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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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

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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Committee members, I will call the meeting back to order. We are now public.

Welcome to meeting number 53 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will resume its study on the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B), 2022-23: vote 1b under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and votes 1b and 5b under the Department of Employment and Social Development.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to make a few comments.

To get my attention and get on the speakers list, if you're in the room, please raise your hand. If you're meeting virtually, please use the "raise hand" icon. Please wait until I recognize you. We have a speaking order with designated times. For those appearing virtually and in the room you have the option of using the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available if you are using the Zoom camera.

In accordance with the routine motion, I am informing the committee that all the connection tests for all the witnesses who required them in advance have been completed. As well, as I indicated, if there's an interruption in the interpretation service, get my attention. For those members meeting virtually, unless you're using an approved House of Commons headset, you will not be recognized to participate verbally.

Appearing for this meeting is the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion. She has departmental staff with her. We have Jean-François Tremblay, Karen Robertson, Tammy Bélanger, Andrew Brown, Elisha Ram, Michael MacPhee and Atiq Rahman.

We'll begin with Minister Qualtrough for five minutes.

Minister, you have the floor.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Hello, everyone. Good afternoon. It's good to be back at the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I'm joining you from the traditional territory of the Tsawwassen and Musqueam first nations.

I was last before this committee to testify during your study of Bill C-22, which seeks to create, as you know, the Canada disability benefit. I thank you for your work and your efforts in helping to get Bill C-22 unanimously passed through third reading last week in the House of Commons.

Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I thought when we were using this hybrid model that we were supposed to be able to see the individual, and we can't see the minister.

The Chair: We've dealt with this before. We have an agreement that the minister would appear with her picture on the screen, because of a disability issue.

Continue, Madam Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you all.

I'm here today to talk about the supplementary estimates (B) for Employment and Social Development Canada, so let me jump right in.

My department is requesting a total of \$411.4 million in additional authorities through these supplementary estimates. This includes \$164.5 million in operating expenses, \$225.7 million in grants and contributions, and \$21.2 million in statutory expenditures.

I'll focus on a few of these initiatives in the interest of the committee's time.

Of course, I'll begin by talking about Canada's first-ever disability inclusion action plan, which we launched last October. The action plan is a road map to create a more inclusive Canada. It has four pillars, including financial security, employment, accessible and inclusive communities, and a modern approach to disability.

This is why we're requesting \$13.6 million to implement early initiatives under the disability inclusion action plan, with \$11.4 million going to the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities and \$2.2 million to alternate format reading materials. This funding will help us make real progress on the objectives laid out within the disability inclusion action plan.

• (1635)

[*Translation*]

The temporary foreign worker program is another key area of focus for my department.

We are requesting \$18.7 million to meet the growing demand for labour market impact studies. Demand is already high, and is expected to increase over the next few years. It is important that we invest now to increase our processing capacity, including hiring more staff, to ensure that employers across Canada can hire temporary foreign workers in a timely manner. The additional funding will allow Service Canada to provide employers with timely decisions in 2022-23 and beyond.

This will complement changes begun in April 2022, including changes to labour market impact assessments, which are now valid for 18 months. That is a nine-month increase, as compared to the pre-pandemic six months. This is another measure that makes it easier for employers to get the help they need, when they need it.

[*English*]

We're also requesting \$27.1 million to increase the reach of the temporary foreign worker program, particularly inspections. TFWs are vital to our economy. They make sure that we have healthy, locally grown produce, and they fill gaps in critical sectors like trucking and construction. They deserve to work in safe, healthy and dignified conditions.

Over the past year, we've improved inspection quality, timeliness and responsiveness. We also established a workload management strategy to reduce inspection backlogs, and we conducted outreach and engagement sessions with stakeholders. The additional funding will build upon these efforts and is part of our broader effort to rebuild the employer compliance regime.

My department is responsible for delivering a wide variety of services to Canadians, from employment insurance to LMIA's to public pensions and a huge variety of grants and contributions. We recognize that our IT systems need to be ready to get benefits to Canadians quickly and reliably. We are requesting \$16.3 million through these estimates to ensure that our IT systems are able to continue delivering for Canadians when they're counting on us.

Canadians depended on us during the pandemic, so I'd like to speak about the Canada emergency response benefit integrity measures. When the pandemic hit, our government moved quickly to implement the CERB and other benefits.

In the beginning, we decided to go with an attestation-based approach. This approach was adopted by Parliament and supported by all parties. Eligibility verification is being done postpayment, and every single application has been reviewed. In cases where an individual has a balance owing, we methodically follow up in a compassionate, flexible manner. That work is ongoing, and to date we have recovered \$1.3 billion.

