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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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• (1640)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Committee members, the clerk has advised me that there is a quorum present and that all witnesses and members appearing virtually have had their sound quality verified, so I will call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 92 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, September 30, 2023, the committee will continue its consideration of Bill C-318, an act to amend the Employment Insurance Act and the Canada Labour Code regarding adoptive and intended parents.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members and witnesses are attending in person in the room and virtually as well.

I will remind those in the room and those attending virtually that you have the option to choose the official language of your choice. If there is a disruption in the translation, please get my attention and I will suspend while it's being clarified. Those of you attending virtually can use the globe symbol on the bottom of your Surface screen. Click on it, and choose the official language that you wish to participate in. Those attending in the room, please keep your earpiece away from the microphone for the protection of the interpreters.

Appearing with us today, in the room, we have Cathy Murphy, chairperson and adoptive parent, for the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada. Then, by video conference and as an individual, we have Shelley Rottenberg, instructional assistant.

We will begin the first hour with an opening statement from Ms. Rottenberg.

Ms. Rottenberg, you have five minutes for your opening statement.

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg (Instructional Assistant, As an Individual): Hello. My name is Shelley Rottenberg. It's a pleasure to be attending this meeting as a witness today.

I'm the secretary for the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada, the co-president of China's Children International, and the associate director for engagement and social media for Asian Adoptees of Canada. I will be speaking based on my lived experience as a transracial international adoptee. I was born in China dur-

ing the one-child policy and adopted to Canada by a single mother when I was a baby.

I support the government providing 15 additional weeks of attachment leave for employment insurance benefits for adoptive parents. If this had been available to my mom when she adopted me, it would have greatly benefited our family. At the time, my mom was not able to take any leave of absence, except for the time it took to travel to China. We do not have any extended family who live close to us, so she had to rely on friends and babysitters to look after me while she worked.

Adoptive parents deserve equal access to parental leave benefits. It is especially important for parents who adopt a baby or child from a different country, culture or racial background because time is not only needed for the parent and child to bond. The adoptee also needs adequate time to adjust to other new unique changes in environment, language, customs, etc.

Growing up, it was always clear to me what I had gained through adoption. I am very grateful for my mom and sister and for all the opportunities I've had throughout my life, although people often forget about the circumstances that made adoption necessary. My adoption paperwork says that I was abandoned at the front door of a garment factory and then brought to a police station and then the orphanage. I was then placed in a foster home in China until my mom became my legal guardian and brought me home to Canada.

I was labelled with failure to thrive because I was very sick when my mom adopted me. I had bronchitis and couldn't keep food down at first. Now that I'm older, when I reflect on my first couple of years of life, I am both in awe and saddened by all of the hardships that I went through as an infant. Research shows how important the earliest years of life are in terms of a child's development. Therefore, given all of the major life changes that can come with adoption, and considering the potential losses of birth family, culture and country, it is crucial that parents have plenty of time to support their adopted baby or child in the beginning stages of this journey.

Even if the adopted baby or child appears well adjusted, additional time to form strong and secure attachments with adoptive parents will only benefit the adoptee and better set them up for success.

That concludes my statement. Thank you so much, everyone, for your time, and at any point I'm happy to answer questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rottenberg.

Now we'll go to Ms. Murphy for five minutes or less, please.

Ms. Cathy Murphy (Chairperson and adoptive parent, Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada): Thank you, Shelley. That was well said.

Good afternoon. My name is Cathy Murphy, and I'm the chairperson at the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada.

I worked in child welfare and social services for just over 35 years and retired in this past year. I've had the true privilege of working with adoptive families, kinship caregivers and customary caregivers right across Canada, but most importantly today, I am an adoptive parent. My children, who are now young adults, continue to teach me every day why time to attach is so important for every permanency family in Canada.

There was a time not so long ago when our children—my son, now 32, and my daughter, now 27 years of age—joined our family through adoption. Our son lived in the child welfare system, and our daughter was adopted from China. Our family has had experience with both public adoption and international adoption. Each of our children has their own unique strengths and their own unique challenges.

Our son had six placements in the child welfare system before he joined our family as a preschooler. We now know that he is living with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. We had no idea at the time. His experiences in his earlier life taught him that the world was not a safe or predictable place, and he had difficulty trusting. Our daughter had two placements—with her first family and foster family, and then with the orphanage—before she joined our family at one year of age.

When our son first came to us, we were introduced to him as “Mommy Cathy” and “Daddy Jim”. My husband is a fire chief here in Ottawa, and for any of you who know little boys and little girls, they love firefighters. My son was no different. He adored his daddy from day one.

I did not become “Mommy Cathy”. I was, “Hey lady” out of the side of his mouth for many years. “Hey lady” was the response I would get if I asked him to do something or if I tried to play with him. “Hey lady” was where I was told to sit, which was outside our kitchen, outside our dining room at dinnertime.

Three and a half years after our son joined our family, it was at bath-time one night, and we had been going through the same consistent routine every night. He loved Batman figures and all things comic book, and he had them all in the bathtub with him that night. He looked up and said, “Hmm. You a very, very good mama. Did you know that?” It still breaks my heart to this day because it took him three and a half years to say the word “mama”.

He is now 32 and has lived through some incredible times, as has our family, but I can tell you that not for one single moment have I ever regretted that connection or the incredible commitment that comes with being adoptive parents. What I know first-hand is what they need to be successful and strong and to be survivors, and what our kids need as well.

I have truly had the honour of working with thousands of adoptive families: kinships, which are just extended grandparents, and

perhaps aunties and uncles; and customary caregivers, which are indigenous families across Canada. I've learned that every child and youth I met needed time to adapt and to adjust to their new setting and family before the attachment process could even begin.

Many children and youth, just like my son, have learned to mistrust. Their worlds were not safe and not predictable, and their caregivers let them down time and time again. They formed anxious attachments or, in the case of my son, may have had difficulty forming any attachment at all because of the many caregivers they've had in their lives and the developmental trauma they may have experienced.

We can build trust by meeting our children and youth where they are, by showing up for them over and over again, by smiling even when you're called “Hey lady” and by celebrating when, three and a half years later, you're finally called “mama”. Then very slowly, they may begin to realize that we are dependable, that we are reliable and that we might—and I emphasize might—be worthy of their trust. The attachment process begins with trepidation, and guess what. It doesn't ever end. It's tested many times over the weeks, months and years to come, because they learned at a very early age that the world is not a safe place.

Every permanency family, whether customary caregiver, kinship caregiver or adoptive parent, has their own unique circumstances. Some parents will have time to prepare for their child or youth to join their family. For others, it will happen very quickly, actually in the middle of the night or overnight, sometimes without warning because the circumstances are beyond the control of the child or youth. These families will need resources. They will need support. They will need connections. They will need to know that their government stands with them during some very trying and difficult times.

• (1645)

What is “time to attach”? It's an additional 15-week attachment leave for customary caregivers, kinship caregivers and adoptive parents. It's calling upon our Canadian government to treat all families equally and fairly—equitable treatment.

Truth be told, the children and youth in my house and the children and youth I've had the privilege of working with need much more than an additional 15-week attachment leave, but by delivering on this attachment leave promise, the Government of Canada would be standing up for families who are supporting the needs of these children and youth, and yes, this is not insignificant.

In Canada, there are approximately 30,000 children and youth living in our child welfare system. Each year, approximately 1,700 of those children and youth find permanency families. Youth are aging out of our child welfare system at an alarming rate, and without permanency, their outcomes are not good. We all need to care about and advocate for the children and youth living in our child welfare system.

We also need to acknowledge that more than half of those children and youth are African Canadian and indigenous. Less than 0.3% of all Canadians have spent time in the child welfare system—less than 0.3%—but more than 65% of all unhoused Canadians have spent time in the child welfare system. Listen to that again: Less than 0.3% of all Canadians have ever spent time in the child welfare system, but more than 65% of all unhoused Canadians have spent time in the system.

We need to raise the age at which youth age out of the child welfare system—in every province and territory in Canada—and lower these statistics. We need to promote and support older child and youth adoptions in Canada and support different forms of permanency. Most children and youth in the system are over 10 years of age now, maybe in a sibling group, and maybe living with visible or invisible special needs. Our son was diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder at the age of 12 and required a host of resources that we were more than happy to tap into in order for him to reach his highest potential.

