures for our students and young people.

Mr. Han Dong: That's great.

How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair: You have just under a minute for the question and the answer.

Mr. Han Dong: On the Canada recovery sickness benefit, I know why this program was designed, but I want to hear from the minister how this program in particular is supporting Canadians during the pandemic.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks. I'll be super-quick.

As you know, the sickness benefit was legislated with all-party support, and I thank everyone for that.

It's two weeks at \$500 a week to make it a little easier for people to make the choice to stay home and self-isolate. We've already had about 123,000 Canadians access this benefit, and really it's a game-changer in terms of our public health goals and economic stability.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

[English]

Mr. Han Dong: Yes, it was very much—

Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for being here.

My first question is about the benefit for persons with disabilities. The department allocated funding for a one-time payment of up to \$600 per person.

However, many people in my riding contacted my office to say that they were not eligible for the benefit because they had never applied for the disability tax credit certificate. More people could receive the tax credit than have actually applied for it. The deadline to apply for the credit was extended to December 31.

Has your department estimated how many people with disabilities are entitled to the benefit but have still not applied?

• (1635)

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I don't know if there is anybody more frustrated than me at our inability to help more Canadians with disabilities.

Quite frankly, we are very excited to have helped 1.6 million Canadians, and we hope to help many more by extending the eligibility period for the DTC, the disability tax credit, until the end of December.

We also know that the rate of disability in this country is significantly higher. I have been very honest with Canadians that up until this point, we haven't had at our disposal as a federal government a way to deliver directly to everyone with a disability, and we are planning to make sure this never happens again by modernizing, updating and making more inclusive our eligibility criteria. Quite frankly, disability policy has been largely driven historically by tax policy. We need to change that, and our citizens deserve it.

I don't know, Benoît or Graham, if you have any specific numbers on how many people it is. Through the DTC, the VAC programming and through CPP disability, I believe our estimates are 1.8 million, but please correct me if I have that wrong.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Graham Flack: Minister, the deadline was extended, as Ms. Chabot mentioned, further to calls from disability groups. The groups feel that the extra time will provide an opportunity to reach out to the necessary people to apply.

It's pretty tough to know exactly how many people will ultimately receive it. The whole idea is to give all those who may be eligible an opportunity to submit their applications. With all the new benefits being offered, it's pretty tough to predict how many people will end up receiving it.

Ms. Louise Chabot: My second question is on the same topic, but it's shorter.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is ongoing. Are you considering a second support payment and have you budgeted for that?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for your question.

We haven't made a decision, but we are fully aware that our expenditures continue to rise, as in the case of persons with disabilities, so, certainly, that is a discussion we will be having.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Now I would like to talk employment insurance. I already raised this in the House.

The recent measures for greater employment insurance flexibility and the new recovery benefits were welcome; the social safety net is now stronger. You estimated the number of people who could access both employment insurance through the flexible measures and the new Canada recovery benefit.

Do those estimates still stand, or are people continuing to lose their jobs?

In the months ahead, can we expect those estimates to be revised upwards to reflect higher demand?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's a great question.

We estimated that roughly three million people would access employment insurance benefits. Thus far, 1.6 million have received EI benefits, and another 1.2 million have access to the other benefits. That's a total of about three million people. We had estimated that the benefits would be available to between three million and four million people, so we are below the estimate, but applications are still coming in.

Mr. Flack, did you have anything to add?

Mr. Graham Flack: I would point out that the numbers we put forward and the calculations we did were to help us prepare for a worst-case scenario. We had to prepare for the worst to ensure the employment insurance system could handle two or three million claimants within a few weeks, something that would normally take a year.

It is true that the numbers we have seen represent fewer claimants than in our scenario projections. So far, fewer people have transitioned to the employment insurance system. It is something we are examining, but it seems to be due to the fact that the economic situation is slightly better than anticipated.

As far as the new benefits go, the numbers are more or less in line with our estimates. All in all, we are below the number of

claimants expected. We are doing an analysis to determine why exactly that is, but it's likely due to the fact that the economic situation is not as poor as assumed in our scenarios.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot and Mr. Flack.

It is now over to Ms. Gazan for six minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to welcome the minister to our meeting today.

My first question relates to the fact that we know that throughout the pandemic there have been several groups that have been totally left behind. One group in particular has been the disability community, which had to wait until National AccessAbility Week at the end of May to get any sort of response from your government. This is totally unacceptable.

In addition, they had to wait until just last week—over seven months after the pandemic was declared—to receive a one-time \$600 tax credit, which in fact only 40 persons with disabilities were able to access due to serious issues with the disability tax credit. Tax credits and savings plans for disabled persons are simply not good enough, and we've certainly witnessed that. The failures of this federal government to support disabled people during the pandemic should prompt a sweeping review of federal disability programs and policies in order to support disabled people, because they have been made the most vulnerable through the holes in the federal social safety net, as you have acknowledged today, Minister.

Prior to the pandemic, people in the disability community had been pushing for a guaranteed livable basic income in addition to the supports we currently have and will have in the future. Is your government open to bolstering income security programs to ensure that disabled persons can live with human rights and not legislated poverty, as affirmed in our Canadian charter? If you are open to that, what sorts of changes would you make to bolster our social security programs?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for that question, but I feel I need to correct you slightly. By the beginning of April we had taken a number of measures to ensure that our pandemic response was disability-inclusive, including appointing a COVID disability advisory group to make sure that we had lived experiences and real-time perspectives on what was going on on the ground. That group was invaluable in terms of giving us advice on our public health measures, on our community support initiatives and on a number of really important steps we took as a government.

In terms of moving forward, we have learned a big lesson from this, which many advocates have been pointing out to government for a long time, and that is around our inability to directly deliver the supports they need to Canadians with disabilities. That's why in the Speech from the Throne we committed to creating the Canada disability benefit, which is modelled after the GIS. It will be a direct income support to Canadians with disabilities. Underlying that will be a significant eligibility form in terms of how Canadians qualify for our benefits.

As I said, it's unacceptable that tax credits perform the kind of gatekeeping function, if you will, with regard to getting access to many of our programs and services, and we're going to change that.

I will also correct the member and say that it was a one-time direct payment that 1.6 million people got. They did get \$600 in their bank account. Again, I know it was way overdue, but I can assure you it wasn't for lack of trying on the part of public servants, who had to create a brand new delivery mechanism to do it.

Ms. Leah Gazan: With all due respect, Minister, you're actually not correcting me; you are actually correcting disability advocates throughout the country who have informed my question today.

My second question, Minister, is about changes to the EI system that are completely insufficient. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has reported that 776,000 Canadians who access the service are now ineligible for any further federal support, and these are predominantly low-wage part-time workers and low-paid self-employed workers. Beyond this, many Canadians do not fit into our current EI programs, such as people with complex mental health issues and trauma who are unable to hold onto a full-time job, or people who have not worked or are living rough, and that certainly is very common in my riding.

