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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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• (1555)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 35 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 January 25, 2021. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee. If at any time during the meeting you have any technical difficulties, let me know. We'll want to resolve them, and if necessary, suspend to make sure that everyone is able to fully participate.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, February 2, 2021, the committee will proceed with its study of the impact of COVID-19 on seniors.

I welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks, followed by questions. We're pleased to have with us today the Honourable Deb Schulte, Minister of Seniors. As well, from the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Alexis Conrad, senior assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch and Policy Horizons Canada; Annette Gibbons, associate deputy minister; and Janet Goulding, associate assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch.

For the benefit of our witnesses, I'll make a few additional comments. Interpretation in this video conference is available. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With that, I think we're ready to go. We'll start with the Minister of Seniors for five minutes, please.

Madam Minister, welcome to the committee. You have the floor.

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Good afternoon, everyone.

[English]

It's a pleasure to be back with you all today.

I'm sincerely pleased to see the committee's interest in seniors' well-being. As Canada's Minister of Seniors, I spend every day thinking about seniors' needs and how we can better support seniors in their day-to-day lives.

Our government is committed to strengthening Canadian seniors' financial security and improving their quality of life.

[Translation]

Our priority is for seniors to be financially secure.

[English]

Some of our first actions for seniors as a government include restoring the age of eligibility for old age security to 65 from 67, increasing the guaranteed income supplement for single seniors and doubling the Canada pension plan for future retirees.

Budget 2021 strengthened all Canadians' financial security later in life. Older seniors are worried about outliving their life savings. As seniors age, their health-related costs rise. All the while, they are more likely to be unable to work, have disabilities or be widowed. To provide short-term support, we'll provide a one-time payment of \$500 in August to OAS pensioners who will be 75 and over as of June 30, 2022, and then, in July of 2022, we'll permanently increase the regular old age security pension payments by 10% for seniors aged 75 and up.

This will provide \$766 to full OAS pensioners in the first year and be indexed to inflation going forward. The OAS increase will strengthen the retirement income security of Canadians later in life. It's the first permanent increase to the OAS pension since 1973, other than adjustments due to inflation.

This builds on our direct financial support to seniors during the pandemic. We provided an extra GST credit and a one-time payment to seniors eligible for OAS, plus extra support for those who were eligible for a guaranteed income supplement. Altogether, a low-income couple received over \$1,500 in tax-free support with their extra costs during the pandemic.

Canada's vaccine program is accelerating. We're on track to receive 40 million doses by the end of June. Our government will always be there as a partner with provinces and territories to help keep people safe. Working together is what will get us through this crisis.

More than eight of every 10 dollars spent to fight COVID-19 and support Canadians continue to come from the federal government. We've procured over a billion pieces of personal protective equipment and tens of millions of rapid tests, which we've been distributing to the provinces and territories. We've funded over 5,000 new horizons for seniors community projects across the country to support seniors during the pandemic.

To better protect seniors in long-term care homes, we'll provide \$3 billion to the provinces and territories to ensure that standards for long-term care are applied and permanent changes made. We've invested billions in infection prevention and the wages of long-term care workers and others. We will establish new offences and penalties in the Criminal Code related to elder abuse and neglect.

Across the country, most seniors want to live in their own homes for as long as possible. To help seniors stay in their homes longer as they age, we're launching the age well at home initiative, which will offer practical support to help low-income and otherwise vulnerable seniors age in their homes.

Budget 2021 also announced additional funds to repair, build and support affordable housing; make improvements to the criteria for the disability tax credit; provide an additional four weeks of the Canada recovery caregiving benefit; and allocate new funding for veterans and palliative care.

Seniors built the Canada we know and love today. They can be assured that our government will continue to deliver for them.

• (1600)

[*Translation*]

Thank you again for inviting me to appear before you.

[*English*]

I look forward to your questions and to seeing your findings and recommendations.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we're going to proceed with those questions, beginning with Ms. Falk, please, for six minutes.

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

Minister, thank you for being here with us today for this important and also timely study.

As we know—and you alluded to this—seniors have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic. Those seniors living in long-term care facilities have been at the epicentre of this health crisis. Layered with a sector that's already in crisis, the scarcity of PPE, delays

in testing, staffing shortages and inadequate infrastructure all contributed to the tragedy in long-term care.

The failure to protect Canada's seniors in long-term care shamefully stands out on the world stage, and too many of our seniors have died of neglect. Too many families have had to say goodbye early. Too many seniors have missed out on countless precious moments. There have been announcements, but Minister, we need to move beyond that in a timely manner.

We need leadership and collaboration with all levels of government and senior stakeholders to really move the needle. We need to stabilize the sector but also take meaningful action to address the serious vulnerabilities in the sector. We owe that to our seniors who deserve to live and age with dignity.

The reality is that, from health to social isolation to finances, no senior has been fully immune to the challenges that have been brought on by this crisis. For low-income seniors over the age of 75, the one-time OAS payment and subsequent increase announced in the recent budget is helpful, but I have heard from a number of seniors from across this country and I suspect that my colleagues have also been hearing from seniors under the age of 75 who are struggling to make ends meet and feel left aside by your government's decision.

Minister, why did you exclude some low-income seniors from your one-time OAS payment and scheduled increase?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for that very complete question. There were quite a lot of elements that you brought into that discussion.

To answer, specifically, why we delivered on our promise to increase old age security for those 75 and above, you need to look at the data that we were looking at and the information that's guiding decision-making. Let's go for a bit of information here.

For those seniors below 75, about 34.2% are employed. For seniors 75 and above, it drops to 15.4%. The median income of those who are below 75 is \$10,000. The median income for those 75 and above is \$720. For disabilities, among seniors below 75, it's 32%. For 75 and above, it's 47%. In terms of those who are severely disabled, it's 27% for 75 and above, and 15% for those below. Women make up 57% of those 75 and above. For those who are widowed, it's 39% of 75 and above, and 23% of those below.

I can go on and on with the data and the statistics that show us that our older seniors are more vulnerable and in more need of support. If you look at the information back when the last increase was made to old age security in 1973, and you look at the age that people were expected to live and where it is now, you see it is seven years on. We are seeing seniors living much longer, having more complications as they get older, facing more costs and being really afraid of running out of their savings.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Minister, at one of our previous meetings we had Dr. Sinha with the National Institute on Ageing, and he questioned your government's use of OAS instead of GIS as a tool to support those low-income seniors.

I'm just wondering why your government did not increase GIS instead.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you for that question. What you have to do is look back at what our government has been doing over the last five years, and this is just one more step in the measures that we've been taking—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Right, but I think COVID-19 is changing things. That's what this study, I think, is going to reveal, that COVID is exacerbating these issues. I don't think we can necessarily look at what's happened pre-COVID. We really need to see the effects that COVID is having on our seniors.

• (1605)

Hon. Deb Schulte: I'm very much looking forward to the outcomes of your study and the recommendations that you're going to make. I think it is important that, while there are some things that the COVID pandemic has highlighted and shone a spotlight on, you need to look at what we've been doing to build the financial security for seniors all along. The first thing we did was to increase the guaranteed income supplement for single seniors, because we saw those as our most vulnerable seniors who needed support. That's why one of the first things we did was to increase that.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you, Minister. I'd like to get one more question in here if I can.

We've seen a major decline in retirement income following the passing of a spouse, and this can certainly add significant financial stress and even uproot a senior's entire retirement plan. Your government promised to increase the CPP survivor benefit in 2019, and then recommitted to it in the throne speech.

Minister, I'm just wondering when widows and widowers can expect that increase.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much. It's another really good question.

What you need to recognize, as was the case with the enhancements to CPP that we did several years ago, is that you need to increase the contributions if you're going to change the outcomes for future pensioners.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Is this a promise that's going to be kept throughout the tenure of this government?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Let's just go back. I was trying to set the frame. The frame is that it's for future retirees, and that is set with the discussions of the ministers in the provinces and territories. It's

not something that the Canadian government can do on its own. Anything with CPP is done in conjunction with the provinces and territories.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes, so what's the progress on that?

Hon. Deb Schulte: What happened was, the review that occurred—the triennial review—was during the pandemic, so obviously, the outcomes at that meeting.... It was a difficult time to be increasing the employer contributions and the worker contributions when we were in the middle of a pandemic. There are future discussions to be had, but right now that isn't something that is happening at that triennial review. There will be future reviews, and we'll continue to work on that. This is an important initiative and commitment that we've made, and we're going to be continuing to pursue that in our next triennial review.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you so much, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Falk.