Today, I'm advocating for time to attach, because it matters. It matters to the children and youth. It matters to their families.

Thank you very much.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Murphy. Anything that you didn't get to say you could raise in your answers to questions.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair, just quickly before we begin. I'm wondering if we can get the video turned on in the room here in the House of Commons if there's a livestreaming video.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Sure. Thank you.

I want to welcome MP Kelloway and MP Angus, who are joining us today.

With that, we'll begin with the first round and Ms. Falk for six minutes, please.

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

I want to say thank you to both our witnesses, Ms. Murphy and Ms. Rottenberg, for your vulnerability and for your willingness to come to committee and share your stories, because I know that digging deep and digging in the past is sometimes hard to do. I want to thank you both for your bravery and courage in sharing your stories today.

Ms. Murphy, if I can start with you, I'm just wondering why a permanency family is so important for children and youth.

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Permanency families are important for children and youth because without them they don't have a safety net. They don't have anybody there to support them through challenging times.

I think of our children at 27 and 32. We are still touchstones for them constantly. We have been able to give them that permanency. I think of some of the youth that I work with through Canada's permanency council, and they don't have that safety net. They don't have that security. They've never found a form of permanency. We need to make a difference for children and youth.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much for that.

You touched on this a bit, but I'm wondering if you can expand further on how adoptive families in particular would benefit from having this proposed 15-week attachment benefit. What would that look like for the youth, but also for the guardians and the parents, the adults who are taking in those youth?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: What that means is that they are available to their child or youth, who has joined their family through adoption, to build those routines and attachments. It's showing up, just like I was talking about, and being there for them.

Even if a youth is joining their family at age 12 or 13, it's really important for that parent or caregiver to be there, to be able to meet them after school or to maybe take them out to their favourite lunch spot over lunch hour once a week, because that's usually the only way you're going to get them out to lunch.

By continually showing up and being actively involved in their life, they are going to realize after an extended period of time that their parents are there for them.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you for that.

Even looking at my own children, it's having that opportunity once in a while to take one of them to the McDonald's PlayPlace, for example, or going to the park or doing those things. Not only does it give that opportunity for attachment to foster but also for trust to grow. We're learning more and more, especially with little people, that play is so important. It's being able to have that time to take off the parent hat or guardian hat and put the kid hat on.

Even with older kids, there's a whole other slew of pressures that come with middle school and high school and changing. From the testimony I've heard, and from the families I've been able to speak with, it's having that additional time to just sit and take time, sometimes even sitting and holding a hand.

Thank you very much for that.

● (1655)

Ms. Cathy Murphy: If I can say one more thing, I just want to thank Shelley and Cassie for being here today.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes. I was going to go to Ms. Rottenberg next.

As I said earlier, thank you so much for sharing and being vulnerable and open, so that people who sit in this place, who maybe haven't had the opportunity to experience adoption in their immediate or close families, are able to hear your first-hand experience.

In your opinion, how important is it for adopted children and youth to build those attachments with their new family?

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: I think it's very important to build the attachment, to allow the bonds, as you mentioned, and to have trust form. I think that's done through repetition and time. You can't fast-track that necessarily. It takes time to build and to grow and to foster. Then it's also having that routine as well, just the consistency of showing up.

Growing up, my mom—she was a social worker—always said, “I'm always in your corner.” That's something she would use with people she worked with, and she always said that to me. I knew she was my number one cheerleader throughout my whole life.

If there were more time early on, where she didn't have to worry about going to work and leaving me with someone else, that probably would have sped up that process of growing and building that trust and the bond to have that more secure attachment.

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

Do you think that for every child it might be different? Might it take a different amount of time for a healthy, secure attachment to form?

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: Yes. I think that every child is different. They have different stories from before they were adopted. That might impact the adjustment period and the time they might need to attach.

As I mentioned, even if the baby or the child seems very well adjusted—there are not any obvious issues or needs—it doesn't mean that there are not potentially underlying.... Also, being proactive by having that time to really show you are able to support and love and be consistent and show up, I think, could be very good in terms of not having issues form later on.

It is different, though. Every child is different. It's giving the time for the parent to get to know the child's needs and really listening to them, and then being able to support them in whatever ways might show up with whatever they can do. That could require getting additional help from other people and resources as well.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's wonderful.

Thank you both so much.

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

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

Thank you to both of our witnesses.

It's always an honour to meet people who are doing good things for children and families. It means a lot to me personally. In my whole political career, I've always looked for ways to help children and level the playing field in many ways. Advocates, to me, are heroes who go out there and look for ways to create a better world around us.

Ms. Murphy, you said that there are 30,000 young people in care across the country. Was I correct in hearing that 1,700 per year are adopted? Is that correct?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: It is 1,700 a year are who are finding some form of permanency. It may be adoption. There may be kinship caregivers or customary caregivers as well.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I would imagine that making the decision to care for a child is a big decision. There is a time consideration and a financial consideration, and there are so many other pieces that connect to it. Sometimes it can be very difficult.

In removing barriers by providing time, for example, which ends up providing more resources, I assume there would be an uptick in potential placements, adoptions or providing care, which would contribute to that 1,700 number.

Is there any research or has anything been looked at to support that claim?

• (1700)

Ms. Cathy Murphy: I think there could be an uptick. I think we also need to provide a great deal more in the way of supports and resources. You'll probably be hearing from Adopt4Life and the Child and Youth Permanency Council about that too, because this is just the beginning of the journey.

For example, my own family has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on therapies, supports and treatment programs for our son alone. That is very common in adopted families.

The government's standing up and agreeing to this 15-week attachment leave is the beginning of a journey for us. It's a long journey and we need a lot of resources and supports. I am sure you're aware of that from previous portfolios you've held as well.

It's a lot. I would do it again in a heartbeat, but it is a lot.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Some of the questions we are asking today must seem so obvious, like the Captain Obvious commercials. Is it good to do this? It's good for kids, and we all know this. This is a process we go through at the House of Commons.

I see the decision to put in place this type of program as a new start to build on. I know I might be getting ahead of myself, but you have opened up a window here. What are some of the other things that advocates, experts and families are suggesting are needed in this country as we move forward to build an even better system?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Definitely, many of our children, if not all of them, have experienced some form of developmental trauma. Finding mental health supports and people experienced with developmental trauma is a challenge right now in Canada. It's definitely a challenge that adopted families face.

I would like to also shine a spotlight on those children and youth who are not finding permanency families and are not being adopted. They remain in our system, and we all need to care about them. That is a significant problem here in Canada.

I think that further advocacy can shine lights on all of those pieces.

Mr. Michael Coteau: When you go through child protection systems, or just children and youth law in various provinces, it's sometimes shocking to see some of the gaps that exist across the country. I remember in Ontario, the age of protection was 16. We raised it to 18, but I was surprised that there was a cut-off at 16 in some cases. We have a lot more work to do.

I know this might be a very hard question to answer, but why do you think laws that are there to protect children....? Why has it taken so long as a society to get to this point, where governments across the country—and I am talking about provincial governments and even municipal bylaws—are moving in this direction in an accelerated way to make these decisions that are good for families?

They're the right types of decisions and may seem obvious to you and to me, but society as a whole is not at that point. What has held us back?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Julie and I, our families and supporters, Adopt4Life and the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada have been advocating on this one issue for over six years. It should be a non-partisan issue. It was a non-partisan issue.

I think it becomes partisan at times. You asked me honestly, so I am telling you honestly. We can't step through that red tape quickly enough for children and youth and their families. I have never brought forward partisan issues. I advocate in the best interests of children and youth. I always have and I always will.

Perhaps that was what was finally seen from our stories, because they're very honest and very real. I think this is a good-news story for families. At least, saying that we value this relationship and that we value that 15 weeks of attachment leave goes a long way for our families.

Oh, my goodness—there is so much more that they need. It is a value statement.

Mr. Michael Coteau: It sends a very strong message.

Ms. Cathy Murphy: It says, “We value you, and we value the work you're doing.”

Mr. Michael Coteau: Am I done?

The Chair: You have eight seconds—now seven.

