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Chair: Mr. Kelly McCauley



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• (1545)

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Paul Cardegnà): Welcome, honourable members of the committee.

[Translation]

I see a quorum.

[English]

I must inform members that the clerk of the committee can only receive motions for the election of the chair. The clerk cannot receive other types of motions, entertain points of order or participate in debate.

[Translation]

We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the official opposition.

[English]

I am now ready to receive motions for the chair.

Go ahead, Mrs. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Clerk.

I would like to move that Kelly McCauley be appointed as chair.

The Clerk: Thank you.

I'd like to know if there are any other nominations for the position of chair.

The motion proposed by Mrs. Block is that Mr. McCauley be elected chair of the committee.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare Mr. McCauley duly elected chair of the committee, and I invite him to take the chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair (Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thank you very much.

I'll just say that I hope everyone gives me more co-operation as chair than I did the previous two chairs.

We're off to a great start. We're going to suspend for a couple of moments due to technical issues. I apologize.

• (1540)

(Pause)

• (1545)

The Chair: Welcome to meeting number 34 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, also known as the mighty OGGO.

I apologize to our witnesses. We'll compress the time a bit. We'll go to 4:30 with our two witnesses on the national shipbuilding strategy. We have—

Mr. Parm Bains (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I'm hearing French interpretation over the English.

The Chair: Was it working earlier for you, Mr. Bains?

Mr. Parm Bains: Now it's fine.

No, I'm still hearing the French interpretation when I speak. I've selected the English.

The Chair: We will suspend again.

• (1545)

(Pause)

• (1610)

The Chair: We're off to a less than auspicious start. We're back in.

Thanks, everyone, for your patience.

Our order of the day is to study the ArriveCAN app.

We have three witnesses with us. They are Mr. Darren Anthony, Mr. Kristian Firth and Mr. Mark Weber.

I understand that Mr. Weber, who is virtual, has been tested for sound and that everything is in accordance with the needs of our translators. Thanks very much.

Mr. Firth, I understand you're starting with a five-minute statement.

Mr. Kristian Firth (Partner, GCstrategies): It is not five minutes, but I am starting, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Mr. Chair and honourable committee members, I am looking forward to answering the questions you may have and that allow us to get the information out on the table.

As I was the lead on this file, I'm able to answer questions for GCstrategies. My business partner and I have, in combination, over 30 years of IT staffing experience with the Government of Canada.

GCstrategies was founded in 2015 and is an IT staffing firm that has a proven record of successful engagements with government departments. We have built teams and provided subject matter experts for many projects for over 20 federal departments during our tenure. We have built a very strong network of best-in-class talent, which allows us to help our clients find the team they want and have the ability to scale up and down as necessary.

When the government approached us to staff a team under their management and direction for a time, a materiel engagement, we did so. Every individual we used was approved, government security clearances were verified, and they were given their specific tasks and deliverables by the government.

To be clear, we did not build ArriveCAN. We were approached to provide a team for consideration to fulfill certain ArriveCAN requirements. We are, however, very proud of the team we gave the Government of Canada, whom they managed and gave direction to throughout the project. They never missed a deadline, and they completed all their tasks and deliverables.

Thank you. I am now open to questions.

The Chair: Great.

Mr. Weber, I understand you have an opening statement.

Mr. Mark Weber (National President, Customs and Immigration Union): I do, yes.

• (1615)

The Chair: You have up to five minutes, please, sir.

Mr. Mark Weber: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Mark Weber. I'm the national president of the Customs and Immigration Union, which represents personnel working for the Canada Border Services Agency.

From the point of view of the union representing those who, every day, are hard at work protecting our borders and ensuring safe and efficient cross-border operations, what's perhaps most vexing about ArriveCAN is how it was developed without any meaningful consultation with, or input from, frontline officers—not when the idea was first proposed, not when the app was initially developed and definitely not at any point during one of the more than 70 updates that the app had to undergo.