Next is Ms. Young, please, for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the minister for spending time with us this afternoon to talk about our important study.

I want to read something to the minister from a recent pamphlet the United Way Elgin Middlesex distributed in my area. The pamphlet is actually called “The #LocalLove Letter”. It outlines some of the amazing programs the United Way and other agencies have been able to provide to our seniors during this obviously challenging time. Specifically, I'd like to read about program funding through your department's new horizons for seniors program. It reads as follows:

Since the start of the pandemic, the Canadian Mental Health Association [Middlesex] has seen a 43 percent increase in calls to The Support Line, many coming from seniors who are feeling scared, vulnerable, lonely....

Lori Hassall, the director of crisis and short-term interventions at CMHA, says, “It was an issue even before the pandemic. We were already hearing from a lot of seniors who would call every day just to talk to someone.”

A \$10,000 grant from United Way, through the Government of Canada's seniors response fund, helped CMHA launch “Friendly Callers”, a new outreach program matching trained volunteers with seniors across Elgin and Middlesex counties.

The weekly call was a chance to check in and connect seniors to local services, such as Meals on Wheels, neighbourhood-based resources or the City of London age friendly network, to ensure that they were getting the support they needed.

Hassall says:

There's so much research now about the impact of loneliness on physical and mental health.... Social connection is the antidote....

I want to ask the minister if this story reflects some of what she has heard about how our government funding through this pandemic has helped seniors across the country.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for that question. Absolutely, these are the amazing inspirational stories that I've been hearing all across the country in every corner, of how people have stepped up to support each other, especially seniors. They are very grateful that the government also stepped up, enhancing the funding.

The new horizons for seniors program had already launched in January. When the pandemic hit, we allowed organizations to change their programming very quickly. Whereas before they would have brought people together in a facility, now they had to try to find a way to support them in their own homes and virtually, and that is exactly what happened. That happened because we allowed them to transform their programs and to use the money in another way.

We also enhanced the program with another \$20 million, in addition to the money this year, to provide 5,000 projects that have been supporting seniors from coast to coast to coast in urban, rural and remote areas. This is something I'm especially proud of. The government did recognize very early where the challenges were. They were listening to the groups and found a way, through enhanced funding and changes in the program, to get those organizations to step up and support seniors across the country.

Thank you very much for that. I've heard really inspirational stories. We didn't just do it with new horizons. We did it with funding through the United Way. We did it through emergency community support funding. There was half a billion dollars provided to community support organizations to help vulnerable Canadians across Canada. We should feel very proud of the work that's been done. I'm certainly proud of the organizations that have stepped up to offer those services.

● (1610)

Ms. Kate Young: I know of one local group that does crocheting in London, and all of these seniors, who hadn't even heard of this program, are really being helped, just getting that day-to-day connection.

I am hoping that we can make sure other groups know about this program and all the programs that our government is offering. Is there any way we can increase the information so that people will know that the money is there?

Hon. Deb Schulte: That's a very good question.

We work very hard to get information out to community groups, and you are part of that network of communication through your own community groups. We have a vast network of stakeholder organizations that we work with. We are constantly providing newsletters and are asking them to get them out to seniors and to seniors organizations. It is work that's ongoing, obviously, connecting through to local papers, local radio stations—these are often where seniors are tapped in—making sure that we're not just going to the national media but that we're going to local media, letting them know that these organizations are out there and that they just need to do a little bit of digging. If somebody hasn't already found

them, then they need to reach out. We're asking all of you to be involved in that, making sure that the seniors in your community know about the organizations that are serving them and that they get the help they need.

Ms. Kate Young: The other question I have is about something you mentioned in your opening, the age well at home initiative. Briefly, because I think we have only about 45 seconds, how will this impact older seniors as you see it?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much.

As seniors get older, they get more frail. They have more challenges meeting the needs of staying in their homes. We hear that they do not want to go into long-term care. They want to stay in their home as long as possible. Therefore, we are creating this program to service that need, which I heard across the country, to make sure that seniors can get the support they need in their homes, especially vulnerable and low-income seniors who can't afford to pay for help and are sometimes forced into long-term care just because they need somebody to help them make meals, do cleaning, do their laundry or help them get groceries.

These are things that community groups are involved in, and we're going to be helping them provide more of that support to seniors who want to stay in their homes.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Young.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Mr. Chair, I will give my time to my colleague Ms. Larouche.

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, you have the floor.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I also thank my colleague Ms. Chabot. It is always a pleasure to come back to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. This committee plays an essential role.

Madam Minister, it is very important to have you at the committee. During the last election campaign, both the Liberals and the Bloc Québécois raised seniors' issues. However, our positions were already diverging when it came to numbers. During the last election campaign, you were proposing a 10% increase for those aged 75 and over, while we were proposing an increase of \$110 per month for those aged 65 and over.

At the time, we already understood that seniors did not want to see discrimination based on age. I asked you that question the first day I arrived in the House of Commons. When I asked you why people should not be given an increase in their old age security pension at age 65, instead of age 75, I remember you coming across the floor and telling me that it was a good question.

Then the pandemic hit and seniors had to deal with isolation. There was an increase in the price of groceries and the “COVID-19 tax”. We all saw increases in rent and transportation costs. Everyone experienced an increase in costs. There were announcements for various groups in our society, but seniors were ignored.

The Bloc Québécois had to hammer home its message about the importance of increasing the purchasing power of seniors. Finally, a one-time \$500 cheque was provided, but only to those receiving the guaranteed income supplement. People who were receiving an old age security pension, but not the guaranteed income supplement, only received a cheque for \$300. Again, there was a lot of frustration.

After last fall's Speech from the Throne, the 10% increase starting at the age of 75 was finally included in the budget, but it will not be implemented until 2022. A one-time \$500 cheque was also offered in August 2021.

Madam Minister, seniors are still angry. What you are proposing is clearly not good enough for them. I have heard you talk about aging with dignity. But seniors' groups, including FADOQ in my community, are telling me that, in order to age with dignity, to live and not just survive, the old age security pension for all seniors must be increased as soon as they turn 65.

You said yourself that their savings are depleted. That happens from the time they stop working, which is at 65. You talked about the number of people working, but there are also people not working.

Do you know what it would cost to give people the 10% increase in the old age security pension at age 65 instead of age 75? Do you have any figures on that?

• (1615)

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: I thank you and your colleague very much. Every time you stand up in the House, I get excited that I might be getting a question on seniors and have a chance to share a bit of the work we've been doing. I always look forward to your questions.

You set a lot of elements in motion in your question. I want to make sure that we touch on a few of them.

Let's go back to early days in the Liberal government. What we have been doing is building up measures that have been enhancing financial security for seniors, starting with reversing the Conservative change. They were “modernizing” the pension system and they increased OAS eligibility to age 67. Right away, we saw there that early pensioners—

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Madam Minister, I repeat the question—

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, you took three and a half minutes to ask your question. We must give the minister a chance to answer.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Okay.

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: I will get there. I just wanted to make sure that you understand that none of these things are done in isolation. They're done as part of a series of steps we have been taking to enhance the financial security of seniors. That has provided results. We have seen a reduction of 11% in seniors' poverty. These are important things. The facts speak for themselves. We are making changes that are making a difference in the lives of seniors.

Right away, the first thing we did was to make sure that those seniors aged 65 to 67 weren't going to be disadvantaged when they couldn't work any longer or were unable to work any longer but wouldn't be getting a pension, which they would be relying on. That was the first step.

The second one was looking at very vulnerable seniors—our lowest-income seniors, single seniors—and being able to help them by providing almost \$1,000. It was a 10% improvement, an enhancement to the guaranteed income supplement for them. We also enhanced the pension system, the CPP, by providing over a 50% increase for future seniors. Quebec stepped up and mirrored that.

These are the steps that we've been taking.

Just so you know, for the low-income seniors on the guaranteed income supplement, we changed the eligibility criteria. There are quite a few things that we've been doing to try to help seniors.

Now, let's get on to what we did during the pandemic, because you touched on that. It was important to make sure we provided support to those seniors who were dealing with the extra costs of getting services because they were isolating at home. Those seniors were, as you mentioned, provided \$300 and an additional \$200 if they were on the guaranteed income supplement. That is what we were doing during the pandemic—but it wasn't just about money. Some seniors were telling us that they had money but they needed help.

• (1620)

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt, Minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte: You're going to interrupt. I've run out of time.