Mr. Michael Coteau: I usually don't take my eight seconds, but I'm just going to say thank you again.

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Thank you.

Mr. Michael Coteau: Thank you for all of the work that you've done.

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Thank you for the work you've done in the past as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coteau.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Good afternoon. Ladies, thank you for your testimony. It will be very valuable to us.

I must tell you at the outset that parliamentarians adopted the spirit of the bill at second reading before studying it in committee. The purpose of the bill is to give adoptive parents 15 weeks of employment insurance, the same as biological parents get. Your testimony has helped to illustrate why time is important.

If the bill passes, adoptive mothers could be eligible for 15 weeks of employment insurance, just like biological mothers. Ms. Rottenberg, do you feel that this equity is important?

• (1705)

[*English*]

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: As Cathy mentioned, I think it's important to make sure to have equal access for both biological and adoptive parents to form the bond and to really have the chance for the adoptee—whether a baby, a child or older, like an adolescent—to get used to the new environment, whether that's the family or the country. All of those things are very important, regardless of age. I was adopted as a baby, but it's very important at whatever age you are.

I think that was the question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Yes, that was my question.

As you can see, the government has already made commitments. I don't want to make you play politics, but the Liberal government has committed to changing our employment insurance system in order to completely reform it.

Biological parents are given 15 weeks, and we'd like adoptive parents to get the same thing. We would like equity. Although the government has made a commitment, the reform hasn't happened yet. This bill is therefore an opportunity to correct some discrimination. Perhaps society has evolved enough to make this happen as well.

We also talk about the importance of parental presence in adoption cases. It's also important that parents not have to worry about their job and that they be able to take the time to support these fine individuals, like you, whom they have chosen to adopt. It's a wonderful choice.

Do you think this bill would have made a difference for your parents, Ms. Rottenberg?

[*English*]

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: Yes. My mom is a single parent. She adopted me on her own, and she raised me and my younger sister—who's also adopted from China—on her own. There was definitely a lot of hard work that went into that—being a single parent and not having some of the benefits that exist today, the extra 15 weeks especially.

It would make a difference if that were to be put into place. I know that my mom has said very similar things to what Cathy said. She would do it again. In many ways, we've helped her more than she can explain. As much as I am grateful to be part of the family, I know that she's very grateful to have adopted me. I think that so much good can come out of adoption.

The government should support that and set it up for success so that adoptees can succeed and adoptive parents can succeed—the whole family unit. If the right supports exist in terms of employment benefits—to have that leave—that just further allows for success of the whole family, all of the individuals involved. It allows for that bond to form and for them to grow up, have those secure attachments and have strong bonds and relationships with not only family members but other individuals as well. It really is so multifaceted.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

Ms. Murphy, the bill provides for 15 weeks of benefits, and we hope that it will pass. You can count on the support of our political party. However, some say that rather than starting as soon as the child or youth arrives, the benefit period should start a little earlier, to let parents prepare the physical location to welcome them.

Do you have an opinion on that?

• (1710)

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Good afternoon, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

It's good to see you.

Yes, we would hope that there would be flexibility within this legislation so that a family could make that decision for themselves. For example, when our daughter joined our family in China, we lived in China with her for two and half weeks before we returned to Canada, and we started the leave on the day she came into our care even though we weren't back in Canada yet.

For a family who would like to have time to prepare, definitely that could be part of this legislation, but there are some families who will have no time to prepare. I think flexibility within the legislation is important to meet individual family needs.

[Translation]

Thank you.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Mr. Angus, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Rottenberg and Ms. Murphy.

I think we are pretty much in agreement on the importance of this, but having you as witnesses to our committee allows us to put

on the parliamentary record the broader issues that we often don't get a chance to discuss.

In my 19 years of political life, I've never gotten the opportunity to quote my favourite quote of all, from Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "I am sorry I can say nothing to console you, for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing.... Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly performed and in the sight of all.... But active love is labor and fortitude".

I want to start with that because of the question of the enormous undertaking of adoption.

Let's begin, Ms. Murphy. You've said that you adopted internationally. I have people in my life who were adopted from very precarious situations internationally and who blossomed, but we also know that there are serious questions raised about international adoption: white saviourism, loss of culture, loss of identity and people who think they want to be parents and then aren't.

How do you frame this extraordinary effort of bringing a child from a completely different culture into our country? How do we make sure that it works and that it will be for the long term and for the benefit of all?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: First of all, we've adopted both internationally and through the public child welfare system.

When you adopt internationally, you are making an active decision to adopt a child. I will use a quote. It's when we learn and know better, we do better. I have definitely learned along the way, as has my husband and as have our children.

Culture was always something that I knew we needed to be actively participating in. It was always something that was a part of my daughter's life. She always had mentors who were from her country. Our family went to language classes. We've been back to China several times with her. She is now 27 and has been back on her own. I wish I could tell you that every family who adopts internationally does that. They don't. Not every family has the resources to do that.

It should be harder for us as adoptive parents, quite frankly, if it's going to be easier for our kids. I think that's the best way to summarize it.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Ms. Rottenberg, what is your experience and what lessons could you offer?

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: I think that in adopting from a different country there's a lot more work that does need to be done to overcome those barriers. There may be a difference sometimes in language and culture, and just in everything, even ethnicity and race and the kinds of experiences that the child might go through, which the parents might not be able to relate to, to understand and to prepare them for.

I know that when I was adopted, I don't think there were as many resources or maybe training. Especially online now, there are so many things that are available, just even in learning from the experiences of previous generations who've been through some things. I do think it's getting better, and there's so much opportunity to continue investing in those resources.

I know that now a lot of resources are adoptee-led. There are adoptees who grow up and speak about their experiences and adoptive parents who are willing and able to learn and listen. That's going to have great positive ripple effects on younger generations of adoptees. It's comforting to know that this is the direction we're moving in.

• (1715)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

Ms. Murphy, you're the chairperson of the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada. You mentioned the 30,000 who are in child welfare.

I represent the region of Treaty 9, and child welfare is a very dark word in our region. We have lost so many beautiful children to a system in which it didn't seem like those children mattered.

I think of Courtney Scott, who was 16 years old. She was taken with her sister from Fort Albany and died in a fire in a house in Orléans, 2,000 kilometres from her family. We lost our child advocate in Ontario. Doug Ford fired Irwin Elman. We are very concerned in our region about children being taken out.

You have talked about kinship and customary care. How do you see that we make sure that the children who have to be taken from their parents, maybe because of drugs, violence or other problems, are still able to be cared for in the kind of loving, cultural support that they are entitled to and that our society must insist on?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: First families are important. I was part, with our son, of one of the first open adoptions in Ontario. As I said, he's now 32. The first family is very important as long as safety issues can be addressed.

When we look at indigenous culture, we need to look at self-governance. I think that the child welfare system, for indigenous culture, is the next residential school of our time. I am disgusted by what I have seen in the child welfare system.

At the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada, we have an indigenous advisory board, and there are youth on that board. They definitely direct us, and it should be those voices that are directing us.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much for that.

I would say that the Highway of Tears, the prison system and everything else that we see broken goes back to children who were put in that system, children who did not get the family support and then aged out without support. If we can address that, we can transform lives.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

Ms. Ferreri, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to our witnesses. It's a very emotional topic.

I can't help but think as a mom that it is literally the exact same story. I didn't adopt my children, but it's about showing up for your kids when they go through their ebbs and flows and they push you away: "Hey, lady" and "You're the worst mom." You go through that as a mother, as a parent. Showing up for your kids is tough. It's really tough. You spoke to me a lot there, Cathy, and it's very emotional. I can feel in the room that essence.

I'm so grateful that my colleague Rosemary has brought forth this legislation. I want to get into the nuts and bolts of it.

I think that data is really critical when we look at legislation, because the issue is emotional, but I also think that the data tells the story of investment.

I want you to, if you can, Cathy.... Please, can I call you Cathy, Ms. Murphy?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Of course.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thirty thousand children, is that the stat you gave on children who are waiting in the child welfare system, the foster system?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: They're older, over the age of 10.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: They're over the age of 10, but only 1,700 a year are adopted?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: That's correct.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: That's a pretty staggering number.