All told, our individual COVID-19 benefit programs reached 13 million Canadians. We acted quickly to get recovery benefits into people's bank accounts without delay. Our approach kept workers connected to their jobs and positioned the economy to come roaring back.

To recover funds from individuals who have a balance owing, we are requesting \$13.4 million to re-profile lapsed 2021-22 funding into 2022-23. This will help fund ongoing reviews to identify and address cases of error and misrepresentation with respect to COVID-related emergency benefits.

In closing, these and all the additional funds we're requesting are focused on helping Canadians and supporting our shared economic prosperity.

Thank you for this opportunity. I'm happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

We'll now begin with Mrs. Gray for six minutes.

You have the floor.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today.

Minister, you touched on this, actually, in your opening remarks. The estimates mentioned integrity measures for CERB, so I want to start with that, with regard to the integrity of this within ESDC itself.

Last week a story broke that, within your department, 49 ESDC employees were fired by the department for taking CERB while they were still employed. Would that be correct, Minister?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's my understanding, but I'll get J.-F. to confirm, please.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay (Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): That's correct.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

When were you made aware that there was an investigation being done of potential CERB fraud by employees within your department?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We specifically have let the public service handle all investigations with respect to any kind of issue related to CERB, whether it be fraud or error, specifically making sure and maintaining political distance, if you will, making sure that there's never any appearance of impropriety.

Of course, there are public servants who made these poor choices, and it is up to the department to take the lead on this.

J.-F., is there anything further from you?

• (1640)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, if I could just ask.... Are you saying that you were not made aware that there was any investigation going on previous to the announcement or previous to finding out that there were employees who would be terminated? Were you aware that there was an investigation going on specifically of employees within your department?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: The level at which I was aware was that there were public servants who were being followed up with, not the specifics within my department or the precise number. It was generally that this was a category that was being investigated.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Okay, so you're saying that no one brought to your attention specifically that there were employees being investigated within your department.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Not at that level of detail, no.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, when were you made aware of the results of this investigation, the discovery of fraudulent CERB claims within your department?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I was made aware the.... I want to make sure I get this date right. The day it broke, I was made aware.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Did someone inform you, or did you hear about it on the news for the first time? Did someone make you aware of the results?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It was a conversation with my staff at my morning briefing.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Who informed you of this, Minister? Was it one of your staff?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I apologize. I don't remember the exact name of the person. I get briefed every morning on a myriad of issues and topics.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Of these individuals—the 49 ESDC employees who were terminated—what were their positions? Were any of them in a management role?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll defer to the deputy on this.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: As far as I know, nobody was in a management role. We can look at it, if you like. It was misrepresentation, not fraud.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Okay.

Minister, as a follow-up to this, have you requested any information from your officials as to what positions these people may have had, and whether there was misrepresentation or fraud? Have you asked for a follow-up or report on this?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: My interest in this has been solely around the process, and I have been assured that appropriate processes were followed in the investigations and outcomes of these decisions.

I want to be clear that my involvement is very much on the process side: "Here's how something is going to happen, and here are the possible outcomes." Again, it's certainly my practice to let these processes play out and make sure I know what they were.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Are investigations still ongoing? Could the number be larger than the 49 announced?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's best to confirm with J.-F. on that, with my deputy. I apologize.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: It's okay.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, if you're unclear, you obviously haven't asked for information to find out whether or not—

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mrs. Gray, it's more that I'm waiting for these processes to play out. I think it wouldn't be appropriate to.... I'm not sure of the confidentiality, at this point, regarding anything that might be ongoing, so I'm hesitant. I don't know final outcomes, so I don't want to get involved in what—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Are you saying you're unclear on whether there are further employee investigations within your department?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: No, I'm saying I'm unclear about the outcomes of any further investigations.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, your department officials told the public accounts committee, last week, that these cases were dealt with internally and not referred to any law enforcement. Does this mean the money from those former employees—what they claimed—will not be recovered by the CRA?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: My understanding is this would be a separate process, along with all the other CRA recovery processes.

J.-F., can you please confirm that?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: As we said last week, and as with any other Canadians who misrepresent themselves.... They will be treated like other Canadians, in terms of repayment.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, can you table, for this committee, the total number of employees who were investigated?

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray. Your time has concluded.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

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

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

Good afternoon to my colleagues.

Minister, good afternoon and thank you for coming before the committee again.

I will say that I've not seen, certainly in my years, a minister who's been so forthcoming, so transparent and so available to members of Parliament and certainly to our HUMA committee.