The Chair: Go ahead and wrap it up. Just finish your thought.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Very quickly, I just want to make sure that it is understood that these are steps that have been building. We haven't been ignoring any seniors. We've been building on a package, as we promised in our platform, to help seniors who are older and are facing more challenges, who have more health care costs and who need help. Their savings are running out because they're living longer.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you so much, Chair. I'd like to thank the minister for joining us today.

You mentioned the \$300 and \$200. We're now at year two of the pandemic, and your government, again, has only provided a one-time \$300 payment for those who receive the OAS and an additional \$200 for individuals receiving the GIS. This equates to providing most seniors—the most at risk during this time—with just \$17.65 per month in support. I find this concerning. From my perspective, when you match that with the \$120 million in support for Imperial Oil and the \$70 million for Husky Energy, as two examples, your government has shown a real disregard for seniors.

Why do you believe it's appropriate to provide seniors, the most impacted by the pandemic, with such little direct support when you provide millions and millions, in fact, billions—there was \$18 billion for TMX pipeline—in support to big oil and big corporations?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for the question.

I think you're comparing with the wage subsidy that we provided to organizations to try to help them keep employees on the payroll. It was very important for them not to lose their jobs and to stay connected to their employers during challenging times.

What we've done for seniors is mis-characterized the way you've presented it. The lowest-income seniors, the ones you're talking about, were provided \$300 and then an additional \$200 if they were on the guaranteed income supplement. These are our lowest-income seniors.

Just to be clear, if you add that to the GST top-up that was provided, it would have provided a low-income senior couple more than \$1,500 of tax-free money to help them get through. That is not an insignificant amount of assistance, and that was providing double the amount of money that was committed in our platform to help seniors, so it is really significant.

As I was saying before in response to the previous question, it's not just about money. We put a billion dollars on the table for community groups to help seniors get meals, to get help to get to medical appointments, to be able to get tablets. They actually provided tablets and low-cost, even no-cost, access to the Internet and services for free so that they could get the supports they needed. We were also able to pay in the early days for volunteers to go out to connect with seniors and help deliver services, supports and food to them.

Half a billion dollars of on-the-ground support, plus direct tax-free funding to support seniors was a significant amount of support, which we provided to Canadian seniors.

• (1625)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, it's \$17.65 in addition per month.

In 2021, in the budget implementation bill, your government has proposed providing a one-time payment of \$500 in August 2021 to OAS for those 75 years of age and older, and increasing the OAS for individuals 75 and over by 10% as of July 2022. If the government is trying to target seniors most in need—might I add, mostly women who don't benefit from a pension—why have you not specifically aimed OAS increases at low-income seniors?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for the question.

I want to touch back on the math that you've quoted yet again. The math that you keep quoting does not reflect the reality of what the low-income seniors received. When you add the GST top-up and you add the guaranteed income supplement benefit—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, can you please answer my question? You're not answering my question.

Thank you.

Hon. Deb Schulte: No, of course I will. I'll be happy to do so, but I do need to correct—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I've asked you another question, Minister.

Thank you.

Hon. Deb Schulte: I know, but I need to correct errors when they're restated.

One thing that is important, if you look at the measure for those seniors 75 and above, is that we have more women. Women tend to outlive men. Women tend to have spent time looking after the kids and, therefore, their pensions are not as good. Also, when their partners pass, unfortunately, they get a 60% reduction in that pension and often many didn't have much of their own pension.

What we are seeing, then, with our measure of 75 and above, is that for those seniors it is affecting the women more than men and is benefiting the women.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, what research study or model did you use to determine that seniors—particularly, we know, a certain group, certainly in the BIPOC community, have a shorter life expectancy—should only receive the increase at 75 years of age? We know that there are many seniors who are living in poverty between the ages of 65 and 74. Why are they being excluded?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, if you could, Minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Very briefly, you have to take this measure in conjunction with the other measures that we were doing all along to help seniors' financial security. We already took a step to help the lowest-income seniors on the guaranteed income supplement, and then in budget 2019 we also helped further by changing the earnings exemption.

There are steps that we've been taking to look after those who are low-income seniors, and steps now that we're taking to support the older seniors who are facing the real issue of running out of savings, because they're living longer than ever before. They are facing more disabilities, more risk of being widowed and are at real financial risk of running out of their savings.

Thank you.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Thank you, Minister.

Next is Ms. Dancho, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you Minister for being here for our study on the impact of COVID-19 on seniors.

I want to change it up a little bit. There's been a lot of talk about finances and spending. I want to speak to you, Minister, today about isolation for seniors and a few of your thoughts in that regard.

Just to begin, I wanted to quote one of our expert witnesses in our first meeting a few weeks back. Her name was Ms. Laura Tamblyn Watts of a Canadian national seniors advocacy organization. I'm sure you know her very well.

She said, in regard to be asked about the impact of isolation on seniors:

It has been a misery for older people across this country, whether they are the individuals left in their own homes and socially isolated from family, friends, neighbours and faith communities, without exercise and daily connections, or at the most extreme level, those in long-term care....

She went on to say:

Older people are suffering untold amounts of physical deterioration. In long-term and residential care facilities, we've been able to measure it, so we know that their bodies are getting less strong. We also know that cognitive impairment has been significantly affected. People who were more able mentally before are now less able mentally. That can be measured on dementia scales or on other scales for cognitive impairment.

We know that mental health has deteriorated enormously. For some people, particularly those in long-term care, where the average length of stay before a person passes away is 18 months, this has been almost the rest of their lives, so it has been devastating.

This is the situation facing seniors, particularly those living alone in long-term care over the past 14 months. Your government has been responsible for this country in that time.

I have many seniors and many folks in my riding who advocate on behalf of their aging parents and grandparents. What are the concrete steps you have taken to address the incredible impacts of isolation on seniors during the pandemic?

• (1630)

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for that excellent question.

I want to say how much I respect Laura Tamblyn Watts. She's excellent. She's definitely one of the stakeholders that I stay connected with for her opinions and thoughts on things.

In terms of long-term care, just so that you know, this is not something I'm not familiar with. My mother-in-law was in long-term care last year and passed away after not very long in long-term care. She was admitted in February, and we lost her in June. She wasn't in very long. Part of the reason was that she lost hope. She couldn't see family. She had been with her husband every day for the bulk of her life. We expected, when she went into long-term care right before the pandemic hit, that her husband, who was just down in the next building, would be able to go and have breakfast,

lunch and dinner with her every day and be with her. That was probably the only way she was going to eat, to have that support.

We totally appreciate the circumstances that have happened to seniors and the precipitous decline that we've seen in seniors who have been isolated in long-term care. I've been working with my colleagues across the provinces and territories to find ways that we can get caregivers and family members back into long-term care safely. That was one of the reasons, obviously, that it was important to get them vaccinated quickly and to get workers in long-term care vaccinated quickly. Also, we've been providing support through groups that have been providing tablets. We've been providing support to long-term care facilities so that they can get tablets in there.

As you know, we've also been working at trying to get more PSWs. What was actually happening was that, for one PSW in my mother-in-law's building, his whole day was spent basically going around with a tablet connecting with families. It's really important. We needed to get the resources. We're working with provinces and territories to get the resources.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate the new technology for seniors. I also have very elderly grandparents who haven't been able to master the new technology unfortunately, so that is difficult for us.

You mentioned vaccines. I appreciate that we are getting more vaccines now. I believe had your government procured more in January and February, we would have seen perhaps less restrictions on our long-term care.

You mentioned that you know Ms. Laura Tamblyn Watts. When I asked her what could be done, she said, "The other piece I would offer is that once people are vaccinated against COVID-19, we need to loosen these restrictions."

Specifically in terms of seniors in long-term care, could you comment on that?

Hon. Deb Schulte: As you know, the jurisdiction for long-term care and for health care is the provinces' and territories' jurisdiction. We have been providing vaccines. We've also been providing rapid test kits and a new technology—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Pardon me. Have you provided any recommendations to your counterparts?

The Chair: Answer very quickly, Minister. We're out of time.

Hon. Deb Schulte: We have been providing recommendations, not through us but through the health tables, through NACI and through the science. It's not a political decision. It's something that's being done with the scientists. Immunologists and virologists have been making recommendations. The challenge is trying to keep people safe while also providing supports to get them through these challenging times when they can't meet.

As you said, there are those who can't master the technology, which is why sometimes providing extra support to have someone help them.... They come in the room and do it with them, which would be PSWs and those working in the facilities, so they can have some time to connect with family members.

However, it's not enough. It's not good enough. We need to do better, and we're constantly looking at ways to help.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you very much, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Long, please go ahead for five minutes.