Ms. Cathy Murphy: It is.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Then, from that number who are not adopted, what are the statistics on what becomes of those children?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: The statistics on aging out are not great by any stretch. I alluded to some of those statistics around homelessness. The Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada did an aging out report with WAGE for four years. We did a national report, and all of the numbers are there. Irwin Elman has also been an incredible advocate with us and continues to advocate, even though he no longer has an official role.

I think we really need to look at what we're doing in this country and how we are supporting our most vulnerable. If our children and youth age out, the outcomes are not pretty. You can go to downtown Ottawa. Those are the children and youth that you're seeing on the street. The mental health...are there. Unhoused youth are there. It's not pretty.

• (1720)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: It's a reality, and you only solve a problem when you acknowledge the truth of the problem. This is a long-time issue, but I think we've come a long way in how we talk about adoption. I'm thinking about the forced adoptions many women went through in my mother's time, when 16-year-old women were sent to a home and forced to give their babies up for adoption, never to talk about it again. There is the trauma of that mother living her life...and that child, who never knows who she is.

There is a very big discussion here, but let's go back to the basics of this legislation, which seems so small in the grand scheme of things but so significant. It's the little things. It's step by step. This would provide an extra 15 weeks, which has never been considered.

On top of this legislation changing how long parents can attach to their children, do you think it also has value in sending a message that adoptive and intended parents share equity in parenting? Do you think there's a value in that part of the legislation?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Yes, I definitely do. I think all families should be treated equally in Canada. I think it sends a very clear message.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you.

Shelley, your testimony was very powerful. I have friends with stories very similar to yours. I love how you eloquently spoke about the sadness and awe you feel over what you endured as an infant.

Could you elaborate more on what your mom might like to share, or what she thinks about this legislation?

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: I'm thinking of all the things she went through—those extra hurdles she had to jump and the lack of resources or benefits. She's very supportive of the fact they exist now, or could, in the future. I talked to her earlier today, because she knows I'm doing this.

She said it's so important, especially in our circumstances, or with international or transracial adoptions. It's important because of all the changes you go through. You need that time to adjust. On her end, it's having that time off work and not having to worry about how she is going to feed her child or baby. It's making sure she has a good life and is set up for success—knowing that's been taken care of. It's being able to focus on the parenting aspects of providing love, support and nurturing. It's just having the time, literally, to be together and to be able to watch all of those firsts. She missed out on other firsts, because I only joined her when I was eight months old.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Time is certainly the most valuable currency we have. There's no doubt about it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ferreri.

Mr. Van Bynen, you have five minutes.

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

I appreciate your candour and the way you're sharing very deeply held feelings that are so important to children.

I don't know how it was determined that 15 weeks is an appropriate length of time for the attachment benefit. What we've heard today and previously is that it's much more challenging when you're adopting a child, compared with having a surrogate child or your own child.

Do you think a 15-week attachment benefit is sufficient, given the added challenges?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: I would ask for the moon, but today we are here advocating for the 15-week attachment leave. I think it's significant.

It shows what we value as a country. We're saying that all families, regardless of how they're created, are valued and should be honoured and upheld. That's huge for our children, youth and families. We have here today some of the incredible youth with whom I've had the pleasure of working. It's very important that you tell them their voices matter in this. Yes, it's important.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Okay.

Shelley, would you like to add to that?

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: I'll add that I agree. It is very important, whether you adopt a child or have biological children, to have the same amount of time for benefits. I think that sends a message. We'll know the government views it the same way, in terms of the family unit and how families are formed, whether it's adoptive parents, biological parents or even adoptees with biological children.

Often times, adopted children can feel very othered in society, which jokes that being adopted means you're different and don't fit in with your family. There are all those levels. On the government level, I think viewing it as more equitable by passing this is a very good statement.

• (1725)

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: The other concern I had was that I don't understand the rationale that providing the benefit would be applicable on the week the child arrives. How important is it to have flexibility to apply for the benefit prior to the child's arrival, and how much time would be beneficial?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: I believe in thinking outside the box. That's why I've always worked for NGOs.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: As opposed to government...?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Yes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Okay, I get your point.

Ms. Cathy Murphy: I believe very strongly that it's up to each individual family to determine what works for them, so flexibility there is very important.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Is there enough flexibility in what's being proposed to meet that need?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: I think there can be. I think we can tweak it. Where there's a will, there's a way, so yes, I think it can be.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: That plays well into my next question.

What amendments would you recommend to the bill, and why would you recommend them?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: I did allude in my statement that kinship caregivers and customary caregivers should be included in this legislation. It's important. It recognizes the role that grandparents and aunts and uncles play as kin.

It's very important that we have customary caregivers included in this legislation for the role that they play. We have worked very closely with some customary caregivers who have taken over care of nieces and nephews, and they haven't taken any leave. Many weren't even aware that leave was available to them. These things are really important. They're doing such important work. They're allowing a child to not only stay in their community but to keep their culture and their language. It's very important work, and it needs to be recognized.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Shelley, would you like to add to that?

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: I don't have any other amendments or edits that I can think of at the moment. I would agree with everything Cathy said about being as inclusive as possible of all types of guardians and carers.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: This comes back to the issue of our adding the 15 weeks as a matter of equality. My concern is a matter of equity. Would an equity consideration be something we should give further consideration to, perhaps at future reviews?

Those are all of my questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[*Translation*]

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

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

My last question is an important one, so I'm going to put it to both witnesses.

First, I'd like to remind you that the bill seeks to amend the Employment Insurance Act to ensure equity with respect to maternity leave. It proposes to add 15 weeks to the current 35 weeks of benefits, for a total of 50 weeks. This objective seems very important to us: It's a matter of equity between adoptive parents and those who already have maternity leave. The other changes are consequential amendments to the Canada Labour Code.

You do understand that this does not apply to caregivers, but only to adoptive mothers. You mentioned caregivers, but that's not what this bill is about. It's intended to provide adoptive mothers with leave for attachment purposes. In that context, would you make any amendments to the bill?

Ms. Murphy, do you want to respond?

[*English*]

Ms. Cathy Murphy: We would like to see it called what it is, which is a 15-week "attachment leave". Ideally, customary caregivers and kinship caregivers would be included in this.

Those are the only changes that we would suggest.

• (1730)

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: Yes, I would agree with what Cathy said.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

To do that, what changes would have to be made to the current legislation?

[*English*]

Ms. Cathy Murphy: Shelley, do you want to take that?

Ms. Shelley Rottenberg: I'm not sure if I'd know about the other laws that might be impacted or might need to be changed as much. If it would benefit families, children or parents, then I think that should definitely be considered—to make changes that would push us forward in the direction of being able to support and help parents with parenting and meeting children's needs.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Mr. Angus, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Murphy, I'm very pleased and interested in your statement on the need for the amendment on kinship and customary care. We know that Bill C-92 has devolved the role for establishing child welfare codes to first nations and Inuit communities. It is so important.

In communities I represent, we have the kokums, the grandmothers, who are raising children. We have cousins and neighbours who are raising children. They are raising them with love, but they are often never recognized. We fight like hell to get them the child tax benefit because we have to prove it again and again. These are very natural ways that children are being brought into safe environments when they are in unsafe environments, when they are at risk or when the parents are not in a position to look after the children. In one of the communities I was in, they said, "We aren't going to take the children out of the homes; we're going to take the parents out of the homes. The children should have safe homes. If the parents are the ones causing problems, we'll take them out, and we'll look after the children in their home."

From your work, what you've seen and your experience with your council, how important is it to frame language around the recognition of those family realities, for protecting and building loving homes for children?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: I think it's very important. We talk about the permanency of families. Adoptive families, kinship caregivers and customary caregivers are included in that. Youth who have aged out of the system may call it "family by choice". They may actually find support networks and connections within their communities as they become young adults, because they haven't been able to find a form of permanency.

We would like to support all of that. I think that, within indigenous communities, the customary caregiving is especially important, as you already alluded to.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Finally, it's been 11 years since Irwin Elman's report that 25 is the new 21. We have young people basically on the streets of Ottawa and other cities, out at 18 without support. There's supposed to be support. How Irwin Elman framed it is that we need, for those who are coming out of the system, an extra level of support. I know that's not the nature of this legislation, but how important do you think it is to recognize that 25 is the new 21?