Minister, I'll start with this. When I started running, wanting to be an MP, I was doing a lot of door to door, and certainly one of the things that became very evident to me very quickly was the plight of two groups: seniors, number one, but more so, persons with disabilities. The stories that I would get at the doors, Minister, were heartbreaking. It's hard to believe that, in a country like Canada, there was a group that had been so ignored. Obviously, mental health issues are through the roof. Employment is bare minimum. Poverty is almost universal and accessibility....

Minister, I want to commend and compliment you on leading and bringing forth Bill C-81, the Accessible Canada Act, which is transformational legislation. I was proud to be part of that in my previous years with HUMA.

I want to switch to Bill C-22, and I'm obviously very happy that it just passed third reading in the House. It's now with the Senate, and I want to congratulate you again for your leadership on this.

I think we all know at this committee—and, certainly, there was basically unanimous support—that it's historic legislation. It's going to be a game-changer for persons living with disabilities right across the country and certainly in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay. I want to thank you for making sure that the disability community will be closely involved in the shaping of the framework of the benefit. Obviously, support and input from that community is of the utmost importance.

We've done a lot, but as you've always said, it's never enough, and we can always do more.

Having said what I've said, Minister, I'd like you to tell us what else you're doing and what else you're working on to improve the lives of persons living with disabilities. Thank you.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

Once again, thanks to this committee. All through the Accessible Canada Act journey and into the Canada disability benefit journey, you've been there and you've constantly worked together and made these laws, these bills, better.

There is lots going on in the disability space with the Government of Canada. Of course, I refer to the disability inclusion action plan and the four pillars there.

The first pillar is financial security. The big one is our Canada disability benefit legislation, which is now in the Senate, and I hope it passes as quickly and thoughtfully through that chamber as it did through ours.

The second pillar is employment. First, we're developing an employment strategy of \$227 million, announced in last year's budget, a portion of which is requested in these supplementary estimates.

The third one is accessible and inclusive communities. That's really the barrier removal part of the equation with the Accessible Canada Act, the work that Accessibility Standards Canada is doing and the work through the enabling accessibility fund to make spaces more physically accessible. Then, of course, there's the communications work we're doing to make written materials more accessible and to overall improve accessibility, really focusing on barrier removal under that pillar.

Fourth is what we're calling a modern approach to government. This is the idea that Canadians deserve programs and eligibility processes and services that are disability friendly and disability inclusive. We're really taking a look across government to infuse a modern, dignified approach to disability so that everyone can get equitable access and service from their government.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Minister.

In a previous HUMA meeting, we had some witnesses in, Mark Wafer with Tim Hortons and Randy Lewis from Walgreens. They talked about how they've embraced persons with disabilities in the workplace, and they found that their reliability, lack of absenteeism and commitment to the team was such an untapped market.

Minister, I want to drill down on the disability inclusion business council. Obviously, it is a significant step towards prioritizing accessibility and disability inclusion in the workplace. Can you elaborate a little more on that, please?

• (1650)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, it's really exciting. Under the employment pillar and within the employment strategy, we will have a specific focus on employers, building what one could call “disability confidence” within employers and really translating what is a pretty well-established business case for inclusion into actual practice.

We have appointed a national council, a group of business leaders from leading companies in Canada, to really put a business lens on what can be done to build this confidence and to encourage and support employers as they hire, retain, advance and promote people with disabilities. We're really hoping that the business-to-business language will translate into an uptake.

As we all talk about labour shortages incessantly in this country, this is an untapped labour pool that we really need to bring in from the sidelines, to remove the barriers that people are facing and allow the creativity and talent to be utilized in our economy, because we just can't afford to have anybody on the sidelines from an economic point of view. We're missing out from a prosperity point of view.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

I thank the witnesses as well as Madam Minister for being present for the consideration of supplementary estimates (B) 2022-23.

I don't know if you're familiar with the “Search and Find” collections. They are beautiful and fun children's books where you search and find.

That's what I tried to do with the appropriations, that is, to look for what I could find related to employment insurance reform. Unfortunately, I didn't find anything.

If I didn't find anything, it's because there is nothing, and that's very disappointing.

Madam Minister, the Prime Minister gave you the mandate to present the framework for a reform of the employment insurance system in the summer of 2022. In fact, it is a commitment you made.

In January of this year, you even said in a Canadian media article that you were confident you could meet the deadline that you were given by the Prime Minister, in addition to establishing new rules and benefits.

Minister, what is the reason, even now and after two rounds of consultations, that comprehensive reform of the employment insurance system has still not happened, when the system is failing 60% of workers who lose their jobs and are left out in the cold?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for your question.

I can assure you that work to modernize the employment insurance system is ongoing. To be frank, I must tell you that we have not finished the plan, but we are continuing to develop it.