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

Good afternoon to my colleagues, and good afternoon, Minister Schulte. It's great to have you back at HUMA again.

I want to just very quickly take exception to MP Gazan's comments on the \$17.65 a month for seniors. That is absolutely not accurate. We gave a \$300 payment to seniors receiving the OAS. If you get the GIS, you get an additional \$200. Then there's the GST return, which would actually equal almost \$100 a month, as a top-up for seniors, not \$17.65. Again, I wanted to clarify that.

I had a 66-year-old senior in my office this afternoon, Minister. She was exceptionally grateful for what we have done as a government. She's a low-income single senior. She was obviously thrilled with the 10% increase that we gave seniors right off the bat in 2015. She was also thrilled that we were in government, because obviously the Conservatives were going to up the age of OAS to 67 years old. She wouldn't have even been eligible for anything if the Conservative government was still in power, so she was very appreciative.

We talked about the benefits we've given. We also talked about the additional 10% for OAS for seniors over 75. Obviously she's not there yet, but she certainly understood the reasons why.

I want you to comment on the things we've done and how all of those things added together make big differences for seniors in making ends meet. I'm wondering if you could give me your thoughts and comments on that.

• (1635)

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much. You're absolutely right that it is a sequence of steps that our government has been taking to improve the financial security of seniors. As I said before, it has resulted in real results. An 11% reduction is significant.

There's always more to be done, but it is true that you have to look at the 10% increase in GIS. You also have to look at the

changes that we made to the GIS earnings exemption. There are many seniors doing small-scale self-employment, such as selling things they make or doing very infrequent services, which allows them to make some income. We made changes in budget 2019 that allowed them to keep, without any clawback, up to \$5,000. That includes self-employment, which was not the case before. Between \$5,000 and \$15,000, they will only get a 50% clawback. That's a significant help and allows seniors who are struggling to keep more money in their pockets.

There's something else that we haven't talked about and we need to. We've also raised the basic personal amount over four years. That's going to help four million seniors save about \$300 if they're single and \$600 if they're in a couple. You have to look at all the steps we've been doing that add up to real savings, real help and real financial security for seniors as they're aging.

For future seniors, don't forget the 50% increase in pension out-comes in CPP. That's a very significant enhancement we've made to make sure that future seniors have the funding they need for a secure retirement.

There is so much more we've been doing that isn't just about money and putting money in their pockets. This is also about making sure we have better supports in the community to help seniors when they need help. That's why I'm really pleased with the age well at home initiative. I've heard a lot of people across the country say, "We don't want to go into long-term care. We're really glad that you're helping in long-term care because those seniors need to be well cared for and treated with respect, but I don't want to go into long-term care. I want to stay in my home. What are you going to do help me stay in my home?"

This is why I'm very excited about this age well at home program. It will be addressing the needs of seniors who are getting more frail and who need more support to stay in their homes. I hear a lot about snow shovelling, mowing, cleaning, meal making and laundry. These are things that can be supported by the community, by volunteers. We can help keep seniors happy in their own homes, rather than having them go into long-term care.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

We continue with the Bloc Québécois.

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

• (1640)

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will be brief. The cost estimated by the Bloc Qu b cois to increase the old age security for all seniors aged 65 and over is approximately \$4 billion. This is the answer I expected from the minister during the previous round of questions.

Let me come back to my question.

Madam Minister, we are talking about \$4 billion. So what is stopping you from increasing the old age security for those who are 75 years old and under?

[*English*]

Hon. Deb Schulte: I want to make this clear, and I didn't get to say it last time. Put into perspective, if you look at what was provided to seniors in 2020 and what will be provided in 2021, it will add up to \$5.5 billion in direct financial support to seniors. That is over \$1.6 billion more than we had committed to in our platform. We are stepping up and providing significant support to seniors, and more than we promised in our platform.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Mr. Chair, let me remind the minister that the assistance given to seniors during the pandemic was a one-time payment, whereas seniors need long-term, recurring assistance. They need an increase in the old age security pension based on the principle that old age security is a universal concept.

You yourself have recognized this by changing the age of eligibility for the old age security plan from 67 to 65, because 65 is the age of eligibility for the pension. From what I understand, like everyone else, some seniors will be able to age with dignity from the age of 75, because that is when they will get the 10% increase in the old age security. Can we really say that all seniors will be able to age with dignity?

Seniors under the age of 75 will not be able to age with dignity. So I would like you to tell us more about that.

Is there a study that really shows that seniors over 75 need more care?

I was recently in a caregiver group of about 50 people, 50% of whom are under 75. They hammered home the message that they need help and support, which would mean an increase in their old age security pension, meaning assistance that would go directly into their pockets.

The new horizons for seniors program is not enough to help them. They need direct financial assistance. What do you do with those caregivers under 75 who need money?

[*English*]

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much.

Again, I want to let you know that, in 2019 and 2020, the government provided \$56.3 billion in old age security benefits to 6.5 million beneficiaries. I'm just trying to put in perspective how much money the federal government provides to seniors through old age security. This is a very massive program.

One thing people need to remember—and I heard it from you all—is that when we're looking at progress for seniors, that's just one piece of the programs we are doing. You mentioned some of the others, like new horizons. You mentioned that now we're going to have an age well at home initiative.

You have to remember we were also being asked to step up and support national long-term care standards, so we put \$3 billion on the table to be able to help provinces and territories enact standards and improve outcomes in those facilities. We also provided rapid stream investments in terms of the buildings, because not only was it infection prevention control that was required to be enhanced, but we needed to enhance some of the buildings to keep people safe, through ventilation and isolation.

These are things we're already doing, and we're stepping up to provide that funding—multi-billions of dollars more. You're just looking at one piece, at the OAS, and that's not what the government is doing.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

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

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

Minister, I know you spoke a little bit about this, about how budget 2021 proposes providing \$90 million over three years, beginning in 2021-22, to Employment and Social Development Canada to launch the age well at home initiative. It would "assist community-based organizations in providing practical support that helps low-income and otherwise vulnerable seniors" including by "matching seniors with volunteers who can help with meal preparations, home maintenance, daily errands, yard work, and transportation." It sounds a little like WE—the volunteering. Too bad we're not looking at paying people a living wage.

Here's my question. Why has the government chosen to rely on a charity of volunteers to support low-income seniors, something that needs real investment, rather than making the investments that are needed to ensure the human rights of older Canadians are met?

• (1645)

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for the question.

I want to make sure we're remembering the \$6 billion that the federal government is providing to the provinces and territories to help with home care. This is where seniors are getting paid help to support them in their homes and to recover from illness and injury to be able to stay in their homes. That's \$6 billion that the government provided.

This is a program that's additional support to help in non-health related situations. Organizations are already there. I think you've probably heard of Meals on Wheels. You've heard of all sorts of organizations that are already in the community supporting seniors. This is to expand that opportunity, to provide them with some financial support to organize, to mobilize more volunteers and to be able to give that help. People want to help, and this is a way to help mobilize that support.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Minister, I would disagree. I think ensuring that all seniors can live in dignity is a human rights issue, and certainly impacts to health.... Again, you're not answering my question.

Why are you spending \$90 million on a volunteer program rather than paying people a living wage to ensure that seniors can get the care they need to live with human rights and dignity in this country?

The Chair: We'll need a short answer, please, Minister. We're out of time.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Okay.

We are definitely supporting seniors in a variety of different ways. We are basically helping to provide support to get more PSWs into the field, to be able to help in not only long-term care but in-home care. We are doing a variety of a different measures. We're also putting more money into the national housing strategy to create more livable spaces for seniors—affordable livable spaces for seniors. You have housing and wage subsidies. You have programs. You have direct financial support.

The government is there for seniors. We will always be there for seniors, and we're going to continue to be there. I'm looking forward to your recommendations so that we can see what else we need to do.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Tochor, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you very much.

Minister, the seniors I have been meeting with tell a different story. You brag about the increase of over \$1,000 for last year, over the different buckets of money that you made one-time payments for, but the seniors I've been talking to read reports in the news about 40,000 15-year-olds getting approved for CERB at \$2,000 a month—not yearly but monthly. They hear about over 92,000 16-year-olds who have been approved and about 17-year-olds living at home.

There were 184,000 kids getting CERB last year. Do you think that's fair?