We know the best deterrent to COVID-19 is frequent handwashing and being housed, and that requires having a home, so not only are the income support programs offered by your government inadequate in allowing people to follow basic health and safety guidelines set out by Health Canada, but we are also seeing a rise of first-time homelessness.

As the pandemic persists, the failure of your government to not properly invest in these basic human rights, as we are obliged to do as members of Parliament and as stipulated in our charter, is placing Canadians further at risk.

Knowing all of this, why is there nothing in the estimates to address those being left out of the EI system before this crisis gets worse?

• (1645)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you again for your question.

When we added additional flexibilities to the EI system toward the end of September, it was with the goal of getting as many workers as possible in and give them support, access to training, working while on claim and all the benefits that system, as clunky as it is, has to offer. We created the recovery benefits, sickness benefit and caregiving benefit knowing that we wanted to support workers who weren't captured even with those flexibilities.

As a longer-term measure, our government is absolutely supportive and aims to overhaul the EI system, I'd say, and try to make it more reflective of how Canadians work today. Certainly it was tough in March to not be able to use the system to help as many people as we wanted to.

In terms of the housing piece, Minister Hussen is appearing next, and I know he'd be happy to give you more information on that. I don't think I could do it justice, but I hear you in terms of the need for income support for all Canadians and between the Canada child tax benefit, the old age security and GIS, and now our new disability support benefit, I'm hoping that we are getting there.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

We are going to Ms. Falk, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

In your notes you referred to the net increase of \$28 billion over the 2019-20 main estimates. I am wondering if this net increase for OAS is a reflection of indexed inflation or if it is a reflection of expected changes to the program schedule.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you. I'll ask Mark to answer that detail.

Mr. Mark Perlman: It is based on all the projections of our aging population and all of the indexing that has been given to us by the actuaries, so it is to keep up with the trends of our population.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay, thank you.

I think everybody around this virtual table would agree that it's critical that Canadians have access to their benefits in a timely and efficient manner. We do know that with COVID-19, this stability is all that more important.

The departmental plan mentions that the department is undergoing changes to how it delivers services to Canadians. Among these changes is moving OAS benefits to the CPP IT platform.

I'd like to discuss the service standard, particularly as that pertains to these programs. I recently had a senior's case brought to my attention. In this case, the individual had been informed by Service Canada that it could take four months to process their CPP application and another eight months, or about 240 days, for its decision on their OAS application. The timeline posted for mailed-in application and applications received at Service Canada for CPP is 120 days.

Let's also keep in mind that many, if not all, Service Canada locations have been closed for a long duration of time during this pandemic and that many rural Canadians do not have access to rural broadband and either need to mail an application in or need to attend a Service Canada office. It would be my expectation that shortening that timeline is a goal for the department.

What funds, if any, are dedicated to improving service standards for Canadians?

• (1650)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Your question is super-specific, so I'll turn to the officials.

Mr. Graham Flack: Mark, I'll get you to speak to the specific allocation we have.

Indeed, we have sought additional funds to address some of the service standard issues.

In the department pre-crisis, 100% of the processing work would have been done in processing centres. We would have had zero per cent of people working from home. We're not structured to allow people to work from home, so you are right that we did experience an interruption in the crisis as a result of the fact that we had to almost instantly equip and secure the ability of individuals to work at home. That did result in a reduction in service standards.

EI is the area I could point to where we've had real success. Our service standard is that we would pay 14 days after eligibility, 80% of the time. With the new people who have come on EI, about 90% have been paid within a couple of days of eligibility and 96% have been paid within 14 days of their eligibility, so we're greatly exceeding the service standards.

The ambition you've laid out for much faster service standards is why we are investing not only in the new systems that will allow us to do that more efficiently, but in additional people who will be hired in the department to improve the standards.

When you consider we had to displace the entire workforce to work from home, overall the service standards for the department have come back pretty well. We are trying to improve them, but I thank you for drawing it to our attention.

The Chair: You have 35 seconds for your question and answer, Ms. Falk. Go ahead.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: What funds are dedicated? I didn't hear a number.

Mr. Graham Flack: Part of the main estimates are \$105 million in OAS service improvement and workload funds.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack.

Thank you, Ms. Falk.

We'll go to Ms. Young, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister Qualtrough, for appearing today before the committee.

As you know, persons with disabilities are an issue I am very concerned about, and I was honoured to serve as your parliamentary secretary for a time and was very happy to be able to work with you on that file.

You mentioned the Canada disability benefit in the throne speech, but we also heard about a robust employment strategy for Canadians with disabilities. I spoke with one of my constituents who is disabled and is really worried about finding a job after COVID. It was hard enough before COVID for people with disabilities to get that job, and now it's going to be even harder.

What does the government mean by "a robust employment strategy"?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's a key component of our disability inclusion plan to address barriers that so many Canadians with disabilities are facing in employment. We know from the Canadian Human Rights Commission that more than 60% of the complaints to the commission are on the grounds of disability, and half of them are in the area of employment. People are still being discriminated against in hiring, promotion and retention. That has to stop.

We are going to work with the disability community to come up with targeted measures that both support employees—we have some really good programs, and we're going to beef them up—and also address supports for employers, meaning education and talking about the business case for inclusion and how a business can benefit from disability inclusion. It's also to educate Canadians and help shift the conversation away from a charity model, which is often discussed as having to help these poor people, to an inclusion model whereby we celebrate and highlight the benefits of hiring someone with a disability, of making your business accessible so someone with a disability can shop there.

We're going to target employers, employees, businesses—the business community writ large, on all fronts—and help change the conversation around employment for people with disabilities.

• (1655)

Ms. Kate Young: Minister, at the beginning of the pandemic you launched the disability advisory group, which I am told has helped you and given you invaluable advice on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and has shaped the way you've moved forward.

What have you learned from all this? What are your big take-aways with regard to people with disabilities, and what should we be doing as a government to make sure they do not fall through the cracks, as they have in the past?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks for that question. It's something that keeps me up at night.

The COVID disability advisory group, as I said, was invaluable. In fact, I met with them 14 times over a period of months, trying to make sure that we were connecting in the spirit of Nothing Without Us, with the community on the ground. They advised Health Canada. They advised the Minister of Communities. They really had tentacles into our entire pandemic response.

The big lesson learned, as I said, is that as much as we wanted to get direct support out quickly to our citizens with disabilities, we really didn't actually have a way to identify or directly pay all of our citizens with disabilities. Disability supports fall under provincial jurisdiction historically, and we know that we need to do better as a federal government in terms of addressing that. We have a way to pay families. We have a way to pay seniors. We have a tax credit, the DTC, that serves, as I said, a gatekeeping function of sorts. We also have some programs through VAC and some programs through ESDC with the CPP disability, but really what we need and what we're committed to do is directly identify and interact with our citizens with disabilities, not through the tax system, but through an eligibility system based on a moderate and respectful understanding of disability. That's what we're going to do.