Actually, over the two years of consultation, economic circumstances have changed quite a bit.

[*English*]

When we started these consultations, we were in a period of significantly high unemployment, and we are now in a completely different economic space. That has highlighted the need to ensure that any modernization, any plan for the future, any road map for the future of employment insurance can take into account the flexibility required to deal with both high and low unemployment.

We know there are significant challenges within this program in terms of access to the program, and adequacy of the benefits and supports once you're in the program. That's what we continue to refine. I would say we are probably at a—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I am sorry to have to stop you, but you know we don't have much time.

The whole point of modernizing the employment insurance system was to ensure that it could deal with situations like the pandemic.

You mentioned the Canada emergency response benefit earlier. You had to invent an emergency measure from scratch to deal with the situation.

You and many of your colleagues have said that the employment insurance system is outdated, that the social safety net has a hole in it, that it can't meet the needs and that it needed to be modernized. After numerous consultations with labour groups and advocacy groups, we know what the solutions are. What are we waiting for to implement them?

The economic period that you are talking about today is precisely the time for a new reform that can give workers access. We have been through a period of crisis, and if nothing is done now, it will be chaos again if we go through an economic crisis or a period of recession.

Nothing explains the delays in modernizing the regime.

The fact that there are no commitments on this issue is very disappointing for all the groups we represent.

I will ask you one last question.

Is the government proud, and are you proud, as a minister, of an employment insurance system that covers about 40% of those who pay into it, discriminates against pregnant women who lose their jobs because of unfair eligibility and accounting rules, provides no weeks of benefits for adoptions, and offers some of the lowest benefit rates?

This, Minister, is what needs to be strengthened, and you have all the tools to do it.

Can you tell us when you will be tabling a plan for employment insurance reform?

• (1655)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I strongly agree that the employment insurance system needs to be modernized and reviewed.

We're going to do that and we're going to introduce the plan soon.

Ms. Louise Chabot: When will this be done, Madam Minister?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I don't have the timeline. It has to be done properly.

[*English*]

We made a down payment on our commitment to modernize when we tabled the board of appeal legislation last fall, when we increased EI sickness benefits from 15 weeks to 26 weeks and when we committed in last year's budget to extend the seasonal worker pilot, but we know that we can't.... It's not best for the system to make piecemeal reform. It all has to fit together, and that's what we're working on doing.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, it is essential that the system be modernized if we want to provide a safety net. The EI system is the best economic stabilizer in a crisis.

I just want to remind you that people pay premiums. In addition to paying premiums, some people do not have access to benefits because the eligibility rules are too rigid. Also, those who are entitled to receive their benefits wait months and months.

There is an absolute need to modernize the system. I think you know that. It takes political will. There was a commitment made in 2015, another commitment in 2019, and another commitment in 2021, in the mandate letters of the respective ministers.

You always tell us that indeed it needs to be modernized, that you are committed to it, and that you will work on it. However, there are no real horizons. That is what we are asking you for, Madam Minister, and we are anxious to hear the answer.

Last week, at the Canada Employment Insurance Commission's Workers' Commissioner's Forum, workers' groups were disappointed, too, that they had no response after being consulted.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

We'll go now to Madam Zarrillo for six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I did want to ask the minister about the line on technology updates, the \$16.3 million she referenced earlier, but before I get into that, I just want to comment.

I have appreciated the minister's commitment to equity and equality, and that includes in employment, but there is one area of the economy—of workers—that hasn't had the respect or the recognition that it deserves, and that's the care economy. These are workers such as personal support workers, long-term care workers and child care workers. We know that we are going to need a lot more professional carers in the new child care program.

Really, Minister, this is gender discrimination. Since the beginning of time, the burden of the economy, the care portion of the economy, has always fallen on women. They've never gotten the respect and the pay they deserve.

I just want to point out, Minister, that a report came out of this committee just yesterday that talks about investments in the care economy. My question to you is in relation to the need for more investment in the care economy and in future skills and labour needs. There is a recommendation there, "Recommendation 3", which talks about "supporting a wide range of strategies to make training in care-related fields more accessible"—training options like "microcredentials" and "upskilling options" and those sorts of things.

I want to elevate it here, Minister, and I want to hear from you. Is this getting increased exposure? How can we get this increased exposure as we think about training for the future?

• (1700)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: First of all, congratulations on the tabling of that report. It's really important that we have the conversations around the care economy, framed as it has been in the work that all of you have done. Again, congratulations.

What we've been doing at ESDC—and I'll ask officials to chime in—is really putting a health care-care economy lens as a priority as we've rolled out, particularly postpandemic but during the pandemic as well, whether it's a sectoral workforce solutions program, the health care-care economy as a priority or foreign credential recognition.