Hon. Deb Schulte: One of the things our government will not do is pit one group against another. We made sure not only that CERB was there for youth who could not work and who were potentially unable to get the income they needed for their studies and to continue on with their education but also that seniors were able to access CERB. Even if they had their pensions, their CPP and OAS, they could still qualify for CERB as long as they had a loss of employment income because of the COVID pandemic or because they had to stay home because they were isolating because of risk factors.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Minister, with respect, you should be ashamed of the decisions in this budget. You're saying we're pitting one against the other, but these are the decisions the Liberals made. We've had hundreds of thousands of kids living at home getting approved for emergency relief, while seniors have gotten a pittance, an increase of just over \$1,000 for the year over all the programs.

I shudder to think of what you're hearing from the seniors you've been talking to. What I'm hearing is that you are pitting one segment against the other.

Hon. Deb Schulte: I think it's really unfortunate that the seniors you're talking to have had their information twisted so that they are basically saying the youth who have lost their jobs don't deserve to be supported.

Listen, I'm the minister for seniors and not the minister for youth, but I can tell you from the youth that I know in my community that it has been very tough on them. They would normally be able to have a summer job at a local restaurant or a carnival. Normally, they would be working in the service industry, which has really shut down, and they don't have the ability now to earn the funds they need to be able to carry on with their education. There may be some who accessed it who shouldn't have, and that will be determined in time through the CRA.

Right now, we were there to support youth. We were there to support seniors, Canadians and businesses, and I'm proud that we were there to support them. That's helped us get through—

• (1650)

Mr. Corey Tochor: If you're wondering where they're getting their information from. I'll just read this quickly. It's from the National Post, a pretty reputable national news outlet. It says:

The documents show that 40,630 15-year-olds were approved for the benefit. The government paid out \$81.2 million for that group. There were 92,784 16-year-olds approved, receiving nearly \$186 million, and 184,576 17-year-olds received \$369 million.

That's where they're getting their news from or information, as you call it.

It's concerning. It's concerning that we would not help seniors out during this crisis at the same level as we were helping out students living at home.

I'm going to switch gears just briefly on the dollar amounts you talked about, the \$5 billion here and the \$10 billion there that the Liberals like to gloat about. It's all printed money. It's all money that is printed, and when regimes across the world have tried to print money to get out of their fiscal crisis, it has ended poorly for society.

I am wondering if you think seniors are worried about inflation right now.

Hon. Deb Schulte: I think everybody's worried about inflation, but more than anything people are worried about getting through the pandemic, and they need supports to do that.

I want to go back. When I was young, I needed a job to help pay for my family. We were not well off, and we all ended up working. I was working at 15. There are a lot of young people in this country who are supporting themselves, their families and their education. You might say 15 is a little early to be supporting your education, but you need a lot of funds to live, to pay for your food and clothes. These are things that families sometimes need to rely on their younger teenagers to help with.

Cory, it's really unfortunate that you're making a judgment call that all youth are somehow in a position to have excess. That is not true and I think it's unfortunate. Maybe it's because of a different upbringing, but I can tell you that I really appreciated my job. If I had lost it when I was 15, it would have made things very difficult for me. I know that is the story of young people across the country.

Let's go back to seniors, because we are not doing one versus the other. Seniors were able to access the same supports as youth and other Canadians. If they worked, lost their income and were making over \$5,000 a year, they would have been able to access benefits as well.

It is important that we are fair and are treating everybody well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Tochor.

[*Translation*]

The last committee member to ask questions is Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Lauzon, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, thank you for joining us for this important study on seniors. We know that you have always been committed to seniors.

I think you'll agree with me that one of your important roles since the beginning of your mandate has been to reassure seniors, to listen to them and to work with them.

My riding has a number of private seniors' clubs. There is also the Réseau FADOQ, with whom we have had many discussions and with whom we work hand in hand. I know that you have always made your presence felt, unlike the Bloc Québécois, which is spreading misinformation, scaring seniors and causing them anxiety.

You have always been there to support seniors, Madam Minister. You provided some important statistics earlier, saying that 57% of women aged 65 to 75 were more vulnerable. You also said that 39% of widows have lower incomes. Health care spending increases by 67% at age 80, and home care increases sevenfold at age 85. The evidence-based numbers that you have shared with us are very significant.

Would you agree that the evidence shows that our election promise, delivered in budget 2021, was more likely to be focused on the most vulnerable?

• (1655)

[*English*]

Hon. Deb Schulte: The answer is yes. There is always more to do, but we should feel proud of the work we've done so far.

Obviously I look forward to the report and the recommendations that you're going to bring forward. I also very much look forward to my conversations with stakeholders such as FADOQ and others, so that they are able to share their perspectives as we move forward and continue to work on the issues that are of importance to seniors, while specifically making sure that we address their financial security and their needs.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you very much, Madam Minister.

Throughout the questions today, you have mentioned several choices the government has made that have helped seniors, including direct and indirect assistance through associations.

You have a program in place called new horizons for seniors, and you have made a number of changes. In addition, you have taken the time to consult with all parties to improve it.

Can you tell us a little about the changes to the new horizons for seniors program and the process you used to arrive at those changes?

[*English*]

Hon. Deb Schulte: I want to thank all the MPs from all parties who took part last year, very early on, in giving us input on how we could improve the new horizons for seniors program. We were able to incorporate it so that we have better distribution across the country, making sure that those in rural and remote communities have an opportunity to get projects. I want to thank all members of Parliament for all of the work they brought forward.

The recommendations were incorporated, and they have resulted in over 5,000 projects across Canada that have addressed those in rural and remote areas, those who are more vulnerable and those in different cultural groups. We have a much better distribution of projects across the country to help support seniors, and I'm very proud of the work that all MPs did to get those quality projects in the applications. We ended up with really excellent results across Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you.

You have addressed a number of issues today, but we haven't talked much about elder abuse. We have invested \$50 million in initiatives to combat elder abuse. We need to ensure that all seniors are safe.

Can you tell us how the Liberal government is honouring its commitment on this issue?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: Elder abuse in all its forms is totally unacceptable, and it is an issue that our government takes very seriously. We are working on initiatives to combat elder abuse, including strengthening the law, creating a national definition and improving data collection. This builds on the work that was already under way by the national seniors council, which examined the issue through the new horizons for seniors program. One of its elements is addressing elder abuse and raising awareness. Through budget 2021, our government will provide \$50 million over five years to promote safe relationships and prevent family violence, including elder abuse.

Our government will continue working on this issue and strengthening Canada's approach to elder abuse. It's very important.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

[English]

Minister, that completes a little over an hour. We are very grateful to you for being with us, for bearing with us given our late start and for the very comprehensive and patient way that you responded to our questions. We appreciate your openness to receiving and being guided by the recommendations that will come from this report.

As I love to say, you are welcome to stay, but you're free to go.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you.

The Chair: Colleagues, we're going to suspend for a couple of minutes just to make sure that we're all set for the second panel.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much, Chair. It was a real pleasure. I always appreciate the opportunity to come and share a bit of knowledge and hear from you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We are suspended.

• (1700)

(Pause)

• (1700)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Today the committee is meeting for its study of the impact of COVID-19 on seniors.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses, who will continue our discussion. We have Alexis Conrad, senior assistant deputy minister; Annette Gibbons, associate deputy minister; and Janet Goulding, associate assistant deputy minister.

Unless you have an opening statement ready, I think we're going to go right into questions.

Ms. Annette Gibbons (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): We do not, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Excellent. We're going to start with Ms. Falk, for the Conservatives, for six minutes.

Ms. Falk, you have the floor.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank all of you for being available today to come to our committee as we study the impact that COVID-19 has had on seniors and is having on seniors, and the reach that federal government programs have had.

The recent budget proposed to provide \$400 million to create a temporary community services recovery fund for charities and non-profits. Will charities and non-profits serving seniors be eligible and/or prioritized in the program?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: They will certainly be eligible. I'll turn to Janet to provide a bit more on this.

Ms. Janet Goulding (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): The community services recovery fund will definitely be available to senior-serving organizations that are either charities or non-profits. The program is still under design, and we're looking at how to make sure that dollars are made available to the most vulnerable Canadians to support our charitable and non-profit sector as it moves, we hope, to the post-pandemic period very shortly.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

Have there been conversations about what activities would be eligible for funding?

Ms. Janet Goulding: The new recovery fund is focused on supporting charities and non-profits that are looking to modernize, adapt or move forward with new programming or new processes that will help them move forward in the post-recovery period. We do anticipate having those details available in the coming months.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Is there a timeline for when the intake of applications will begin?

Ms. Janet Goulding: We intend to run the program using community-based intermediaries who have national reach. There will be a public call for proposals to identify the organizations that will administer the program. All of those details are still to come.

• (1705)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay. Thank you.