That's certainly what has been called for for a long time, and I'm very excited to embark upon that work. We're going to transition the disability advisory group—I think I might scoop in my own announcement here—into a permanent group, but they're going to keep working with us to help us make good on our promises around disability inclusion.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Ms. Young.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you may go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, as you know, we will be urging the government to overhaul the employment insurance system, and we think the current measures could provide the foundation for that reform.

What options is the government considering to rebuild, if you will, the employment insurance program?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's a broad question.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I know you need more than two minutes to answer.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We want to make it responsive to the way Canadians work and include more Canadians who haven't historically had access to EI in the way that we would. I think of part-time workers, gig workers, precariously employed workers. How we build a modern system that reflects how people work today and not how people worked historically is, I think, the starting point of our discussions on EI.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I am going to switch topics. We know the IT systems were subject to security breaches. Data was stolen and access vulnerabilities were identified. The proper checks couldn't be carried out.

Has any funding been allocated to modernize the IT systems, to make them more secure, especially with respect to telework?

Mr. Graham Flack: Yes, absolutely.

Supplementary estimates (B) includes a small portion of funding for the new system we want to build, under the heading “funding for benefits delivery modernization”. The program has stronger security systems than those currently in place.

We are also drawing on our own resources to fund system improvements to address cybersecurity risks. I have to tell you, the challenge is never-ending: the method of attack is different every time, so we are always making changes to the system. We can never say the work is done and the system is secure, because people find new ways every day to launch attacks. We have internal funding to make system improvements, and funding has been earmarked for the new system, which will have extensive security features.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack and Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Next we have Ms. Gazan, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, earlier this summer you stated, “Students...face serious challenges as a result of the global pandemic, and these unique circumstances call for unique action.”

As a post-secondary educator for almost 20 years, I would criticize your government for having almost complete inaction with students. In fact, I would say that the Liberal government has failed students, first with the WE program, with the assumption that students, many of whom are living in poverty, would be expected to work for under minimum wage in any circumstance, and then with that program being taken away as a result of the scandal with the Liberal government, never to be replaced with another program. Then there was zero mention of students in the throne speech.

It's problematic now. To top it off, the grace period for paying back student loans is now over, and many students were not able to work this summer as a result of the pandemic, forcing them to lose housing or even not go back to school because they lack the funds. We know that students are critical to rebuilding Canada's economy, and that requires an educated and financially stable workforce.

Minister, why are students continuing to be left out of the discussion for supports that will allow them to be successful in achieving their educational goals?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: In the Speech from the Throne, we committed to significantly scaling up our youth employment and skills strategy to provide more paid work experiences for students, recognizing that historically, economic shocks like the one we're currently facing have disproportionately impacted students.

Our \$8-billion investment of the student benefit, the thousands of jobs, doubling the Canada student grant and adding flexibility to the student loan program have really been well received by the student population.

We have 700,000 students who received the CESB, a significant portion of whom got the enhanced \$750 a month for students with disabilities or students with dependents. I can assure you that our entire cabinet is committed to ensuring that youth recover and flourish post-pandemic. Specifically, the Minister of Youth and I are very determined to make sure that their voices are heard at every step.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Colleagues, we are going to suspend now in order to allow Minister Hussen and his team to come in, because we have a hard stop at six o'clock.

Minister Qualtrough, we hope to have you back on the supplementary estimates to continue this discussion. We thank you and your officials very much for being here with us today. We'll see you soon.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It was my pleasure, and take care. I'm happy to come back at any time.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're suspended while we allow for a mike check for our next panel.

• (1700) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1710)

The Chair: We're back in session.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses, the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development; Catherine Adam, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic and service pay policy branch; Janet Goulding, associate assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch; Cliff Groen, senior assistant deputy minister, Service Canada benefit service delivery branch; and Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister, ESDC, and chief operating officer for Service Canada.

Welcome back as well to Mark Perlman, chief financial officer, Employment and Social Development.

We also have Evan Siddall, president and CEO, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; and Lisa Williams, chief financial officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

Minister Hussen, you have the floor.

Hon. Peter Kent: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. It's unacceptable that the original two hours with ministers and their officials was reduced to one hour. We accepted that reluctantly. Today was supposed to have been one hour with ministers and one hour with their officials separately. We got 45 minutes in the first hour, and I understand you're going to cut this to perhaps 30 minutes.

In booking these arrangements, we have to realize that even with reduced House facilities to enable meetings—and we appreciate all the work that goes into that—it is well known, and it's a protocol that's been accepted, that House votes are held on Mondays and on Wednesdays. I think it's unacceptable that you're going to curtail this hour as you curtailed the first one.

I think it's perfectly acceptable that those who have booked this facility for 6:30 be delayed, as we were.

The Chair: Mr. Kent, you make an entirely fair point. Our late start was a function of the votes and the time it took to get everyone set up. The hard stop we have at six o'clock is because there is another commitment in the room at 6:30, and the COVID protocols require some time in between to change from one meeting to the next.

The best I can do, Mr. Kent, as we go through the questions and answers, is that we can perhaps have some discussions away from the meeting and have the clerk get on his phone and email to see if we can get the 6:30 meeting pushed back so we can get a full hour here for the full two rounds. That's the best we can do in these circumstances.

You raised an entirely fair point. We were unable to get the OGGO committee to relent so that we could have that extra time. I expect that's also the committee that is due in at 6:30.

Thank you for raising the point. I really wish we could do more.

Minister Hussen, you have five minutes for your opening statements. You have the floor.

• (1715)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and committee members.

[Translation]

Thank you for inviting me to join you today to speak to the 2020-21 main estimates and supplementary estimates (B) for Employment and Social Development Canada.

Five years ago, our government introduced a plan to build up Canada's middle class, create jobs and help struggling families. I am pleased to say our plan is working.

[English]

It is with this same determination that we established emergency measures helping Canadians throughout the pandemic.

Allow me to provide an overview of the measures implemented under my portfolios.

On homelessness and Reaching Home,

[Translation]

the safety and well-being of Canadians is our number one priority.

[English]

This includes providing support to those who are at risk of homelessness or who are experiencing it.

In the early days of the pandemic, we increased support through the Reaching Home program by injecting \$15 million into it so that cities with the largest population of individuals experiencing homelessness could deal with the urgent pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This amount of \$15 million was followed quickly by an additional \$157.5 million to provide additional support on top of the base amount as the full impact of the pandemic grew. This money was also made flexible so that municipalities and community entities could use it for whatever they felt was necessary to combat COVID-19 among Canada's homeless population.

In September 2020, we announced an additional \$236.5-million investment to help communities maintain and expand the emergency response to COVID-19 and to provide them with the flexibility to deliver permanent housing solutions for those experiencing homelessness, as well as to prevent further inflows into homelessness through the upcoming winter.