Ms. Cathy Murphy: It's very important. We're talking about federal legislation. Youth are aging out at different ages in every province and territory. Quebec has one of the youngest ages at which youth are aging out.

It's very significant what's happening to them. The fact that we do not have a national database in Canada that's even tracking what happens to youth after they age out is horrifying to me. That has never been established here.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

With that, we conclude the first round.

We'll need to suspend for a few moments while we do sound tests for the next witnesses.

Thank you, Ms. Rottenberg and Ms. Murphy, for your testimony here today on this important piece of legislation.

With that, committee members, we'll suspend for five minutes while we get the next panel ready.

• (1730) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1740)

The Chair: Committee members, the witnesses have been cleared. I will resume the meeting.

I ask committee members to take their seats while we introduce the witnesses for the last round.

Appearing in the room—and she'll do extremely well—is Cassandra Eisner, student. We have, appearing virtually, Carolyn McLeod. Carolyn is a professor at Western University.

Welcome to the committee. We'll begin.

Cassandra told me that she was a bit nervous. I told her to ignore everybody who was looking at her and to relax.

Cassandra, you have the floor. You can make comments, as you choose, for up to five minutes or whatever time you like.

Please relax, and tell us what you want to.

Ms. Cassandra Eisner (Student, As an Individual): Hello. My name is Cassandra Eisner, and I am 23 years old.

I was placed in the foster care system in New Brunswick at the age of nine and found my forever family at the age of 11. I am a lived expert from the child welfare system.

Over the years, I have been a strong advocate for youth in care and for adoptive families through volunteer work with the New Brunswick Adoption Foundation, the New Brunswick Youth In Care Network and with PRIDE panels. If you're unfamiliar with PRIDE panels, they're training for future permanency families and supports. I am currently a director on the board of the Child and Youth Permanency Council of Canada.

As I already shared, I was 11 when I joined my adoptive family. Although I would argue that my adoptive family is my real family, that was not always the case. I moved in shortly after meeting them and after having meetings and sleepovers. Moving in with people who were recently strangers is intimidating and very scary. Time to attach is something that would have helped that 11-year-old little girl.

When it comes to joining a new family, there are lots of mixed emotions: fear, anxiety and excitement, just to name a few. This is a huge life change for anyone, especially someone who has experienced developmental trauma from factors that were out of their control.

It is important to know that these factors are not the fault of the child or youth. Due to these unfortunate circumstances and experiences, it can be very difficult to attach and to build a trusting relationship with new people, especially caregivers. The extra time given for attachment in these situations is important to be able to build stronger and healthier relationships, and to allow for more time to heal and to build trust in these new situations.

I am here today from New Brunswick to tell you that "Time to Attach" is a very important campaign, and it's something that would benefit many youth and children who are coming into or are already in the system and are in need of permanent support systems.

Thank you for your time and consideration on something that is very near and dear to my heart.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Eisner.

You did very well, and I'm sure you will do fine in the question period.

Before we get to that, we'll hear from Carolyn McLeod, a professor from Western University.

• (1745)

Ms. Carolyn McLeod (Professor, Western University, As an Individual): Thank you.

My name is Carolyn McLeod, as was said. I'm a professor of philosophy at Western University. I'm pleased to be able to speak to the standing committee on the value of the sorts of benefits laid out in Bill C-318.

The relative credentials that I have are that I'm the lead author of a report you may have seen called "Time to Attach: An Argument in Favour of EI Attachment Benefits".

I'm an adoptive parent of two children who came to us at ages three and six. I was the founding chair of the board of directors for Adopt4Life. I am an expert, academically, on the ethical dimensions of forming families through adoption or through assisted or unassisted reproduction, and I've contributed to public policy in these areas.

I was recently recognized for this work by the Royal Society of Canada, of which I am now a fellow.

My brief comments will centre on the "Time to Attach" report, which discusses the need for attachment benefits. We argue in favour of having these benefits for the sake of children who find permanency through adoption, kinship or customary care.

Unlike Bill C-318, we do not touch on surrogacy, which is not to say that our argument could not be extended to children born of surrogacy. I won't comment one way or another on that issue. Rather, I just want to summarize our main argument that children in adoptive, kinship or customary care families need more time to attach.

Among those families, we're focused on those who provide permanency to children, and so obtain permanent, legal custody of their children. Many of these families do legally adopt their children, but some don't, and some who do adopt them don't identify as adoptive families.

Regardless, for simplicity, we use the language of adoption to refer to all of them, and we acknowledge how imperfect that language is.

Just to summarize our main argument, I'm going to read here from the executive summary.

[The Time to Attach] report highlights a problem in Canada's system of parental leave benefits, which is that it fails to recognize the unique challenges that tend to accompany an adoption.... Consider that adoptive parents are eligible only for what the government calls 'parental benefits,' whereas biological parents are eligible for parental benefits plus 'maternity benefits.' The purpose of maternity benefits is to respond to the special challenges that accompany pregnancy and birth. But there are no comparable benefits for adoptive parents, none that respond to needs that are unique to their families compared to biological ones.

What the system does, then, is treat adoption as though it is parenting minus pregnancy and birth. On this view, there is nothing special about adoption; it is like any other form of parenting except that it didn't begin with a pregnancy and birth. But such claims about adoption are patently false.

[Our] report advocates for the introduction of attachment benefits for adoptive parents. Our main argument in favour of these benefits proceeds as follows.

Central among the unique challenges that adoptive parents face is that of encouraging their child to attach to them as their parent or primary caregiver. While all parents can experience difficulties with attachment and bonding...the difficulties are heightened and much more common with adoption than with biological re-

production. That is true even when the adoptive parents have a kinship relationship to the child, because children tend to lack the kind of attachment we're focused on with kin who are not their biological parents.

Adopted children often have trouble forming secure attachments to their new parents, understandably so given the kinds of experiences they tend to have before being adopted. Relevant experiences include the loss or disruption of their connection to birth parents, maltreatment by parents or caregivers, and multiple placements from foster care. The result is often an 'insecure pattern of attachment,' as it is called in the psychological literature. This condition affects not only one's ability to form attachments with others, but also one's overall social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Despite these difficulties, adoption has been shown to be effective in helping children develop more healthy patterns of attachment. This outcome takes time, however, as well as patience and commitment on the part of adoptive parents. It is particularly important that adoptive parents have time at the beginning of an adoption placement to help their child grieve the loss of previous attachments or minimize [that loss] through openness to kin, where appropriate. At the same time, they need the child to start attaching to them as their parent, which in turn will help them bond to the child.

• (1750)

Attachment is therefore a challenge with most adoptions, which makes adoption unique compared to biological parenthood....

...adoption is not parenting minus pregnancy and birth. Instead, it involves providing love and security to a child who once had these things but lost them or who may have never had them before. The Canadian government needs to recognize this fact and also value adoption. It therefore should create a whole new category of benefits: attachment benefits....

That's our central argument in the report, which we defended in various ways. For example, we draw on social scientific literature on attachment and adoption to show that adopted children need more time to attach than they're currently given in Canada. We also argue that legal, moral and international standards support giving the children this time and having equal leave benefits for adoptive and biological families.

Interestingly, our research shows that Canada is an outlier among comparator nations like Australia, the U.K. and Germany in not offering the same or very similar leave entitlements to adoptive parents as it does for biological ones.

Finally, our report summarizes the result of a survey we did of 974 adoptive parents in Canada. Those results were overwhelmingly positive in favour of attachment benefits.

At this point, I'm happy to answer questions you have about the research or related matters. I'll do that to the best of my ability without my co-authors by my side. Some of them have more expertise than I in certain aspects of the report.

Thank you for this opportunity to highlight the work we did on "Time to Attach".

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McLeod.

We'll begin the first round of questions with Mrs. Falk for six minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much, Chair.

I'd like to thank Ms. McLeod for being here and sharing her insight, testimony and experience.

Also, Ms. Eisner, thank you so much. You did wonderfully. I want to thank you for your courage and your bravery, and for being willing to share vulnerability. I think that's so important, especially in places like this, which sometimes... It's not "sometimes". This place is very rarely friendly to vulnerability, so I want to thank you so much. You did such a good job, and you're so well-spoken. Thank you so much for taking the time to be here and share.