We just closed a call for proposals specifically related to credentialing of care workers. We are working on our commitments around personal support workers, to which I'm sure someone in the room there can add a bit more detail. For ECE workers, our child

care agreement with every province has commitments embedded in terms of the training and the work conditions for early childhood educators. Then, of course, there are the commitments to age at home and to have dignity in long-term care.

I would say that all of this is coming together because of the evolution of the way we talk about and value care work, driven by a lot of the work that all of you have been doing, but that has been happening across the country. As someone who has worked in the disability space for so very long, it's a very exciting framing to the conversation because it adds such a significant amount of respect and dignity.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Minister.

I look forward to more coverage of that in the media, and more talk about the care economy as a key and integral part of the economy.

I want to go back to the supplementary estimates on technology updates. This is something you and I have spoken about in the past, even in relation to Bill C-22—how that benefit will be expressed into the community and how technology needs to be able to underpin that.

Could you expand more on the \$16.3 million, and what projects are being undertaken?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I have a long explanation here, but I feel there is somebody who can more succinctly answer this for me. I will pass it to J.-F. and the team.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: Thank you, Minister.

It's what we call the "technology debt", in this case. It's not necessarily about developing new projects. As you know, we have OAS, CPP and EI, and they all run on really old IT systems.

We have a panel replacing this with a new system. At the moment, we need to stabilize the existing system to make sure it continues to work appropriately. In 2021, we got funding: \$469 million over six years.

This year, some of that money comes from the CRF, and some of it comes from the EI account, for example. This is the portion coming from the CRF. The only objective is to stabilize the existing system. This could mean, for example, making sure they update the infrastructure and that it will actually work over the next five to 10 years.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I have a follow-up question, then: Will that legacy technology affect or limit the rollout of the Bill C-22 benefit?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: No, we have a plan for Bill C-22. That won't affect it. All of those things are taken into account.

In this case, it's in the context of EI, OAS and CPP—making sure the existing systems are stabilized. Those are systems we can play with. We have shown that in the past. It's just that they are quite old, so we need to make sure they continue to exist, before they become unusable for some of our old programs.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo. That concludes your six minutes.

I'll now go to Madam Gray for five minutes.

• (1705)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, in 2017, there was a review done of the Social Security Tribunal by KPMG. Was an RFP put out for firms to conduct the review, or did KPMG receive a sole-source contract?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I will ask officials whether they can answer that or provide the information afterwards.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: I don't have the answer to that. I'm sorry. We can check.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

I would like that information to be tabled for this committee, please. If there was an RFP, table a copy for this committee—the RFP was.

Minister, can you tell us what the dollar value of the KPMG contract to do this review was?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Do you mean from 2017—the same contract?

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Yes.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I don't have that information now, but we can get it for you.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

Could you table a copy of that information for the committee?

Are you able to provide a copy of the contract with KPMG to conduct the review?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: J.-F., can we provide the contract?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: We will see what can be provided, and we will provide it.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

The Canadian government has a contract strategy. For the Social Security Tribunal review, was a review of the statement of work done by the comptroller general?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Again, we will have to get that information for you.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Minister.

Part of the role of a department is to prepare a statement of work using performance specifications, whenever possible. Was a statement of work done for this review?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Again, I think so, but I would not—

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: I think the CFO can answer the question.

Ms. Karen Robertson (Chief Financial Officer and Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): Mr. Chair, although I wasn't here in 2017, I can attest to the fact that there are statements of work for all of our files that go forward for procurement.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you.

Was a contract strategy done for this review? Can anyone answer?

Ms. Karen Robertson: I'll get that answer for you. I'm sorry, but it predates me. I will get back to you.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: That's great. Could we have tabled for this committee both the statement of work and the contract strategy for this review that KPMG did, please?

Minister, was there a ministerial sign-off on this review by you or your predecessor?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: As you noted, it predates me. I will have to confirm that. It depends on the amount of any given contract whose authority is sought to sign off on it. We can get that information for you.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: That's great. Thank you.

In some respects, it's surprising that we don't have this information, considering that your government has just tabled Bill C-37, which this review led up to. I would have thought everyone would have been more prepared to answer those questions. We'll go on to something else.

Minister, in September 2022, you told the House, in Parliament, that Parliament would know the government's vision for EI by the end of 2022, and that time has now come and gone. This is creating a lot of uncertainty. It's a lot of stress for working people as well as businesses in terms of both what they may need to pay and who may be accessing it. When will the plan be announced?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks for the question.