It is our responsibility as a government to ensure that communities are able to quickly build affordable housing to meet the rising needs. That is why we recently launched the new \$1-billion rapid housing initiative. This will help create approximately 3,000 new affordable housing units in cities right across the country.

To relieve financial pressures on Canadian homeowners who may have lost income due to COVID-19, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, in coordination with private mortgage insurers, implemented measures early during the pandemic to allow homeowners to temporarily defer payments on insured mortgages. Homeowners have the opportunity to benefit from a temporary short-term deferral or reamortization of mortgage payments ensured through CMHC.

On early learning and child care and supports for parents in working class families, child care is a necessity. This pandemic has reinforced the need for parents to be able to access safe and affordable child care. That is why in July we announced the safe restart agreement to help provinces and territories to access \$625 million so that the child care sector can recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to that, with the bilateral agreements with provinces and territories, we've also invested an additional \$400 million, for a total of \$1.2 billion to support child care in 2020-21. This is a record amount, Mr. Chair. We're committed to working with provinces and territories to make child care even more accessible and affordable by setting up a Canada-wide early learning and child care system that is more affordable than ever before.

To address the evolving needs of parents during the pandemic, we have modified the Canada child benefit by sending an additional \$300 in May of this year to every child receiving the Canada child benefit, and permanently increasing once again the Canada child benefit in July of this year.

Charities and non-profits have also experienced increasing demand during the COVID-19 pandemic for services in communities right across the country at a time when they are facing fewer donations and fewer volunteers. That is why I'm proud of the fact that earlier this year our government announced that it would be investing \$350 million through the emergency community support fund to support vulnerable Canadians. I want to report to the committee that the majority of that money has been spent on vulnerable Canadians, and the remaining amount will be disbursed very soon.

Minister Qualtrough has already spoken about our emergency responses to replace employment income lost by Canadians: the CERB and the wage subsidy. At the outset of the pandemic, nearly \$9 billion was received in much-needed income support to make ends meet when people were not able to work. Now with the Canada recovery benefit and the reformed EI, we will make sure we have the backs of workers.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Honourable members, the items outlined in the supplementary estimates process today address the priorities of the Government of Canada and demonstrate our clear commitment to Canadians.

[*English*]

There is no doubt that the financial resources requested will enable us to continue this important work on behalf of Canadians.

I would be very pleased to answer any questions that my fellow members of Parliament have for me.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We're going to start with the Conservatives.

We have Mr. Schmale, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here.

I understand that the CMHC is being rebranded. Can you tell me how much this is going to cost and why, given the fact that they have a basic monopoly in the marketplace, they need to do that?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Since this is an internal CMHC issue, I want to turn to the CEO to answer that question.

Mr. Evan Siddall (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): I'm happy to respond to that. Thank you, Minister.

Thank you for the question.

No decision has been definitively made to rebrand the company. In fact, we have not been using public funds for that purpose. We've been using internal resources—no external resources.

It's meant to align with a new strategy that we as a group, we as a company, arrived at with our board last year, and it's that we aim that by 2030 everyone in Canada has a home they can afford and that meets their needs. We wanted a brand that was consistent with that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I appreciate that, but really, you have a near monopoly in the marketplace, so why does it really matter what your name is?

Mr. Evan Siddall: We do compete with private sector companies in the insurance space. Just as other public sector entities—museums, the EDC, the BDC—have rebranded themselves, it's an appropriate way to present ourselves to our client base, we believe.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Do you fear that you're going to lose business because of a name?

Mr. Evan Siddall: No. Again, as I said, that's about reinforcing our strategy and the policies and the client-driven activities that we are pursuing because of that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Do you have an update on first-time homebuyers since COVID hit?

Mr. Evan Siddall: I'm sorry. What's the question, sir?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Do you have an update on the numbers in terms of the uptake?

Mr. Evan Siddall: Yes.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, I can tell you that 9,500 applications have been approved, representing about \$173 million, as of September 2020.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Are you planning to expand this program?

Mr. Evan Siddall: That's a decision for the government, sir.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister Hussen?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, I can take that. Thank you for the question.

As was promised during the last election, we promised Canadians living in the greater Toronto area, the greater Vancouver area and the Victoria region that, due to their local circumstances, we will increase the threshold amount of the first-time homebuyer incentive to take into account their local circumstances. It is a promise that we intend to keep and that we haven't executed yet, but we intend to keep that promise.

• (1725)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, can I get the time remaining?

The Chair: You have three and a half minutes left.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, in the main estimates, you're requesting \$24.4 million for “Social Innovation and Social Finance Strategy”. Can you tell me what this money is earmarked for, exactly?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll let the officials go into details, but essentially this is meant to support social purpose organizations that are doing really important work to solve complex social problems such as housing, poverty reduction and so on.

I can give you many examples of the great work that is happening through social purpose organizations right across the country. I've met many of them and have seen for myself the work they do. This is a way to support them and to support the system of the social finance world and to encourage more organizations to consider a social finance model of funding, because it's sustainable and has a much bigger impact than—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Right, so what metrics are you using? Who makes the final decision? Is there a series of criteria? I went to the website and it basically said that it was a kind of free-for-all and is whatever the government determines is important.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll let my officials take that.

Ms. Janet Goulding (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Minister. I'll be happy to take that question.

I believe the question is related to the investment readiness program. It's a two-year pilot program that the department is running.

The way the program works is that we are partnering with a number of intermediaries in the community: for example, Community Foundations Canada, the Canadian Women's Foundation, the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association and the National Association of Friendship Centres. Those organizations are running open calls for proposals to allow social partnership organizations to access funding that allows them to do exactly what the minister alluded to, and that is to increase their capacity both to participate in the social finance market and to grow their capacity to grow their impact.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much for that.

I'm sorry. I want to split my time with Mr. Vis, if I could. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, go ahead, please.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): I'm going to go with a series of questions with my short amount of time here, and then I'll seek answers.

How many project applications are in the queue of the national housing co-investment fund, and when will they be complete? Did the national co-investment fund receive additional funds since the mains were tabled in February? If so, how much? What measures are being taken to ensure that funding is reaching the communities where it is needed the most? What are the guiding principles for the approval process?

Are there certain regional or demographic targets as it pertains to the approval of projects? According to my knowledge, some provinces and territories—Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Northwest Territories, Quebec, Saskatchewan and the Yukon—had not seen any approved projects under the NHCF as of April 2020. Have any projects been approved in these provinces and territories since that time? If so, where? How many projects have been approved in each jurisdiction? Are any regions of the country being prioritized with regard to the approval of projects under this funding stream?

Thank you so much. I really appreciate your time today.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I will answer the last question first and then defer to Mr. Siddall for the number of projects in the pipeline.