The staffing crisis in long-term care has exacerbated the impact of COVID-19 on the health of our seniors, and there is a shortage of health care and care workers across the country. In the fall economic statement, funds were allocated to train 4,000 support workers across the country. This committee received a written response to my previous inquiries on the topic stating that recruitment for this training started in April, with placements beginning as early as June 2021.

Given those dates, the program should be under way. Can you please provide the committee with an update on the enrolment of this program?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Go ahead, Alexis.

Mr. Alexis Conrad (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch and Policy Horizons Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thanks.

Mr. Chair, there's actually not much more I can say other than what was provided to the committee before. The program is moving ahead. I think there have been announcements around funding, targets and working with Colleges and Institutes Canada to train thousands of personal support workers. We're still in that period, obviously, which the committee received information about, between April and June. We would be happy to follow up with information to the committee when something does change.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Perfect.

I have a few other questions as well, but if I can't get that information, I would like the questions on the record so that when the information becomes available the department could provide it if possible.

Could you provide a breakdown of enrolment across the country and what colleges are running this federal program? Will the department be tracking the completion rate of this program or how will the success of the program be measured? How does this program measure up against other investments in training, like the Ontario accelerated PSW program, and are these programs complementary?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We'll come back to you, then, Ms. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Perfect. I appreciate that.

I want to also touch on the age well initiative. I know that the minister did mention it, and it was brought up in our previous hour. We know that budget 2021 announced \$90 million over three years to launch the age well at home initiative, which would be helping seniors to age in place. We know that's very important, especially for seniors attaining and having autonomy. I'm just wondering how this program is going to achieve that.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We're still developing the detailed program parameters for it, but the goal is to fund community serving organizations at a regional level and a national level to try to develop and put in place best practices to support seniors in the community.

We have the new horizons program platform, which we will sort of use as a base for the delivery of this new program. We have, as you know, a whole infrastructure built around it that involves us in a relationship with various support organizations across the country that are serving seniors. We'll certainly be building on that foundation—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Is there a goal for a deadline?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: A deadline for a call for proposals, do you mean?

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes. I guess it's still under way and being developed, but it was announced in the budget.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We probably will have a couple of calls for proposals under the program, and we really do want to launch in this fiscal year. We're working very hard to reach that objective.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Who is going to be targeted for eligible funding? Would it be people or seniors specifically, individually, or is it going to be the organizations?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: It would be organizations that would apply.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: What types of activities is the department exploring that would be eligible for funding?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: As the minister noted, organizations that are providing various supports to seniors in the community would be provided funding to organize those sorts of supports.

It came up with the minister that the volunteer model is certainly a model that's out in the community a lot already, at the local level, so building and strengthening some of those activities is certainly something we have in mind. We're also looking at trying to support the development and rollout of best practices for things that have been proven to work in order to try to support organizations perhaps in another part of the country to be able to provide a similar service. We're really trying to not reinvent the wheel but to look at some of the great success stories that are out there and trying to support organizations in different areas and different regions to build on those kinds of models.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's wonderful. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gibbons.

Next, Mr. Dong, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses and officials for coming to the committee to give us some answers.

I want to follow up on what MP Falk was asking. We know that the majority of our seniors wish to age at home. We know that the pandemic has posed a greater challenge.

Today, Angus Reid had a survey out. I noticed that 45% of the respondents said it would be impossible to provide sufficient support for seniors to age at home without considerable help. Looking forward, budget 2021 talked about the \$90 million over three years to launch the age well at home initiative.

To follow up on the previous question, why did the ministry choose or consider the avenue of volunteer service? Do we know if there will be enough volunteers to meet the needs of seniors aging at home?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: As the minister noted, there's already a great record of volunteer participation in all kinds of community-serving organizations, and certainly for seniors there are a number of very successful ones out there, so we would be able to build on that. We know seniors themselves are very active volunteers in serving each other, so certainly that's one type of organization or one model I think we want to provide more support to.

There are a great many needs out there and a lot of different ways of supporting the community. What we're trying to do is to give a little bit of a boost to what's already happening out in the not-for-profit sector and, as I said before, where there have been success stories, we are providing supports and providing the profile and the capacity for organizations that right now don't have the resources to be able to build up a function or an activity to serve the community. We are looking at giving them the boost to do that and at giving them models through comparing with what's already happening in other places.

Lots of very interesting things are happening in communities now. We are hearing that they just need a little bit more support to be able to bolster that and to manage projects to build up capacity even further.

Mr. Han Dong: I can support that. In my riding of Don Valley North, I know personally quite a few seniors who are helping seniors through Meals on Wheels. They are actively recruiting volunteers to cater to the diverse community we have in the riding. I hope we can enact this very quickly to provide those key supports.

I can't help but ask what checks will be in place to mitigate the risk of senior abuse, considering that if we expand this program we will be recruiting or encouraging more volunteers to come and serve. Are there any thoughts on that?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Are you referring to the possibility that people involved with the administration in community organizations may be doing—

Mr. Han Dong: Yes. Many people involved in delivering these programs will be volunteers. Are there any background checks and provisions to prevent any risk of senior abuse?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: That's a great question.

Because this program will be delivered through projects that these community-serving organizations structure, we would be relying on them to make sure they're doing the kinds of checks that need to be done. We would provide the support for them to be able to do everything they need to mount a project and provide services to seniors ultimately, through volunteers, for example, so it will be important that they are resourced to be able to manage the volunteer function well.

• (1715)

Mr. Han Dong: That's right. I strongly recommend that resources are put in place to mitigate the risk of things happening, because it will bring a bad name to a very good program, which will be discouraging to a lot of volunteers who are in place.

Very quickly, on the new horizons program, I hear a lot of community groups have been successfully applying for this funding. Of course, we saw the additional funding put into place last year. Going forward, is there any way to provide any stability to these community groups in terms of these programs, because they see that they're catering...?

It's quite successful, and they want to continue doing good work with the support of this program.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The funding is not an operating grant, so there's no guarantee of receipt of funding every year. Every year, it's sort of what we call a competitive process. There are lots of different organizations that are new to the program every year. There are definitely organizations that apply for funding on a renewed basis every year as well.

The objective of the program is to fund distinct projects as opposed to the ongoing operations of an organization, so that's a distinct project that meets the needs and objectives of the program.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gibbons.

Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

Let me start with a brief preamble by saying that fear is a very bad counsellor. So I hope I won't scare you with my questions, but I'm very happy that we can scare you a little.

My question is about the government's stated intention in its budget to increase the old age security at age 75 starting in 2022.

Do you recognize that the old age security pension and the guaranteed income supplement make up the first pillar of Canada's retirement income system?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: They are certainly the pillars of the income system for seniors.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Do you agree that the old age security pension is a social protection system that provides retirement income and that is universal at age 65, regardless of one's situation, whether one has worked or not?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: It is not a universal right, because there are still conditions, such as the number of years as a Canadian resident.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Yes, that's true. However, in general, a few months before we reach that venerable age, we all receive a message from the federal government telling us that we are eligible for the old age security pension.

For many people—I don't know the number, but perhaps you do—this is their only retirement income. They have no other retirement income from work or other sources, or they have not worked. So the old age security pension is a major source of income.

You advise the government on its decisions that justify its policy choices. This is very important. Here's my question. What studies and evidence-based data did you use to draw a line, for the first time in our view, and increase the old age security starting at 75 instead of 65 years of age, recognizing that the universal pension plan, with some conditions, starts at age 65?

What evidence do you base this on, and what differences do you see, even between 75 and 73? What is the rationale behind that?

• (1720)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The government has made a decision to make that distinction and to increase the pension for those 75 and over.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Yes, but what data were used?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The minister told the committee about a number of factors. There are the costs of health services, the additional costs of living when a person becomes single again after the death of a spouse. There are differences in work participation. People who are 75 and over work much less than those who are 65—

Ms. Louise Chabot: Do you have any evidence?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Yes—

Ms. Louise Chabot: Can you forward it to us?

Does it support the fact that I may be 68, 69, or 73, and although I'm entitled to my old age security pension—

[English]

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): I have a point of order.

I'm sorry to interrupt, Madame Chabot, but the translation is not coming through clearly. I can't understand a word.

The Chair: I'm not sure, Mr. Vis, but it might be because we had two people trying to speak at the same time.

[Translation]

Mr. Vis, is it working now?

Ms. Louise Chabot: Why would two people be speaking at the same time?

The Chair: It was you and the witness, Ms. Chabot.

I'll turn it over to you.

You have one minute and a half left.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Let me give you another example.