As I've previously testified, we continue to refine the plan. It's important to me that we get it right and that we take into account everything that's been advised, all the submissions and what we heard in the consultations. We are not ready to release it, but it will be released soon.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, are you planning to release it prior to budget 2023?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm not in a position to make that promise at this point. I don't know when it will be released. As I said, there are a lot of moving parts, and this is proving to be incredibly complicated. If we want to get it right and avoid the piecemeal approach of the past, we're going to take the time to do it.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Are you expecting it to be sometime this year, Minister, in 2023?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, I am for this year, but I heard you about when I have said before that I would deliver this, and I want to be as honest as I can about this, as forthright as I can. We are in the position of refinement.

• (1710)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, are you planning on bringing forth legislation for EI reform, or are you going to be doing it in regulation as you've done with other government services?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: As I've testified, there will be IT, legislative, regulatory, financial and phased components to this. Yes, absolutely there will be legislative changes required, and it will depend on the order of sequencing of changes as to how and when that needs to happen.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: It's all pretty vague.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

Now we will go to Mr. Coteau for five minutes.

You have the floor.

Mr. Michael Coteau (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today with the committee. I know you've been quite busy with many files, so we do appreciate your time.

I'm interested in students and how they contribute to the labour challenges we as a country have. I'm looking for ways to eliminate barriers that exist and that prevent and take away from one's being successful in post-secondary or throughout the apprenticeship programs.

I was quite happy when I saw in the fall economic statement the elimination of interest being applied. I had to use OSAP, and I think after post-secondary my final bill was about \$56,000 to pay back. The interest was something that was always a challenge because as you were paying, you could see the cost going up.

If you can, I'd like you to talk a little bit about this component of your mandate letter. What will be the impact of the elimination of interest on student loans? In effect, how many people overall will it impact?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's a really exciting initiative and will make a significant difference in the lives of so many students, both as they work to pay off existing student loans and as they contemplate post-secondary education for the future.

Currently, there are about 1.8 million students who owe student loans. All of them are currently benefiting from the temporary freeze on interest, and those who haven't paid their loan off in the next couple of months will benefit from the permanent removal of interest from student loans. It goes hand in hand with our other ef-

forts, whether it was doubling student grants or whether it was apprenticeship service. We're really trying to support a wide variety of opportunities and learner types, whether it's skilled trades, skilled training for existing workers or new entrants to post-secondary.

It's hard to quantify the impact, but the way the Canada student financial loan program works in Canada has resulted in some very effective ways of minimizing—not eliminating but minimizing—student debt, and eliminating interest is certainly a big part of the success story for students moving forward.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I also saw, at least in the mandate letter, that there's an increase of 50% for the maximum debt forgiveness for family doctors and people within the medicine sector. Can you talk a little bit about that and how it impacts nurses and doctors?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, absolutely.

When you look at where we need nurses and doctors, you see that we need nurses and doctors in rural communities. This is a program and an opportunity that incentivizes and affords doctors and nurses to contemplate the practice of rural medicine—I guess that's how I would say it—by allowing access to a reduction in their loans for the time period they're in those communities.

I don't have more details on the timeline for that. Is there an official in the room who can help me out with this one?

Mr. Atiq Rahman (Assistant Deputy Minister, Learning Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): The timeline for the 50% increase is later this year, pending regulatory approvals. It was announced in budget 2022. We are working on the implementation of the measure, again, pending regulatory approvals.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you, Atiq.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you.

When we say “rural communities”, do you have any idea at this point how “rural community” will be defined? Will it just be by the Canadian standard? Are there any more details on who will be eligible, which kinds of communities across the country will be eligible, for folks to go to serve and get that reduction?

• (1715)

Mr. Atiq Rahman: The definition of rural and remote communities is somewhat technical. It's based on Statistics Canada's definition of “census metropolitan area” and “census agglomeration”. We exclude some of the urban areas from that definition. Budget 2022 also announced a commitment to review that definition, and that part is under way as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you so much.

Mr. Chair, do I have any more time left?

The Chair: No. That's it.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Okay.

Thank you so much, Minister and officials.

The Chair: You've used your time.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Madam Minister, with respect to temporary foreign workers or labour market impact studies, I understand that you intend to put in the necessary efforts to better support employers' requests for timely services. This is another example of the delays at Service Canada that employers have been very vocal about. This is in addition to delays in Employment Insurance and passport issuance.

Service Canada is not your responsibility, but the Employment Insurance program and Labour Market Impact Studies, or LMIA's, do fall under your purview, but are enforced by Service Canada. In terms of LMIA's, are you really committed to ensuring that the application processes for employers are expedited so that they receive a timely response?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Absolutely, we have service standards; I think Mr. MacPhee could provide an update on that.