In terms of the national housing co-investment fund, it's an application-based process. There is absolutely no preference for one region over another. Each project is looked at based on its merits. The one area in the country where we have put set-asides in the co-investment fund to take into account the particular challenges of building affordable housing is the territories, so there is an amount of money in the co-investment fund set aside for the territories, but

beyond that it's an application-based process and each project is assessed on its own merits.

In terms of the number of projects in the pipeline for the co-investment fund, I will turn it over to Mr. Siddall.

The Chair: I'm going to jump in right there because we're well past time. Mr. Vis went right to the line and then ceded the floor. I think what he's expecting and what would be reasonable.... Mr. Siddall, you'll have the transcript of the questions. If you could provide the committee with the answers in written form, then we can be a little fairer with the distribution of time.

● (1730)

Mr. Evan Siddall: I'm very happy to do that.

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull, please, you have six minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and your whole team. It's great to see you. Thanks for being here. I really appreciate all the work you've been doing.

Minister, I want to ask you about the Reaching Home funding. I'm concerned about my constituents and constituents across Durham region. As winter approaches, people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are exposed and at risk of the outdoors, but also, more so, of COVID-19. We increased the funds for Reaching Home—I think it was a 313% increase, a significant increase—and I've heard from constituents and stakeholders in the region and my riding that this money reached them quite rapidly during COVID-19, which was really helpful.

I wonder if you could give us some additional details on this funding and how we're moving to end chronic homelessness in Canada.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, I want to begin by highlighting what the honourable member said. On the additional infusion of \$157.5 million, the feedback we got from the community entities, the organizations and the municipalities, was that the money was crucial and instrumental in making sure that folks were protected from the COVID-19 pandemic; that the organizations had money to procure extra space for social distancing for individuals experiencing homelessness; and that they had the additional flexibility and money to buy PPE and cleaning supplies and to procure all kinds of different necessities. That made a huge difference, and that is why we moved ahead with an additional \$236.7 million.

These are additional dollars to the base amount, in addition to increasing the number of communities receiving Reaching Home dollars, including indigenous providers. It's a program that's working very well, and that is why we renewed the funding, to make sure that those communities can get over the winter period.

Second, and very closely related to that, is the rapid housing initiative. You have heard from municipal leaders right across the country how this will make a big difference in their own attempts to provide permanent housing solutions to their residents who are experiencing homelessness, whether it is on the west coast, the east coast, central Canada and everywhere. If you talk to the 15 mayors of the first stream, they will tell you that this money will make a big difference.

In the second stream, we're waiting to see the number of projects that will come forward to access the second stream of \$500 million to either build rapid housing from scratch or obtain existing properties and convert them quickly into housing. Again, this is part of the spectrum: Reaching Home managed to house people temporarily, and the rapid housing initiative hopefully will move them to permanent housing. This is in addition to the regular national housing strategy program, and they are working together.

I'll give you an example. In Scarborough last week, I was announcing 110 new units as part of a modular housing project, which did not come from the rapid housing initiative. They used money in the regular national housing strategy. So these programs are working and complementing each other. With the addition of the rapid housing initiative, we are now at \$56 billion as part of the national housing strategy.

A lot of work has been done. Of course, there is more work to be done as well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great.

Minister, thank you for that really extensive answer. I'm going to pivot now.

The Chair: Sorry, you actually have two minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I want to ask you about the emergency community support fund, because I think that's another essential support for our beloved non-profit and charitable sector, which as we all know is struggling. I'm sure you're hearing every day about just how much that sector is struggling.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that there are definitely fewer donations, that the revenues are down for the charitable sector, but the demand is increasing for their services. It is probably also challenging to get volunteers out. I just think the emergency community support fund is such an essential support for that sector at a time when we really are relying on it much more.

Could you provide us an update on how that work is advancing and whether there is anything else in the pipeline to support the charitable and non-profit sectors?

• (1735)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, the reason we moved ahead on the emergency community support fund was that we heard from the community-based organizations that were providing really important work and delivering important services, as well as food and medicine, to the most vulnerable in our communities. But the same

organizations that we rely on to take care of the most vulnerable in our country were, themselves, facing pressures, whether it was a drop in donations, a drop in volunteers, or sometimes facing new costs that they did not have to face before.

The member for Spadina—Fort York told me about an organization in his constituency that used to get free baked goods from a business. Now, because of COVID-19, the business has closed, so suddenly this non-profit had to buy baked goods. That is an extra cost they simply didn't face before.

The \$350 million is meant to target those organizations and reinforce them so they can not only continue to deliver those important services, but actually reach more people.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Minister.

Social housing and homelessness are very important issues that Quebeckers care about deeply. I imagine that holds true in other parts of the country as well.

Specifically, I'd like to talk about the recently introduced rapid housing initiative. If I'm not mistaken, it is a \$1-billion initiative and all the funding is supposed to be spent quickly, before mid-May 2021. I thought that \$250 million had already been allocated.

Given the short time frame, which reflects how urgent the situation is, why not make all of the funding available immediately? Do you plan to ask for additional funding to address the situation?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, every Canadian deserves a safe and affordable place to call home. Our government recently announced \$1 billion for the rapid housing initiative to build 3,000 affordable housing units across the country.

[*English*]

What we have done is to ensure that there are two separate streams. The first 15 municipalities—including Montreal and Quebec City—across Canada that have the highest number of individuals experiencing homelessness will receive money as part of the first envelope of \$500 million, but there's another \$500 million in the project stream, which is available to organizations and other municipalities that have rapid housing projects. Again, when I talk about the rapid housing projects, I mean building housing quickly or buying buildings, buying hotels or motels, and converting them quickly into housing. The point is to move people into housing within 12 months.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I have a follow-up question, because I may not have made myself clear. Why did you budget only \$250 million in the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B), when the initiative provides \$1 billion in funding? Why the difference? Can you shed some light on that?

I will move on to another question. It's about the funding to support Canadians experiencing homelessness. The main purpose is to provide money directly to the agencies. Can you describe the criteria you used in choosing the organizations that received funding?

• (1740)

[English]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a very good question. On Reaching Home, there are two types of organizations that we deliver money to. These are front-line organizations serving individuals experiencing homelessness. One is the general stream, and then there are also organizations that are indigenous-serving and indigenous-led, which serve an indigenous homeless population. Those are the two groups we funnel money to through the Reaching Home program. The criteria are simple: They have to demonstrate that they are serving a population that's homeless, and that they have a demonstrable track record of being able to manage the funds and provide services, including shelter and other supported services.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Now I have a question about Service Canada. Businesses struggled when they had to shut down, as we know. What's more, Service Canada has only resumed partial service delivery. Have you earmarked any money to hire staff so that services can resume on a permanent basis, at both outreach sites and Service Canada centres?

[English]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I will defer to Ms. Lori MacDonald for this question.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. MacDonald.