I would like to start with you, if that's okay, Ms. Eisner.

How important is it for children and youth who are adopted to build attachments with their new family?

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: It's very important. Without that attachment, it makes it difficult to really make any relationship at all.

Being able to attach to a parental figure or a permanent caregiver is important, because they can then build that trust and build that relationship, and be able to actually allow themselves to have that support system. It's also important for them to know they have someone in their corner they can rely on.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Would you say, from your own experience, that having that attachment to the permanent caregiver, the parent...? Once you formed that secure, healthy attachment, did you find that your other relationships—maybe with friends, teachers or others—were healthier, or that it was easier to attach?

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: I found, in my personal experience, that after I was finally able to create a healthy attachment with my family, it became easier to make friends and be able to be honest and vulnerable with those people. It takes a lot of time, but even in romantic relationships, you have to learn from your supports growing up. That's how we learn. It's by seeing other people and thinking, "Okay. This is normal. This is what it's supposed to feel like."

They say, biologically, it's very common for children to look up to their parents and say, "Oh. That's a healthy relationship. That's what I want." Their parents are supposed to be there to support them and make sure that they're getting everything they need and that they have all the necessities.

If you don't have that and you don't have that relationship, it's very difficult to move forward in life, build trusting relationships with employers, keep jobs and continue to create different relationships with other people too.

• (1755)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Would you say in your experience that forming that secure, healthy attachment contributed to a sense of belonging and a sense of connection?

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: Absolutely, it did. When I was in the foster care system, it was very much, "Oh, that's the kid in foster care. That's the child who doesn't have a family."

One of the first things my parents helped with was making sure that I knew I had a family now. I was safe. It's very important to have that sense of belonging. You feel like you have people who care about you, who are there for you and who are always going to fight for you no matter what.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much for that.

Ms. McLeod, I'd like to turn to you.

In your research, have you determined that adopted children face difficulties and complexities with attachment?

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: Definitely.

Part of our report touches on the special difficulties that children in care face when it comes to attaching to their new parents. There are definitely heightened challenges there, and that comes from having previous attachments disrupted. I mean, everything that Cassandra said is borne out in the literature, in terms of the difficulty and in terms of the importance of having that attachment to a caregiver.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: What contributes to these complexities? I know you said disruption in attachment, but are there other items that might contribute to that?

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: Are there other items that might contribute to the attachment difficulties?

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes, the difficulties in attachment.

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: There is the disruption of the attachment, but also, as I mentioned in the summary, previous maltreatment by attachment figures. You don't have an attachment figure who is encouraging that secure kind of attachment style, as it's called in psychology, which is encouraging the proper way and the healthy way to attach to another human being.

Because of that kind of maltreatment, a child entering adoption, especially an older child, like one of mine, may have already developed an insecure or unhealthy attachment style. As a parent, you need to work to try to turn that around. It's not like you're starting with no attachment or no healthy attachment, you're starting with unhealthy attachment in a lot of cases. That's part of the challenge.

One thing we say...

I'm sorry. Go ahead, Rosemarie.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: My time is up. I just wanted to thank both of you again for being here and being vulnerable and sharing with us. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Mr. Fragiskatos is next for six minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both of you for being here today.

Professor McLeod, it seemed that you wanted to finish a point there and might have run out of time. Did you want to continue?

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: Yes. I wanted to mention that we highlighted in our report the special challenge of attachment with adoption, but there are added challenges on top of that, so you have to factor those in.

With many adopted children, there will be some openness with kin and you navigate those relationships with biological family. You're doing that on top of trying to turn an unhealthy attachment style around. Your child also may have certain disabilities. Many children in care do have disabilities.

On top of dealing with that challenge of attachment, there are usually added challenges as well.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I want to begin with you, if I could.

Assuming that this proposal of the government goes through, which I'm sure it will—Mrs. Falk deserves credit for helping to put it on the table to begin with, along with many other MPs across the House—where would Canada compare, let's say in the G7 or the G20? Use any comparison that you wish and any comparison that could be reasonable. Are there other examples that come to mind?

• (1800)

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: Most countries, even outside the G7 or G20, provide equal leave benefits. Canada really is an outlier.

That was one of the most astounding things we discovered through the research: how unusual it is not to provide equal leave benefits. That's something we highlight. We have a chart in the report that highlights what we call “comparator” nations, such as Australia, the U.K., Germany, Sweden and Denmark. We don't have the U.S. in there, because they have such poor leave benefits, generally. It's not worth comparing ourselves to them on this issue.

Yes, it's quite shocking how unequal our benefits are and how equal other countries' benefits are.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you for that.

I'm going to read into the record a summary of the report that you and your colleagues worked on. The study found that “The child welfare system...is in a state of crisis” with “too many children and youth flowing into the system”. It says there are also not enough children or youth being placed in “permanent, safe, and loving homes.”

That's something we heard in testimony presented by Ms. Murphy earlier today.

My question is a simple one, but I think it's fundamental to the discussion. What can government do to help this issue and ensure children are placed in safe and loving homes? I think it's a responsibility that extends beyond the federal government. Certainly, the provinces would have a large role here.

I know it's a very big, general question, but I can't help asking it.

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: I'm not an expert in the measures that have been taken, but I think there are some that have been put forward in response to the crisis.

For example, there are many indigenous children in care in Canada. Mr. Angus mentioned methods of dealing with cases where families might lose their children in our current system, such as creating alternatives that might allow children to remain, and providing education and support for their parents so that families don't get disrupted in the first place. That's obviously not going to

work in every situation. There's always going to be a need for adoption, I think, and for placing children in permanent arrangements.

I could speak from my own experience. We actually adopted our children internationally after failing with the domestic system. If I had known more about that system—I learned much after becoming more involved in policy in this area—I think I would have been better situated and might have succeeded with a domestic adoption. Part of it is this: Potential parents are not given enough information here. There's not enough support for them to succeed in this system.

Those are just a couple of suggestions.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

My colleague Mr. Van Bynen picked up on a point made by Ms. Murphy about the lack of existing data.

Could you quickly comment on that? I haven't given you much time—about 45 seconds.

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: Sure.

That's a huge issue. We mention it in the report. We tried to give the government an estimate of how much it will cost them to provide these attachment benefits, so we tried to look at how many kids have actually been placed in care. Could we estimate how many would be placed yearly? That was extremely difficult to do, because we couldn't find accurate data about how many children are placed with families in different provinces.

Doing anything in this area without good data is very difficult.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

With your indulgence, Mr. Chair, I have 10 seconds.

Thank you very much, Ms. Eisner, for your presentation today.

If there's one thing you want this committee to take away after we've looked at the bill and this entire issue, what would it be?

• (1805)

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: I think the most important thing to take away is that adoptive children are just like biological children. We still need that time. I think it's important that adoptive parents have at least the same amount of time as biological parents to take care of their child and attach.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

[Translation]

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

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

Thank you very much to both witnesses, particularly Ms. McLeod. Both testimonies are going to be helpful to us, but in hers, Ms. McLeod raised exactly the question posed by the bill: equity between birth parents and adoptive parents.

In my previous life, before I got into politics, I was a trade unionist. At the time, the members we represented were already saying that labour laws had to be changed to achieve equity. So people have been thinking about this for a long time.

Why do you think there were separate regimes? It's understandable that there were two separate regimes at the time. How long have you been advocating for equity?

[English]

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: I do think equity is very important here. I think that adding these benefits signals that we, as others have said, value these families and that we're committed to treating them equally.

Why would adding these benefits do that? It recognizes, as I said in my summary, that there are unique needs associated with adoption. Equity doesn't necessarily involve treating everyone the same. It involves recognizing that groups can have unique needs, and we need to recognize the needs associated with adoptive families, kinship and customary care. I think this sort of bill does that.

I think that justice is part of the issue here. Children's well-being is a core part of the issue, but justice and how we treat families are very important. We argue in the report—

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'm sorry to interrupt.

Quebec has made the same claim. As you know, in Quebec, the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan is part of a family policy; equity was achieved two years ago when the law was changed.

You're speaking to elected officials, to parliamentarians. Even though this bill is before us, there has already been a commitment to correct the Employment Insurance Act to ensure equity by providing for this 15-week period. To convince everyone that this is the right time and that the bill must move forward fairly quickly, what would be your main arguments in favour of adoptive parents?