This is certainly par for the course for the agency, and regrettably frontline officers are used to this. Still, it defies reason that an application designed for the front line would be developed without involving those who serve on the front line and who know what works and what doesn't. It defies reason that the government would insist on continuing to inject capital into a project that neither facilitates nor enhances border processes, all the while claiming that it does and without any consideration for what's actually going on at the border.

What defies reason the most is that all of this is going on while our border services are facing a severe staffing crisis. To say that there is a deficit of between 2,000 and 3,000 border officers at this very moment is not an exaggeration. By choosing to sink dozens of millions of dollars into ArriveCAN while its border services' workforce is understaffed and overworked, the federal government is simply gambling with Canada's ability to maintain a safe and properly functioning border.

ArriveCAN is certainly not unique at CBSA. It's one example in a long line of far-reaching technological band-aid solutions in search of a problem, solutions that ultimately fail to enhance border security and effectiveness in any real way. What they also have in common is that they are always developed without involving the frontline personnel who actually work at the border.

From our perspective, what the government and CBSA can learn from the ArriveCAN experience is that, if they want to effectively and properly manage our borders while ensuring that the projects designed to do so are sound, they must rely on and seek out the expertise of frontline border officers in a meaningful way. Our members are proud of the work they do. They're proud of serving Canadians, and I know they would jump at the opportunity to help improve our border processes.

In conclusion, it's my hope that the union's input will assist this committee in its important work.

I thank you and look forward to your questions.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. I'm just wondering if it's the practice of this committee to swear in witnesses.

The Chair: It has not come up in the past in this committee.

It's funny you should say that. I'm reading *The Power of Parliamentary Houses to Send for Persons, Papers and Records*, because it's time to be a technical geek.

My understanding—perhaps the clerk will correct me if I'm wrong—is that whether people are sworn in or not, under parliamentary privilege it is still contempt of Parliament to mislead the committee by giving a false statement or false evidence; to refuse, unless related to cabinet confidence, to answer any questions; or to fail to produce documents that this committee might require someone to produce.

That is my understanding.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That satisfies my question. Thanks.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll go to you, Mr. Barrett, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks very much, Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for starting early, following those technical glitches that we had.

To GCstrategies and Mr. Firth, how many employees do you have?

Mr. Kristian Firth: We have two employees: me and my business partner.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Your contract with the Government of Canada lists your work as a residential address. Is that correct? I don't need the address, but is that correct?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes. We had a physical location downtown from 2015 to 2020, and we now have home offices.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Without getting into your detailed CV, are you programmers or app designers?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Absolutely not. We are IT recruiters. We cut our teeth in the industry working for large staffing firms, and we decided to go out by ourselves.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In this context of your work for the Government of Canada, you're the broker, or the middleman between the government and the service provider. Is that correct?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Essentially, yes. They would come to us with their requirements. They ask for them and we facilitate them.

Mr. Michael Barrett: When we're talking about the full scope of this project, there are lots of publicly reported numbers. What is the commission for that intermediary, middleman role? We're led to understand that it's 30%.

• (1620)

Mr. Kristian Firth: That would be at the very top end. Industry standards are anywhere from 15% to 30%, depending on the skill set and the type of resource that is required.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Regarding the app, who approached who? The Government of Canada reached out to you. You did not reach out to them with respect to this contract. Is that correct?

Mr. Kristian Firth: That is correct.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you have a list of the department and the departmental officials who initiated that contact?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No, I do not. I thought I was here to testify. I do not have that with me right now.

Mr. Michael Barrett: With respect to this question, is that something that you will undertake to provide to this committee in writing?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Within 48 hours, I could probably—

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's great. I appreciate that. Thank you.

I have a question about some news that was reported today, but I am curious about the total amount of money that your company received from the Government of Canada for the the ArriveCAN app.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Do you mean for the specific component that we were responsible for in the application?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes.