I hope we can get that evidence, because we don't think there's any justification for those decisions other than that they are political choices.

My other question is this. We are in a pandemic and this will be short.

Last year, because we hammered it home, people received \$300 for old age security at age 65. This year, in August, we're going to do the same thing, and we are still in a pandemic, but this time it will be at age 75.

What justifies that decision this time?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The \$500 payment in August is really related to the decision to increase the old age security pension for people 75 years and older. It is a payment in recognition of the fact that this change will not take place until July 2022.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Do I still have time?

The Chair: Yes, you have 30 seconds.

Ms. Louise Chabot: In 30 seconds, I can hardly ask questions about other measures. However, I will use the example of abuse. I don't know why we are spending money—perhaps you can justify it—on policies or action plans that the provinces have.

Have you thought about advising the government to increase health transfers so that the provinces and Quebec can make all their own choices in terms of service delivery, instead of spending money on a piecemeal basis on issues that have nothing to do with the federal government?

The Chair: Could you please answer briefly?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I don't have a comment on that.

I was referring to the public policy decision on the old age security pension, not other decisions.

• (1725)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan.

Go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming to committee today.

My first question relates to Manitoba and much of the western provinces. We know that urban indigenous peoples in particular, first nations communities, have been disproportionately impacted by high rates of COVID-19, and this has also been true in the case of Black communities in Canada. My question for your department is this: Has there been any data collection in relation to the social determinants of health and impacts of COVID-19 on indigenous and Black seniors during the pandemic?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I will admit, Mr. Chair, that I'm not in a position to expand on that. I know that we're having some discussions with our federal and provincial colleagues on data sources and on breaking out different populations of seniors by different characteristics, and that's something that we need to improve upon. We have the federal and provincial ministers responsible for seniors meeting in June, and one of the things officials have put on the agenda for them to discuss is how we improve that.

On the specifics around those data points and the impacts of COVID, I can say generally that I think StatsCan has done quite a bit of work to be able to provide very detailed demographic information, but I don't have that at my fingertips.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I was very happy to finally see a robust StatsCan study again. However, as we know, rates of poverty within certain groups of seniors are higher, which is why this data is pretty critical going forward, and I hope to have a more robust answer the next time. I think this is quite pressing.

I know you've been asked a lot of questions about this. The government has proposed a \$500 payment for August 2021 to OAS pensioners who are 75 years of age and older, and an increase in the OAS pension payable to individuals aged 75 and over by 10% as of July 2022. Again, going to back to research, we also know there are differences in life expectancy. These are not secrets.

What data was used to determine that this one-time payment of \$500 and the 10% increase would be adequate?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: As I was saying before and as the minister spoke about earlier, there was a range of different data taken into consideration, things like costs, differences in income and differences in labour force participation. We can certainly send some of those numbers along to the committee as Madame Chabot asked for.

One of the numbers I have here—and this is intuitive for a lot of people—shows that the proportion of seniors with employment income in 2018 was substantially lower among those aged 75 and up—15.5%—compared with 34% of seniors aged 65 to 74 who had employment income, so that's one of the data points that were considered in that decision.

With regard to marital status and whether couples are sharing expenses or whether there are more likely to be people who are on their own covering their expenses, there's a difference there in terms of seniors over 75. Those are the types of things that were taken into account.

Ms. Leah Gazan: With all due respect, I know this is not your decision, but I hope 75-year-olds don't have to work in order to stay off the street. That being said, has there been any sort of exploration of data, any research done specifically with regard to wom-

en? We know that many women who are seniors do not benefit from a pension. We know that women in their senior years live in poverty at higher rates.

Is this data gender-specific, and going further, has specific research been done with BIPOC communities?

• (1730)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: That some of it is gender-specific and some of it is not is the short answer to that. I don't believe that there was detailed analysis at the BIPOC level, but I certainly am happy to go back and check that.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes. I have some concerns about that, because this was a pretty big decision to leave out individuals 65 to 74 for an increase in an OAS benefit, knowing the high rates of poverty in which seniors live. It doesn't seem from your responses—I could be incorrect—that there was a lot of research done in making these critical decisions, when the announcement was made, in terms of who gets it.

I agree with many of my colleagues within the committee that there seems to be a two-tiered system being set up for seniors in our country.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan. We're out of time.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, everybody.

The Chair: We'll have Mr. Vis, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It was almost exactly a year ago when I believe Mesdames Conrad, Goulding and Gibbons were talking about OAS at our committee.

The minister said at that meeting on May 15, 2020 that the most important thing was to get a payment as quickly as possible into the hands of those seniors who were struggling. That was the objective of the government. It's why we had the one-time payment option go to old age security recipients and guaranteed income supplement recipients, so we didn't have to make them apply.

At the time of our discussion last year, we discussed the merits of OAS recipients receiving \$300 even if they were in the upper-income levels, and of GIS recipients receiving \$500. It seemed that the minister agreed they'd made some tough decisions, but they wanted to get that money out quickly. We wanted to do it as quickly as possible, and at the time I accepted that rationale. I didn't like the fact that some people got more money than others and how it was arranged, but I accepted that the money needed to get out the door.

Now, let's turn to the budget. There are \$500 cheques going out this time, but only to seniors over the age of 75. When did the deputy minister advise the minister that seniors over the age of 75 should be receiving a \$500 cheque, or did the deputy minister advise the minister to issue \$500 cheques?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The decisions around the specifics of those, and this was announced in the budget....

We have a detailed process every year where we work in the department providing advice. Ministers make decisions about what to seek in the budget and present that to the Minister of Finance, as you know. All of the discussions we would have on any file that is going to be the subject of a budget determination, if you will, went through that process, including this one.

Mr. Brad Vis: You can't tell me whether or not the department advised the minister to issue \$500 cheques.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: There was a decision. I mean, everything is a conversation with ministers, and—

Mr. Brad Vis: But there's a paper record in your department, and surely there must have been a memo from, say, the director of policy, recommending that seniors receive a \$500 cheque. Was there a memo issued by the director of policy for seniors at your department to issue a \$500 cheque in August?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I won't get into the details of the back and forth because those are the recommendations to the minister, and, quite honestly, I was not an associate in the department at that time—

Mr. Brad Vis: It doesn't matter if you were in the department at that time or not.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: No, I understand. What I can tell you is that there is a back and forth on budget proposals and different options are considered, and different options for implementations are considered, so when—

• (1735)

Mr. Brad Vis: I know there's a back and forth, Madame Gibbons, but I know that department officials also write recommendations and the minister has the right to either approve or deny that recommendation.

My question is this: Was there a recommendation to issue a payment in August for seniors over the age of 75 from the policy branch at your department?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The reason I'm not giving you a specific response is that there is always back and forth about what's possible, the timing of making different changes, and—

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay.

Maybe, then, could you, for all committee members, table the advice given to the minister in advance of the budget, including the recommendations for the minister to include in the budget?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: That's part of the budget process, which I'm not—

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm going to have to file an ATIP. Is that what you're saying?

The Chair: You may find that it's covered by cabinet confidentiality as well.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: It's a budget process, and we don't—

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay. Fair point.

In our previous meeting, Dr. Samir Sinha, the director of health policy research and co-chair of Ryerson's National Institute on Ageing, said that it was a bit of an eyebrow-raise when they saw the

announcement and that “if it had been my decision, I wouldn't have used the old age security mechanism to do that”.

What's the rationale behind giving all seniors over the age of 75 \$500 in August, likely right before an election, I might add, and not seniors under the age of 75 who receive GIS? What's the economic rationale behind that?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The payment in August is part of an integrated policy decision to increase OAS for people over 75—

Mr. Brad Vis: Do you think it's acceptable that the economic rationale is that seniors making—

The Chair: Mr. Vis, you're out of time.

Mr. Brad Vis: —over \$100,000 need another \$500 cheque from the government?

The Chair: You're out of time.

Give a brief response please, Ms. Gibbons.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: All I will say is that this is part of the policy decision that was made as part of the budget.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gibbons.

Thank you, Mr. Vis.

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

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here. I really appreciate your responses and all your hard work.

Unfortunately, there were some implications earlier by members of the committee that almost implied that somehow students were getting more than seniors. I think there was that implication.

Just as a clarification question, I wanted to ask you this. Did retired seniors on CPP lose their income as a result of the pandemic?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: No, they would not have.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Not to say that seniors certainly weren't experiencing income insecurity prior to the pandemic, I'm sure, but it wasn't as a result of the pandemic. Is that right?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Seniors would not have lost the ongoing benefits to which they were entitled. OAS, CPP and GIS all would have continued as standard. If they had been employed and were eligible for the CERB, many of them did apply for the CERB as well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. Thank you for that clarification.