[English]

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: As I mentioned, I think that if we stick with what we have now, where adoptive parents only qualify for parental benefits and don't qualify for those added maternity benefits and get less leave, we're not recognizing the unique challenges involved with adoption.

We're really not valuing and understanding that way of forming families, which I think is really significant, because there's already a normalization of using assisted reproduction, for example, when people can't have children the old-fashioned way. There's already a kind of sense that adoption is second best to biological reproduction.

For the government to signal that's not true is really important. I think equality for families formed in that way is central, and I don't think we really respect those families equally by giving them less parental leave.

• (1810)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: This is my last question related to a clause or an amendment.

Some are suggesting that the 15-week leave start when the child or youth comes into the parents' care. Others say that the 15 weeks could begin before the child or youth arrives, to prepare for their arrival and set up their living space.

I'd like to know what you think about this. Is it beneficial for the leave to start before the child being taken in arrives, or is it preferable to grant it from the moment the child arrives to foster a stronger bond?

[English]

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: I think there should be more flexibility around that point. That was the one thing I highlighted the most in the bill. It does conflict with our report, where we recommend more flexibility and that parents should be able to start the leave before the expected date of arrival of the child to prepare for their arrival. It should be left up to the parents' judgment to decide how much time they need to do that.

Getting the supports in place that they'll need to care for the child.... They'll have some understanding of what those supports are—or they should.

I think it's crucial to allow more flexibility there.

The Chair: Mr. Angus, go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I have three daughters. Two are in their thirties and one is in her twenties. When it's a bad day for one of my daughters, it's a super bad day for my wife, and it's a really bad day for me until I find a way to fix something. I guess that's the power of attachment. When my daughters were born at home, the midwife said that, for the next 10 days, the mother and the baby were to stay in that bed. They're not on the phone and all the other stuff in the world just has to stop. That was attachment.

I never really thought much about how attachment happens with a child or with a baby. We're talking about something here that is more intentional. It's something that has to be constructed, in a sense.

Ms. Eisner, you're an expert on this in a way that I'll never be. What does attachment mean to you? It's also a two-way street. Isn't that right?

How do you see it as someone who came into...? You were 11 at the time. How would you explain it to another young person who would be going into that situation? What is attachment and how do we make it work?

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: I think the best way to explain attachment to someone else, especially someone who is going into a very similar situation, is to say that it's normal to have difficulty at first. In creating a relationship with someone new—in my situation, it was my parents and siblings—it's very difficult to wrap your head around something that big and to understand, “Holy crap, I have a family now”.

Being able to just have time to process that is important. Part of the attachment, of course, is processing the idea of “Oh my gosh, someone wants me”. It's also about being able to build that relationship and realize that these people care about you. It's building that trust, being able to care back and being able to build that love and that relationship.

It goes with any kinship situation. It could be a family friend that you consider family. It's the same thing. If your parents were to bring in a friend and they said that this is their really close friend, you build a close relationship with that person and maybe you get close with them. It's the same idea, but instead of it being someone who is like family, they become family.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You called your family your “real family”. They are your real family. Is that correct?

When you're meeting other young people, you're an advocate. What do you tell them about how to create a real family?

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: I think that real family are the people you choose, that you care about and who also choose you, love you and support you. They're people who you would do the same for.

• (1815)

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's profound because I think family is a choice at the end of the day, even when you're biological. At the end of the day, you're going to choose either to stay together and look out for each other or not. Some don't.

This is very helpful.

Ms. McLeod, in your research with older children coming into adoptive situations, where there are going to be more issues of trust, what recommendations do you make to ensure that the attachment bond provides the confidence that's required, so they can grow in a loving environment?

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: Thank you.

We do recommend, for older children who are adopted, that their parents have that additional leave. Some might argue...and it's true that in some countries, actually, there's an age limit on when parents can have additional leave or the same leave given to other adoptive families.

The presumption there is that while this child is in school all day the parents don't necessarily need the leave, but as we say in the report, it's equally important, whether the child is 15 or three, that the parents have the leave. The kids are going to go to school for part of that time, but parents might choose to home-school them, which for a certain period of time might be a good solution to deal with the attachment issue. Even if they go to school, being there for them in the morning, being there for them at lunchtime if they can come home for lunch and being there when they get off school, all

of that is important for getting as much contact as you can have to encourage that attachment to happen.

You're not going to solve all attachment problems within a year of leave, but as our report says, there's evidence to show that significant improvement can happen within that first year, and that's true regardless of the age of the child. It's important to have that leave.

My second son was adopted at age six. I don't think he fully attached to me until probably about a year ago. He's now 13. Certainly, having the time with him at the beginning was crucial to get that process off the ground and get it working well.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much.

I have nine seconds left. I'll use it in the next round.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

I have Mr. Aitchison for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Aitchison (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to both of you.

Cassandra, thank you. You're incredibly courageous to be here to tell your story. It's amazing. It's moving for us.

I feel a little odd, though, that we're talking about this particular piece of legislation. As I absorb what I'm hearing and what I'm feeling, I think to myself that 15 weeks of leave for time to attach seems like such a no-brainer. It feels a little dumb that we're talking about this, to be honest. How is it possible that we're talking about this?

As Ms. Murphy was speaking earlier, she made a comment about how she could “ask for the moon”, but she didn't because the time didn't necessarily permit.

I'm not sure you're allowed to speak any more, Ms. Murphy. Maybe Mr. Chair would permit that.

However, I would ask all of you, I guess, if you were to ask for the moon.... When I heard the numbers, the number of children in the child welfare system and the number who actually get adopted.... You were nine by the time you were adopted. How old were you?

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: I was 11.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: You were 11. I'm sorry—my apologies.

I think to myself, what could we do to increase the number of people who wanted to adopt—if we made it possible for them to adopt—and who could provide that connection? I think about this in terms of the moral imperative: that it behooves us as Canadians in one of the most affluent societies in the history of the world to protect children.

I think about it in an economic context too, because when you think about 65% of persons who are unhoused having been in the child welfare system, there's a pretty direct correlation to that lack of attachment, the lack of connection, the lack of the power of love and to being unable to love.

This is a no-brainer. We just have to get this done, and hurry up and get it done. What would you do if you were to say, “Scott Aitchison, wave your magic wand and just fix this”? Give me some ideas, because I think that’s what we should be truly fighting for.

• (1820)

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: If you had your magic wand with you today, I would say that we need at least to have equal parental rights when it comes to leave. I know that it depends on the child and it depends on the situation. Some children develop and attach much faster than others do. In my case, it took me four years to fully attach to my family and to be able to tell them everything and be honest and realize, okay, they’re not going anywhere.

That’s a long time, but I think to at least have the minimum, the same amount that biological families do, is important. That’s what I would ask for.

A voice: [Inaudible—Editor]

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: That too.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Say what you’re going to say.

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: I guess if I’m allowed to make an addition—

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Keep going.

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: —it would be reforms to the system itself.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you.

Maybe Ms. McLeod could add to that.

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: I think it’s definitely worth considering expanding the leave time for people who adopt more than one child at one time. For sibling groups, there are jurisdictions where the adoption of sibling groups makes you eligible for more leave than adopting a single child.

I also think it’s important to ensure that there’s some funding for the supports that the parents need post-adoption. This would probably help encourage more people to adopt and also to adopt children who have special challenges, maybe physical or cognitive challenges. That support doesn’t necessarily have to come in the form of leave from work, but it’s also that there’s support for helping that child along the way.

As I said, there can be added challenges, beyond attachment, to adoption, and some of them can be expensive. Providing some support in that way is important, and also ensuring that those supports are really available to the people who adopt because some of them really struggle to find them.

Mr. Scott Aitchison: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We’ll go now to Mr. Collins for five minutes.

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Thanks to the witnesses who are in attendance here today.

I’m going to follow up on some of the questions that were just asked.

When I look back at the history of benefits that have been provided to parents, I see that, way back in the year 1971 when I was born, my mother would have received 15 weeks of maternity benefits in that year. As we look through the 1990s and into the the 2000s, we witness the introduction of parental benefits provided to both parents and the extension of the weeks that were provided, and here we are today.