[*English*]

Mike, is it you who can tell us exactly where we are on service standards with LMIA's?

Mr. Michael MacPhee (Assistant Deputy Minister, Temporary Foreign Workers Program, Department of Employment and Social Development): Yes. Thank you very much.

In terms of the LMIA processing time, we actually have made good strides in improving the pace. Year over year, despite seeing a 37% increase in the volume of LMIA's—and that's this year up until the end of January compared with the full last fiscal year—we've actually improved the processing time writ large across all different streams by almost five business days.

[*Translation*]

In the Quebec region specifically, there are additional delays. This is because it is a joint process with a Quebec ministry.

[*English*]

However, even in that case, we have worked very closely with the Quebec region, and over the course of this fiscal year, we have improved our processing time by 18.4 business days, moving it from 52 days at the beginning of the year down to 34 business days at this point in time.

We continue to work very closely to improve that processing time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you for your reply.

Madam Minister, I will never tire of asking you about EI reform. When are you going to do it?

We think it is vital, not only for workers, but also for our economy. You have committed to modernizing this law. We expect you to

get on with it soon. Information technology cannot be an excuse for not moving forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Now we have Madam Zarrillo for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to revisit the financial security pillar of the inclusion action plan. This relates specifically to....

Minister, both you and I live in British Columbia, and we know how expensive it is to live there. We know that the disability community is relying on the food banks now. It has become so expensive to live, and the financial supports just aren't there for persons living with disabilities.

I just want to talk a little bit about what happened last week in my riding. A number of faith-based organizations came forward to me and said that we really need to do something to alleviate the suffering and this exorbitant cost of living in relation to food for persons living with disabilities. I have been asking over and over again, Minister, for an emergency relief benefit, some sort of relief for persons with disabilities who are now making impossible choices about whether they have an adequate meal for the day.

I am just going to ask again, Minister. Is there an opportunity to have an emergency relief benefit for persons with disabilities? We've seen before the Liberal government step up and help large corporations when they were in need. This is a compassionate request. It's human rights. It's dignity. I want to know where you are at with this, Minister.

• (1720)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I, too, stay awake at night worrying about what's going on in the disability community. I can't think of a word to describe the levels of poverty and the worry.

Listen. We want to focus on a long-term solution, and we heard during Bill C-22 testimony that it's what they want. We don't want to divert any of our resources away from delivering the disability benefit. I think the call to action is to get this through the Senate, get this through the regulatory process and be ready to deliver it as soon as possible by focusing all of our effort precisely on the delivery of the CDB and not diverting resources to anything other than the task at hand, which is the CDB.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Minister, when you talk about diverting resources, do you mean funds? If so, what are the resources that we're going to see in budget 2023 for Bill C-22?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: What I mean there—I apologize—is more human resources, technical resources, processing resources. In terms of this year's budget, as I may have quipped before, it's a bit of a career-limiting move to scoop the finance minister on any budget, but we have made a commitment to the CDB as a government. We have to go through a few more steps with the Senate and the regulatory process. I have said that we will deliver the benefit in 2024, and that's what we're working toward.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo and Madam Minister.

Madam Gray, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, in November you announced an extension of EI sickness benefits from 15 weeks to 26 weeks, to go into effect December 18, 2022.

On December 9, I wrote to you regarding concerns from Canadians that this extension may not be retroactive for those who applied before December 18, 2022. It's now February and I still have not received a response from you, so can you answer this question for me now?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thanks for the question. I apologize for the non-response. That's not something I'm terribly proud of. I apologize.

What I can tell you is that the sickness benefits, the extension, came into play mid-December and will not be retroactive to existing claims. It will only apply to claims that were started on or after that date.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you for that clarification, Minister. There will be people who will be happy to hear your response, although not happy with what the response is because, in particular, there are people who had to apply just before December 18 because of their personal circumstances. How do you reconcile, when your government's promise is to create a more flexible and inclusive EI program, not making this retroactive between the date of your announcement and December 18?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It has as much to do with the.... We needed to pick a date and we needed for the legislation and the legislative changes to come into effect on a certain date. The legislation was not retroactive. It was felt that it would be more—I would say “equitable” is not quite the word—fair to have a date that we would deliver this on moving forward as opposed to picking some date in the past, which would also have said a lot.

Any time you establish a date in any of these programs there are people on either side of it, and that's the best we could come up with that, in my mind, was the most fair way forward on this. That is, it was not to go retroactive but to go for new claims. That was the decision that was made.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Minister. Although perhaps when you said you picked a date, picking the date that something is applicable as opposed to in the future might have really clarified things for people.

I will go on to something else.