Is it mostly the case, then, that the cost of living may have changed and that some of their expenses may have been increased during the pandemic due to the pandemic? Is that true?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: On the decision that was made last spring to provide the payments that the minister spoke about—the \$300 for OAS, the GIS payment and the GST—those were things intended to support Canadians to deal with some of the extra expenses they incurred due to the pandemic.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Those expenses would have been things like prescription fees and groceries, etc., and delivery fees. Is that right, generally speaking?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: That's right.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Yes, that's what I heard from seniors in my riding.

The one-time payment was linked to a cost-of-living increase that was due to some of these added costs that seniors were experiencing. That's the rationale for the one-time payment. Is that right?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: That is the rationale, yes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Okay. That makes sense.

Do we know how much that cost of living might have gone up for those particular seniors who would have been impacted by that?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I think there were.... There was certainly analysis with data that we had at the time to sort of try to make an estimate, but I think that some of those decisions were made very quickly in an effort to try to get support out to Canadians quickly. We wouldn't have had exhaustive datasets, but we certainly knew at the time that certain foods were more expensive, for example, as you noted, and took that into account.

• (1740)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

Just to be clear here, I'm not suggesting that seniors aren't income insecure or needing support, but is it not the case that.... What government in history lowered the age of eligibility from 67 to 65? Was that the Liberal government?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Yes, it was.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Which government increased the GIS by \$947?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I think your question is rhetorical.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Yes. Which—

Ms. Annette Gibbons: It was done under this government in 2016, I believe.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Which government plans to increase OAS by 10% for seniors over 75?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: It's the same.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Right. Are there many other measures that impact the income security of seniors? I think we heard today from the minister that we haven't cracked the nut or solved the problem, and there's a lot more work to do. However, does this not show a history of really trying to tackle income insecurity on a national level for seniors across the country? Is that fair to say?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: There have certainly been several initiatives in the last four or five years that have been focused on increasing the support system for seniors.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: In the fall economic statement, \$1 billion was committed for the safe long-term care fund. What is that funding for?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I'm going to ask Alexis to speak to that.

Mr. Alexis Conrad: The \$1 billion will go to provincial governments to help with long-term care. However, it is funded through Health Canada, not through our department.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Right. Is it for infection prevention and control mostly?

Mr. Alexis Conrad: Yes, those kinds of things. I don't have the specifics, but we're happy to provide anything to the committee. It is generally a Health Canada transfer.

The Chair: That's it for your time, Mr. Turnbull. Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Studies have been conducted to inform the government's decision on the old age security (OAS). Have any studies been conducted on increasing this pension at age 65?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I can only speak to the decision that was made and the work that we have done with respect to people who are 75 and over.

Ms. Louise Chabot: No one asked you to conduct any study at all to find out what it might mean at 65. Is that correct?

You have a team that supports the most highly-placed elected officials, but you have not studied the possible scenarios either. Is that correct?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: In the Speech from the Throne, the government made a commitment to people aged 75 and over. That commitment was part of Minister Schulte's mandate letter. That's what we have been working on.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Do you have any statistics?

You talked a lot about distinctions between people who are 65 years old, some of whom are working. I don't have the exact figures in front of me. Are you aware that some of them are working because the OAS pension is not enough for them, and that sometimes, if they are able to work, they do so to make ends meet at the end of the month?

Having said that, I'm really trying to understand the situation. In our view, this is quite unique, because this program starts at a specific age. The government has rightly congratulated itself for restoring the age of eligibility for the program to 65.

Mr. Chair, I'm coming to the end of my two and a half minutes, so I will get right to the point.

Ms. Gibbons, how can you seriously justify, with numbers and data, excluding people between the ages of 65 and 74? If you don't want to include those who are 65 and over, we could look at 73 and over.

• (1745)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: As I mentioned earlier, a number of different factors were considered in making the decision. In the end, the government chose to put forward an increase in payments for those aged 75 and over.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Finally, we have Ms. Gazan, with the last round of questions, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

Going back to what my colleague Madame Chabot said, I have concerns about how this decision was made. I think it would be helpful to the committee if you shared the actual research and data that was used to decide to withhold any increases to those under age 75.

Going back, will the proposed long-term care standards include standards for adequate pay for care workers?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The work on the standards is at an early stage, so I think it's too soon to know exactly what they will cover. The intention of the two groups doing the work is to cover both the built infrastructure as well as the processes and procedures that staff follow in providing care. Certainly, something like what the staff complement is for a certain number of seniors in a home is something—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Just because I have one other question and I have such limited time....

I do think it's a good idea, considering the shortage of staffing, to look at making sure people have a livable wage to maybe encourage them to take that profession on.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I have just one final point, if I could say it.

It's very important. The provinces, of course, are ultimately responsible for standards in care homes, so they will be—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have just one last question.

We know that the pandemic has been horrific in long-term care homes. I'm wondering if there are any supports that will be provided to seniors who have survived and have suffered, for example, and who, going forward, may be experiencing post-traumatic stress from their experience in long-term care.

Are there any supports that are planned for seniors?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: There are a couple of things that come to mind. Certainly, the things that we're doing under the new horizons for seniors program and the new age well at home initiative will be looking at supports—though perhaps not dealing with PTSD. There were some measures in the budget, as well, under Health Canada that deal with mental health supports to Canadians. Of course, the government did introduce some measures during the pandemic, and there are other measures in the budget.

I certainly would encourage you to, perhaps, invite Health Canada for further discussions on that as we're not really in a position.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Gibbons, Ms. Goulding and Mr. Conrad, thank you so much for being with us and for your answers to our questions. They will, undoubtedly, be extremely valuable in putting together a report for government. We very much appreciate your service to your country and to government and the professional and patient way that you've carried yourselves today. Thank you so much.

I have one brief question for my colleagues.

Witnesses, thanks. You're free to go if you wish.

Colleagues, when we meet on Thursday, we will have Romy Bowers as the only witness. She has asked that she be afforded some flexibility with respect to her opening statement. It presently runs about eight minutes long. Is there any objection to giving her eight or nine minutes for her opening statement? If there is, we'll tell her that she has to cut it down. Is there any problem with that?

Very well. If that's the case, that concludes the business for today. Do we have consent to...?

Ms. Dancho, go ahead.

• (1750)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I just have a quick question about committee business for Thursday.

Were we not supposed to have the rapid housing strategy discussion that day? I was surprised to see committee business. I thought we had rapid housing that day. Could you just clarify?

The Chair: No, I don't recall any agreement to have rapid housing. We wanted to get Ms. Bowers on as soon as possible, and this is what her schedule permitted. Her schedule only permits 90 minutes, and we do have some things to clear up in the other 30. I can tell you what is on my list.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Sure.

The Chair: We still need to settle the budget for this particular study. We need to settle the question of honorariums and gifts for witnesses. We need to settle on the amount and the date for the Centennial Flame Research Award. I think that is it.

Those will be the things that will take that first half-hour to cover, and then we have an hour and a half with Romy Bowers.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: The only reason I ask is that when we originally talked about it, we were going to have the rapid housing update in the same meeting as Romy Bowers. Maybe that wasn't confirmed, but I know that was discussed. I thought that was what was happening, but you're saying that that's not the case.

The Chair: No, that isn't the case. My understanding is that we were going to have a full meeting with Ms. Bowers, but we can only get an hour and half, so no, that isn't consistent with my recollection. However, I'm happy to continue this discussion to see when we can get rapid housing slotted in. The Bowers thing was kind of time sensitive, because under the order in council, we only have until the end of May.

Do we have consensus to adjourn?

Mr. Brad Vis: Mr. Chair, on that point, if possible, would it not make more sense to have CMHC officials here at the same time on Thursday—that was my recollection too—to continue after Ms. Bowers' testimony and provide an update on the RHI? It doesn't have to be her directly, but generally that program goes through CMHC. That was the rationale behind it in our previous committee business discussions. That's all.

The Chair: That makes eminent sense. Leave that with me. It makes a ton of sense that we arrange for... We'll see if we can secure officials to speak to rapid housing at the meeting to deal with her appointment. We'll do our best.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is there any other business? Do we have consensus to adjourn?

Ms. Dancho, I'm sorry for the confusion. Now that Mr. Vis has stated it this way, it aligns with my recollection. I had a cramp, I guess.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It's no problem.

The Chair: I believe I see consensus.

We are adjourned. We'll see you Thursday. Thank you, colleagues.

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