It’s been a long journey, if you look back at the history, in terms of the benefits that have been provided. If I refer to Madame Chabot’s reference to unions, all of these gains have been made by people pushing government—unions, specifically, through collective bargaining processes—and fighting for additional benefits. It’s been a real collective effort, and both Ms. Eisner and Professor McLeod are a big part of that today, as has been recognized by other committee members. It’s been quite a journey and a long journey.

Some of the questions I would have along those lines are in terms of what the gap is right now between where Canada is.... Professor McLeod talked about Canada being an outlier. What’s the gap right now in terms of the gold standard of benefits that have been provided—I think you just referenced a couple in your last answer—and where we’re at now? It almost seems like a given, as was referenced, that we’re going to pass this and that it’s just a matter of in what shape or form.

How do we change the narrative and the legislation to ensure that we’re not an outlier on a go-forward basis?

• (1825)

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: Definitely, we can ensure equality. In fact, if this bill were to pass or if these benefits were to become part of a system in Canada, in some cases we would actually have more leave than some of the nations that I mentioned. Some don’t allow a full year, but the ones I mentioned all allow for equality. I mentioned ones where more leave is provided when a sibling group is adopted. I think that’s definitely worth thinking about. In the case of biological reproduction where people have more than one child at a time—triplets—it’s worth considering more leave in those circumstances too.

With regard to allowing for flexibility, some of them will talk about having paid time off work for appointments related to adoption before placement. This could happen quite a bit earlier. I mean, there are so many appointments that we have to go to—doing the PRIDE training and all of that. Usually you can fit that into your work schedule, but not everybody can. There’s a lot of preparation for an adoption. You can ensure that people’s work is protected. Some jurisdictions do that. They allow for that sort of flexibility, even before a match has been made. You don’t even know who you’re adopting yet, but you really want to make this happen and you need the time to do that. There is a lot of time involved in just qualifying for adoption. That’s true in most countries, so I think—

Mr. Chad Collins: I’m sorry, Professor McLeod.

I noticed that in the States—and you alluded to their lack of support on this issue—the Americans who who took part in an adoption process and were polled talked about the benefits from their employer, and 68% of them talked about those benefits being a big thing that encouraged them. They were part of the decision-making process to adopt.

I wonder if the passage of this benefit and the equity that you and Ms. Eisner are seeking, will, in some shape or form, bump up our adoption rates here in Canada.

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: There is some evidence of that from our survey. We did survey some awaiting parents. They hadn't necessarily adopted yet. Some said they would have been more likely to adopt a sibling group or adopt a child with special needs if they knew they had more leave.

Particularly in those cases where kids are hard to place—it can be very hard to place a sibling group, and it can be very hard to place a child with physical or cognitive disabilities—there is some indication from our survey that some people would have considered those adoptions more seriously if they knew they had a full year of leave.

Generally, I think sending the signal that this is an equally valuable way of forming a family could help to encourage more people to adopt.

Mr. Chad Collins: Mr. Chair, I don't know how much time I have left, but I have one quick question.

The Chair: One quick question....

Mr. Chad Collins: It's in relation to the benefits that accrue to the parent.

We focused a lot of our questions on the benefits that accrue to the child or children being adopted. We heard from a previous witness in terms of some of the challenges that parents experience through this process.

I wonder what the additional weeks mean in terms of their dealing with.... One of the witnesses at our last meeting talked about the depression that some adoptive parents go through as part of this process, which I never would have thought of.

Can you quickly elaborate on the benefits that accrue to the parent with the additional weeks that are being discussed today?

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: In the report, we use the language of parents bonding with their children and children attaching to their parents—that's how psychologists refer to it—and how bonding to a child certainly can be easier if they're attaching to you.

If they express no attachment or unhealthy attachment, it can be very difficult. It poses added challenges. All of us who are parents know that parenting can be challenging, but when you have a child who's not attached to you, it's very difficult.

I had an experience. I adopted, and a friend of mine adopted at the same time. Her child had a very unhealthy attachment style and would come to me as often as to my friend whenever that child needed something. He was treating me as much as his parent as her. I can't imagine the difficulty she found in that kind of behaviour. It

was sad for everyone, for him and for her. He definitely got over that. He's doing really well now, but that's challenging.

• (1830)

The Chair: Thank you, Professor McLeod and Mr. Collins.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot: Some of my colleagues have asked about ways to improve the situation. In my opinion, correcting inequity in the employment insurance system would be a step in the right direction, because we're talking about 15 weeks of attachment benefits, the employment relationship and bonding with the child. For a parent, those things really matter.

I just want to remind you that the employment insurance system is no silver bullet, and that it's important we move forward. These parental benefits won't make parents any richer, because we're talking about an income replacement rate of up to 55% of the claimant's assessment. Unfortunately, if things go sideways along the way, if they lose their job, for example, the situation could deteriorate in terms of benefits.

So we will fix what needs to be fixed, but it should be part of a comprehensive reform of the employment insurance system, which we're expecting and which would provide additional support in these situations.

If I understand correctly, an amendment should at least be made so that the parent can choose to take the 15-week parental leave and has the flexibility to decide how many weeks of leave they want to take before and after the child's arrival. I understand that's a desirable amendment we could make as parliamentarians.

Ms. McLeod, did I understand your intention when you talked about flexibility?

[*English*]

The Chair: Give a short answer, Ms. McLeod, if you choose to answer.

Ms. Carolyn McLeod: I would just add a point made by Cathy Murphy earlier. I definitely agree that kin and customary caregivers should be included in the eligibility for attachment benefits.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McLeod.

We'll now conclude with Mr. Angus for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Chair.

I have a fair amount of experience on the indigenous front. It is often a dark story, but there are some extraordinary young people we've seen. I live in a little working-class town, so we get to know most of the kids.

One of my concerns, which I've always felt, is that, for children who were in the foster care system, it was almost as if there was a mark that wasn't stated. When they needed extra help at school, it was "well...you know." If they got in trouble with the police, it was "well...you know." They didn't have the love that they needed.

I've known some of these young people and seen them grow up. I was in a youth group with some of them. Some of them are extraordinary. However, there's that need to have someone in your corner.

Ms. Eisner, if you don't mind.... I don't want to pry, but you speak with a lot of young people.

For the older children in the system, how important is it to know that, when something happens at school or when something happens, someone is there, that an adult is going to be there to have their backs, tell them they are loved and say, "You know what? Don't worry about it. It's just another day at school. You're going to be amazing."

It's that extra bit of support. I'm not saying it's not there with foster parents, but that's my general impression from the kids I knew growing up.

• (1835)

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: From my personal experience and the stories I've heard from others, I would agree with you 150%. It is so obvious that, when there is an issue, the kid in care is always the first one to get blamed or it's an excuse. It shouldn't be either of those things.

It's very important to have someone in your corner. I've seen children who are now older than me age out of the foster system back home in New Brunswick, and it's heartbreaking to see that they don't have anyone. You see that come out in anger. They are angry at the world. They're angry at the government. They have nobody to support them. The only people they have are their selected family, who could be friends.

There are lots of different cases, of course, but when you don't have that figure you can look up to and rely on, it makes life that much more difficult.

I wanted to add on....

Mr. Charlie Angus: Go ahead.

Ms. Cassandra Eisner: This was from earlier, but I wanted to add because you made a comment about it. It's about children with learning disabilities in the foster care system. I was incorrectly diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 10, and I was medicated. I was not tested for a learning disability until I was in the 10th grade. That was when they realized I did not have a learning disability by any means. It was just that I needed a little bit of extra time because I had test anxiety, which is very normal for a lot of people. It's not uncommon.

To be able to have that testing before assuming things is very important, but the government doesn't cover it. That's the reason, I'm sure, that they don't test you when you're in care. They say to just give them the medication. Does that work? I don't think it does.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you for that.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Angus.

Ms. Eisner, you said to me that you were very nervous at first and were not sure whether you could present. I want to commend you on being very poised and very assertive and very clear.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: You are certainly a role model for a lot of people. Thank you for taking the time to appear today and for being so personal and open about your experience before this committee.

Thank you, Professor McLeod.

With that, committee members, we will adjourn today's meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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