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At this time, we have 285 of our Service Canada centres open, out of 317. They are fully staffed at this time and, in fact, we are now able to serve 93% of the Canadian population within 50 kilometres of a Service Canada centre. We are funded, we are open and we are serving clients.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Next, we have Ms. Kwan, please, for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the minister and his officials.

My first question is for CMHC.

Could the departmental officials table their assessment of the count of the homeless population for each municipality in the major city stream and any other factors used to determine the severity of housing need in the stream, as well as the distribution of units projected to be built by city based on the regional property costs?

Mr. Evan Siddall: Yes, we can table that information.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

My second question is also for you, Mr. Siddall. Through my order paper questions, when I asked about the co-investment fund and the rental construction financing initiative, the figures the department provided are about funding "commitments". Can the officials confirm for the record that these funding commitments include applications that have a letter of intent but no pending agreement? Could the department also table how much of these funds has so far been transferred to each applicant?

Mr. Evan Siddall: We can table all that information, certainly.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you confirm for me, on the record, that the funding commitments include applications that have a letter of intent but no pending agreement?

Mr. Evan Siddall: I'm not sure that is true. We will address that question in writing.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The municipalities and NGOs have met with CMHC officials and have told them that the RHI is fraught with concerns. They pointed out that modular housing projects can only be approved on a 10-year basis, yet eligibility rules require a 20-year-plus option. They restrict eligibility to conversion of non-residential buildings or, if it is a residential building, it has to be in disrepair or abandoned, and that is hugely problematic, as such projects could easily take anywhere from one to five years with rezoning and permitting requirements. They also pointed out that there needs to be a dedicated parallel program led by urban, rural and northern indigenous housing providers.

My question for the minister is, will the minister listen to the NGOs and the municipalities and change the eligibility rules?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We have listened; in fact, we consulted extensively with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and they're the ones who helped us design this program. We have listened; we have delivered a program that I believe reflects the wishes of the community in terms of setting up two separate streams, one focusing on where the urgent problem is, the top 15 municipalities that have the highest number of homeless individuals, and also allowing—

• (1745)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, let me interrupt because my time is limited, Minister.

My question is about the specific criteria. Have your officials brought to you the concerns that the cities and NGOs raised with respect to what I indicated just now?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I think you indicated a number of criteria—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I specifically—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —so I wasn't sure which ones you are referring to at the moment.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps I can get Mr. Siddall to answer that question in writing so that I can get clarity on this issue.

Mr. Evan Siddall: We can do that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

On the issue around the throne speech.... Sorry, I'm just going to go to the national housing strategy announced in 2017. It did not include an urban, rural and northern indigenous strategy. The 2019 mandate letter that the minister received specifically had a directive to address the urban indigenous housing strategy, yet today there is no strategy. Why was it left out of the throne speech, and when will the minister fulfill that mandate?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It is part of my mandate commitment to fashion a national housing strategy that is in line with the needs and the aspirations of indigenous people in Canada, and it has to be done by them and with them. Of course, it would also mean that we would have to obviously make sure, as I said, that it is done in partnership.

I know the committee is studying this issue, and I look forward to their findings as part of a way to—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, you don't need to wait for the committee to finish this work.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I didn't say I was waiting for the committee to do the work. I didn't say that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This has been in the mandate for some time, and I hope that you will actually get on with it. The community has been waiting and waiting. The urban indigenous community is homeless. Many of them are desperate for action by the government now.

The housing co-ops from the section 95 program whose operating agreements expired prior to April 2016 have been excluded from phase two of the federal community housing initiative. As a result, 277 co-ops—7,500 households in Alberta, B.C., Ontario, P.E.I. and Quebec—will not get the subsidies required to support low-income members of their co-ops.

Equally disturbing is the fact that co-ops with operating agreements under the urban native housing program are also excluded. By choosing not to provide rental assistance to these co-ops, the federal government is actively displacing low-income families during a pandemic.

Will the minister ensure that the low-income members of these co-ops are supported by making the rental assistance available to them?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: What I do know is we are investing \$500 million over 10 years in the federal community housing initiative. That's being implemented in two phases. The initiative will protect tenants and stabilize the operations of some 55,000 units in federal community housing projects—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Minister, I was very specific in my question.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I was trying to answer the question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm talking about section 95 co-ops. Will those ones that have been excluded from rental assistance get the assistance they need?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm trying to answer your question.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the launch date for phase two of the federal community housing initiative was delayed from April to September 1, so we made sure—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, they were excluded—

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, you are past time.

Minister, please finish your answer, and then we're going to move on.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Okay. I was very quickly saying that we've made sure that current levels of financial assistance are maintained. Of course, COVID created a bit of a delay, but the work continues.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Thank you, Minister.

Next we have Mr. Vis, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis: Since I've been appointed as the shadow minister for housing, there's been a near-universal message from housing stakeholders that the housing co-investment fund application process is very challenging to fill out. A number of indigenous housing providers have said this too.

Second, there aren't a lot of assurances about the length of time that program proponents need to wait to receive an answer.

What can your department do better, Minister, or through CMHC, to improve the application process and improve the unnecessary wait times?

• (1750)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Before I defer to Mr. Siddall for this answer, I will start off by saying that a lot of work has gone into streamlining the process. That work continues. It is fair to say that a lot of progress has been made to streamline the process, but there are also a lot of things that other actors beyond the federal government can do. For example, what municipal governments do before the applications reach CMHC is also part of the mix. You can see that municipality A will fast-track and offer incentives and move things along; municipality B will not do that.

In terms of what can be done beyond here, I'll turn to Mr. Siddall.

Mr. Brad Vis: Give a brief answer, please.

Mr. Evan Siddall: I will try to be brief.

We have reduced our turnaround times by 50%. We stood this program up extremely quickly. We got it launched on time. We have client solution specialists who are supporting folks as well.

I'm happy to respond more. We sped up what is a very complicated program that requires consultation with provinces and territories, underwriting of loans, confirmation of affordability criteria, greenhouse gas emissions and accessibility criteria. We have reduced the turnaround times by 50%.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you; that's sufficient. I will say that the constituents or stakeholders I spoke to within the last couple of weeks felt that the processing times were still too long. I do appreciate that answer. If you'd like to table anything further to show that progress, it would be very welcomed by all committee members.

My second question is for the minister. You recently claimed that your government has helped house one million families. Would you be able to table a complete breakdown outlining the one million families that have been helped?

I ask this question because MP Vaughan was in the newspaper, in the Toronto Star, in January, where he said that this claim was stretched and that they massaged the numbers a bit. The committee, I believe, would welcome a complete breakdown of the million families that have been helped. Would you be able to provide that for us, Minister?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I would be happy to do that.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Minister.

My third question relates to the rural and remote homelessness stream under the Reaching Home homelessness strategy. Your officials told me in my recent briefing, which I welcomed, that there was \$11 million allocated for rural and remote communities and \$55 million over the next five years.