Minister, as you know, my Conservative colleague Jacques Gourde has a private member's bill to further extend these benefits to 52 weeks. This committee, including your Liberal colleagues here, voted unanimously to adopt the bill during study.

Will your government support providing a royal recommendation to this legislation so that it can be adopted?

● (1725)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: As I said earlier, we are making good on our platform commitment and my mandate commitment to go from 15 to 26 weeks.

As we look to modernize the program, this recommendation and any others that we heard, which were in the hundreds.... I dare say more than that, but let's say “hundreds” conservatively. This recommendation will fall into the broader modernization path as opposed to one of ongoing decisions.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, this isn't just a recommendation coming out of consultation. This is actually a private member's bill that went through the entire process, came to this committee and was voted on, so it's really disappointing to hear that you're not going to support providing this legislation a royal recommendation.

I'll go on to another question.

Minister, according to the estimates, \$125,000 was transferred from ESDC to the Department of Natural Resources regarding the two billion trees program. Why was this transfer made?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

Karen or J.-F...?

Ms. Karen Robertson: This was a transfer to Natural Resources Canada to support the planting of 25,000 trees. It includes everything from the site preparation to the planting, to the monitoring activities to support a high survivability rate of the trees.

Can I answer further?

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I think that answers what it was actually for. What's ESDC's role in this?

I'm surprised that the minister didn't have the answer, because in fact the minister is here to answer questions about estimates, but I'll put it back over to you.

Ms. Karen Robertson: It supports our green plan, like any other department has.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gray.

Now we go to Mr. Van Bynen to conclude for five minutes.

Mr. Van Bynen, you have the floor.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I truly appreciate your attendance. I have to say, I very much appreciate your genuine commitment to making lives better for many Canadians. I truly appreciate, as well, that it does not enable you to micromanage the minutia and that you have a supporting team to look after those elements.

Having said that, across votes 1b and 5b, the supplementary estimates (B) for 2022-23 propose to allocate approximately \$13.3 million to address labour demand and training the workforce of the future.

Budget 2022 and the 2022 fall economic statement included a number of measures related to labour demand and skills development. These include introducing the tax deduction to support labour mobility for tradespeople; doubling the funding for the union training and innovation program, which supports union-based apprenticeship training; innovation and enhanced partnerships in the Red Seal trades; and creating a sustainable job training centre.

Which initiatives would be supported by the proposed \$13.3 million to address labour demand and training the workforce of the future?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I've lost track of that number.

Did you say \$13.3 million?

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: I believe it shows as \$3.6 million in vote 1b and as \$9.6 million in vote 5b, under grants and contributions.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I see that. There's a lot of paper in front of me.

I'm a little frazzled here. Can you help me out, J.-F.?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: We can turn to Andrew.

There are actually a few items with \$13.3 million. That's why it's confusing.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: The TFW is \$13.3 million as well.

Thank you.

Mr. Andrew Brown (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): On the question about the \$13.3 million for providing supports and addressing labour market pressures, first these are to provide funding for the foreign credential recognition program, with an initial focus on supporting internationally educated health professionals. This is the funding for this year that was announced in budget 2022.

As well, it's to help apprentices from under-represented groups begin and succeed in careers in the skilled trades through mentorship, career services and job matching through UTIP. That also relates to some of the funding that was announced in budget 2022 to double the UTIP program.

• (1730)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

How would the proposed funding help address the labour demand? What would the impact of the funding be in the short and long term?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Do you want me to take a kick at that Andrew?

I'm sorry. I think this is just a testament to how well we work together as a team.

The foreign credential recognition program in particular is an opportunity for us to work with provinces and their respective credentialing agencies to remove the red tape that sometimes, or many times, newcomers with significant international credentials experience. It is also funding to support first job experiences for people who have newly arrived in Canada.

There are so many benefits to this program, but it's really important that we work with provinces to remove what are often significant barriers by helping them streamline their processes and provide those first work experiences for new arrivals.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: My follow-up to that would be about how the federal government would measure the effectiveness of this spending.

What are the goals and objectives that we're seeking? How would we measure our successes?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: For us, it's quite clear. In those areas, we have gaps between the existing situations. For example, when we think about the population that is vulnerable or generally excluded from the labour market, we know there is a gap between this population and the rest of Canadians. With those new initiatives we will try to measure how efficient we are by increasing their participation in those areas.

Apprenticeship is a good example of this. As you know, some groups are sometimes excluded from some industries. By working and targeting those populations, we want to see how this effort would actually close the gap between some segments of the population and the rest of Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen. That concludes this round.

Thank you, Minister and department officials, for appearing before the HUMA committee today to answer questions.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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