I represent a riding where there is a lot of rural poverty. Do you think this number is sufficient to address rural homelessness and rural poverty? What more can your government do to ensure that people in remote communities get the same types of services that people in urban areas get?

Thank you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I think you can see by the top-up we made to the regular Reaching Home dollars. The \$157.5 million that I referenced earlier were additional dollars to the base amount. The same goes for the \$236.7 million. Topping up Reaching Home, and also making it more flexible and increasing the number of communities and providers that we provide financial investments to, is an indication of our understanding of the need to deal with homelessness wherever it is in Canada.

Let me just say one more thing. The rapid housing initiative is also open to any community organization, entity, or municipality to apply to house homeless individuals permanently.

Mr. Brad Vis: I appreciate that answer.

I will say, though, that in some of these unincorporated areas, such as Boston Bar in the Fraser Canyon, there is literally nobody there except for me to help them with these applications.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I understand.

The rapid housing initiative is flexible enough to allow places like that to use an intermediary to get the money, such as the province or a non-profit organization. They don't have to do the work. They can use an intermediary to do that.

Mr. Brad Vis: I would say that's easier said than done.

Thank you for your answers.

The Chair: Mr. Long, you have five minutes.

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

Good evening, colleagues.

Minister, it is certainly good to see you again. I want to thank you on behalf of my riding of Saint John—Rothesay and all Canadians for the work that you've done and the leadership you've shown, especially during this pandemic, where we have faced historic challenges.

Minister, my riding is Saint John—Rothesay. Since I was first elected as a member of Parliament, I've often heard from working parents across the riding about the need for affordable and accessible child care in our community and across the country. Over the past five years, I have also often heard about it from witnesses testifying before this committee. That's why I was pleased to be able to join you earlier today to announce a nearly \$10-million federal investment to help improve access to high-quality child care and early learning services in New Brunswick.

It's also why I was thrilled to see our government commit to ensuring that all Canadian parents have access to affordable, high-quality child care through the creation of a Canada-wide early learning and child care system in the Speech from the Throne. My office has been fielding a lot of questions from excited parents, as well as child care providers in my riding, like Heather Hamilton and Erin Schryer, who are eager to learn more about what this commitment will mean for them and their child care.

Can you tell us what the next steps will be when it comes to implementing this historic commitment?

● (1755)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you very much.

I want to thank the honourable member for bringing up a really important issue that has become even more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic. As our economy recovers and as parents go back to work, they are telling us that child care is not a luxury; it is a necessity for them. Access to not only affordable child care, but high-quality child care is of utmost importance. That is why you saw our government respond during the Speech from the Throne, stating very clearly and unequivocally that we will do everything we can to put together a national system of early learning and child care that is accessible, affordable and has high-quality child care.

To do that, we would need to work very closely with provinces and territories, as this is an area of provincial jurisdiction. We need to work with them and build on their investments, as well as our investments over the last number of years in early learning and child care. It includes listening to the stakeholders. It includes finding success stories and trying to replicate them across the country, making the economic case—not just the social case—for investments in early learning and child care. We are committed to making this happen and to learn from others, including the Province of Quebec and our international partners who have done this and who have seen tremendous economic benefits as a result of these investments.

Mr. Wayne Long: On that subject, Minister, we know there isn't equitable access for many people, especially in indigenous communities. We know how important it is to have culturally relevant care for indigenous children, but now more than ever those providers are facing incredible challenges.

You recently announced support for these providers. Could you share additional details with the committee?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. We wanted to make sure that as a government we're paying attention to the safe restart of the indigenous early learning and child care centres. That is why I was pleased to join the Prime Minister as well as Minister Miller to announce a \$120-million investment in indigenous early learning and child care as part of the safe restart of indigenous early learning and child care centres.

This builds on our previous investments that are ongoing as part of the \$1.7-billion investment to set up an indigenous early learning and child care framework and the agreements that we have signed with first nations, Inuit and Métis.

The \$120 million is related to COVID-19; it is to enable them to retool and readjust their operations, as well as their infrastructure, to meet the new health requirements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister and Mr. Long.

[*Translation*]

It's your turn, Ms. Chabot. You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I am going to ask my question about Service Canada again.

The first time, you said that 287 of 317 Service Canada centres were now open.

When the offices closed during the first wave, it was difficult, almost devastating, for people who needed access to those services. It

is very disappointing that all the centres and outreach sites have not yet reopened.

Have you made sure staff and funding are available to keep Service Canada centres and outreach sites open in the event that the situation gets worse?

• (1800)

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I will defer to Ms. Lori MacDonald for this question.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: To reframe the answer I gave previously, we do have 285 offices open, out of 317. We have the funding and the staff available to do so. What's holding up the opening of the final offices is finalizing contracts for cleaning, for installation of plexiglass and for commissionaires from a security perspective. All of those are under way right now as we finalize the opening of those centres. We have the funding for this year as well as next year. We anticipate having all of this completed by early January.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Chabot, you have 20 seconds, just enough time for a quick question and short answer.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Do you have enough funding to reopen all the centres and outreach sites?

[*English*]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes, we have the funds to open up all the offices.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

Next, we have Ms. Kwan, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm going to turn my question to Mr. Siddall. I'm sure he understands what I'm talking about when I say that the section 95 housing co-op operating agreements that expired prior to April 1, 2016 are not getting their rental assistance. Is he aware of any plans to ensure that low-income members get the resources they need?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I can answer that, because this came up earlier.

On co-ops, those agreements lapsed under the previous government and we did transfer money. We transferred funds to provinces and territories to fund the former agreement.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Mr. Siddall, could you answer my question too, please?

Mr. Evan Siddall: I think the minister has answered it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, are you telling me that those co-ops whose operating agreements expired prior to April 2016 are getting rental assistance?

Mr. Evan Siddall: I think through various programs they are. If your question is with respect to continuation of operating agreements, no, those have expired. We don't have any evidence that people have lost housing as a result of that, however.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, I have a number of co-ops that are actually on the cusp of losing their housing right now. I'd be happy to bring those to the officials' attention and to the minister's attention, because at this moment, they are actually going to be displaced in the middle of a pandemic.

Mr. Evan Siddall: We'll certainly find a way to help them through existing programs.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, when you say "existing programs", that is to say the existing programs will provide for rental assistance for those who would not be able to get their operating agreements renewed.

Mr. Evan Siddall: It would be irresponsible to be that specific. What we will do is work with them, as we already do, to make sure that through various funding sources—ourselves, the provinces and territories—people are not displaced, which I think is our shared objective.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, and that funding from municipalities and stuff that has been cobbled together is coming to an end. That's the reality. I am receiving a lot of letters from co-op members who are freaked out about this situation because their low-income members are in fact going to be displaced. I'd be happy to continue this conversation with you, Mr. Siddall.

In the throne speech, there was a commitment that now chronic homelessness would be reduced altogether. If human rights are going to be respected in terms of housing needs, when does the minister expect this to be achieved? Is there a timeline and a target?

• (1805)

The Chair: Make it a short answer, please, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's a combination of things, as you know, Ms. Kwan. It is using the national housing strategy, using the rapid housing initiative and Reaching Home, working with our partners, and making sure that we encourage more private sector investments.

There's no one solution. We have to do everything and—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is there a timeline?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —other levels of government have to step up, but we are doing what we can.

Remember, our target used to be a 50% reduction in chronic homelessness. We're going for 100%, because we've made so much progress.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Next we have Mr. Vis, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm going to pass my time to MP Schmale. I wasn't aware I was having another round.

The Chair: We'll have a full two hours. We're going to do two more...your five minutes and then the final five minutes, and then we will adjourn. We were able to extend a little bit, thanks to the accommodation of the good professionals here at the House.

Go ahead, Mr. Schmale, for five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Vis, for transferring over your time.

I'm going to Mr. Siddall.

I want to talk about access to information requests. A number of my colleagues have submitted a number of requests and I believe it has quite frustrated your organization. Can you tell us why you shouldn't be willing to provide that information to MPs who have put in requests?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Are you talking about CMHC?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, I am.

Mr. Evan Siddall: Through the chair, I'll respond that we've responded in time to all requests by MPs and, to my knowledge, to all requests from other people.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: From what I hear, you have indicated very curtly, if you will, that you have an issue with MPs submitting requests, especially when there are so many coming at you requesting certain information.

Do you know how many ATIPs you have outstanding at this moment, by any chance?

Mr. Evan Siddall: I actually don't have that information on hand, but I'm happy to provide it to you.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, that would be quite handy. Thank you very much for that.

I'll quickly pivot to the minister and to what he said about child care.

Minister, when you're talking about your child care program, minus what the plan is for indigenous communities, are you going to allow choice and the most options available for parents, or will this be a one-size-fits-all government program?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It will not be a one-size-fits-all government program, simply because we're not even there yet. We have to talk to provinces and territories. We have to talk to stakeholders. We have to talk to experts and get the evidence. We have to talk to our international partners, talk to the Province of Quebec, learn about how they did it and what were some of the initial challenges they faced and some of the successes they encountered right away after making these investments.

What you heard in the Speech from the Throne was a statement of intent, an ambition. Now we're going to get the work done.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: If I understand correctly, based on your answer, I'm a bit... We've seen this since 1993. We've seen it in every election going forward.

Of course, when you lost in 2006, the previous Conservative government brought in its own child care, which allowed parents to have \$100 per child under the age of six given to them. You've enhanced the program, to your credit. For the parents who need child care now.... If you had a child born in 1993 or somewhere around there, that child would be way past the option for day care by the time the government actually got around to it.

I do agree that you will have to put a plan in place, but for the parents who need help now, wouldn't it be better to avoid yet another government program—or a plan to make a plan to maybe have a government program? Wouldn't it be better to just continue giving more money to parents?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: To my honourable colleague, I don't want to go down the road of history, because I think neither of us was in elected office at the time.

However, if you're going to go down there, it's also important to put it into proper context. The Liberal government at the time was trying to put in an affordable national program, and it was the Conservatives who were joined by the NDP and they killed that.

• (1810)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, but look at how long that took. That took over a decade.

Are you going to go down this path again for another decade?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: No, no. Well, I—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: It would be a lot quicker, to your credit, to your government's credit, to continue with allowing parents to have more money in their pocket and the maximum number of choices—basically enhancing our freedoms, not controlling our behaviour through another government program or the tax code.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I don't think it's about controlling behaviour; I think it's a philosophical difference that we have. You believe in giving money and then washing your hands of it. We believe in maintaining quality. It's not just about access or—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Government-controlled doesn't necessarily equal quality, nor cost, nor outcomes. If you think child care is expensive now, wait until the government gets its hands on it.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I think the parents who benefit from the more affordable child care system in Quebec would disagree with you a lot on that.

We have to learn about what works. Why is it that other countries can do this and we are not able to do it?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You allow competition in the marketplace; that's how you do it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Schmale.

For the final four minutes, we have Mr. Vaughan, please.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): Thank you.

I guess I have a couple of things.

On page 19 of the throne speech, and I can read it directly, it says we're going to build strong communities by investing.... I'll knock out the whole list of “public transit, energy efficient retrofits”, etc.,

and then it explicitly says “affordable housing, particularly for Indigenous Peoples and northern communities.”

Is that not the language that member Kwan was looking for in terms of commitment in the throne speech to build indigenous housing in urban, rural and northern spaces?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, it is, and it shows that it is a priority for our government. That statement of intent and ambition is a clear sign that our government wants to put in place a national strategy for northern, urban and remote indigenous housing and to make sure that we address this.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the lapsed housing agreements that she refers to, which disappeared under the Conservative government prior to our being elected, the new Canada housing benefit funds that have been transferred, particularly to the Province of British Columbia, can be used to provide subsidies.

Has the British Columbia government used those monies yet?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely.

In fact, I had run out of time earlier; I was going to mention that the Canada housing benefit is a game-changer. It is portable, and it can absolutely be used by individuals who find themselves in housing need and who previously enjoyed those subsidies under the agreements that were cancelled by the previous government.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We have a 10-year agreement with the British Columbia government. Have they started to spend those housing subsidies yet?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, they have.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Good.

In terms of the concerns about rural homelessness, for the first time since 1989, our government, during the COVID epidemic, expanded the designated communities program and picked up six new rural communities. Were any of those in B.C.?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. Abbotsford was one of them, and a number of other British Columbia communities. That's what I was referring to in my previous answer when I ran out of time.

We expanded the communities because we know that homelessness is also a reality in rural Canada, in places that are growing, like Abbotsford and Kamloops, and places like Kenora. Those communities are now included in a much-expanded list, with additional dollars that we've made flexible so that communities can respond in a very robust, long-term way.

Now, with the rapid housing initiative, we will ensure that a billion dollars can be accessed by communities that have rapid housing solutions.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Mr. Vis also identified Alberta as a place where no co-investment funds have been announced. I was sent by you to Calgary on January 15, and I announced a \$48.5-million block investment into the Calgary housing system to build new housing. Also, we forwarded seed dollars to help bring forward applications to that co-investment fund.

Calgary actually got block funding of \$48.5 million, did they not?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, they did. Not only that, but there are many other projects that we have been able to announce in Alberta, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your team for being with us.

Mr. Kent, we were able to get the House of Commons folks to shorten up their time and to push back a bit so that we could get the full two hours. I want to offer a big thank you to our clerk and to the House of Commons folks who support us and who allowed us to push the envelope a little bit.

• (1815)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The envelope, however, is at its limit. That's all the time we have.

Thank you, colleagues. We'll see you next week.

We are adjourned.

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