Mr. Kristian Firth: GCstrategies invoiced over \$44 million over the past two years for all of our federal work over 20 departments, but for the application that we were responsible for staffing, which included two years of support and maintenance and over 150 releases on the three platforms, we were billing approximately \$4.5 million per year.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Today, the CEO of a company called ThinkOn said that his company had nothing to do with ArriveCAN. This was reported in The Globe and Mail. He said, "We have received no money from the CBSA" and "We're not even remotely in that space".

Our understanding is that your organization facilitated the design and build of this app, and connected all the components. What role did ThinkOn play?

Mr. Kristian Firth: We are an IT staffing firm. We have no influence whatsoever on day-to-day activities, nor do we have any influence on how its architecture is done or how it's built. We provided the team that they asked for, which designed a specific ArriveCAN component.

I cannot comment on anything outside of the bit that we were facilitating for the government.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Are you aware that the government reported, in response to a question tabled by a member in the House of Commons, that for work on ArriveCAN, a company called ThinkOn Inc. received a \$1.2-million contract. Were you aware of that?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Again, I cannot comment. I was not part of that and I was unaware of that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: You weren't aware of that.

Mr. Kristian Firth: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In terms of the total cost of the app, when the government reported that \$1.2 million was given, did it cause you concern that they said \$1.2 million went to a company that now says it didn't receive \$1.2 million?

Mr. Kristian Firth: The reality is that I can only comment on what I was responsible for and what we engaged on. That's what I have knowledge of. I cannot comment on things that I wasn't part of.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's fair enough.

Our concern here is to find out.... If someone is saying that an organization was paid \$1.2 million and then that organization says it didn't receive \$1.2 million, there is a lie there, and we have to source that. We have to figure that out.

The committee passed a motion requiring documents to be turned over: a list of contractors, subcontractors, breakdown of costs, a list of contracts, all RFPs and invoices. Are you in receipt of that request for documents?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I'm sorry. We were contacted on Tuesday. You have to have five days to even submit information, which didn't fall in place, but we were never told we had to provide anything. We were just told we had to be here for testimony.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay. Are you willing to provide the committee with the documents I just referenced?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I'm sorry. My understanding was that you've asked the federal government to provide those to you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Right. We find ourselves in a situation where we're checking people's homework, unfortunately. The government is saying one thing, and now we're looking to the private sector to find out what was paid, things like the total amount received from the Government of Canada for the app—which is a number you've referenced—the names of all subcontractors and delivery partners, how much they were paid, deliverables, proof that some subcontractors had security clearances and that all work was done in Canada.

Is that information you would be able to provide to this committee?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I can speak on behalf of it right now, so—

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to interrupt.

We're going to go to our next round with Mr. Housefather, but I'm sure we can get back to it in the next round.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Welcome, gentlemen, and thank you for coming.

If I understand this correctly, you are a company that does what many companies in the industry do. You don't retain employees on staff, because you don't know what projects you're going to have. You have a large group of people that are experts in certain subject matters, and you assemble them for your clients when and if the client has a project.

Would that be accurate to say?

• (1625)

Mr. Kristian Firth: That's accurate.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Do many companies, including in the private sector, use firms like yours to develop large-scale applications like ArriveCAN?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes, they do.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Perfect.

Did any politician ever come to you and say, "Let's negotiate a contract?" or was it always staff members of the department?

Mr. Kristian Firth: It was the staff members of the department who came and engaged us in conversation.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Have you ever negotiated anything with anybody who was a public office holder, or was it only staff?

Mr. Kristian Firth: It was only staff.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Perfect.

When staff members came to you and said, "Can you go out and assemble this great group of people?", did they say anything like "Please make sure you get Liberal donors and Liberal supporters to be the people who come work for us?"

Mr. Kristian Firth: No, that never happened.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: It was a completely apolitical decision where you assembled the best possible team that you could assemble.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes. They came to us because we have a proven track record of providing these skill sets and teams for them to review.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: As you stated, the team that you assembled, they delivered what they were supposed to deliver on time.

Mr. Kristian Firth: They never missed a deadline and completed over 150 releases in two years.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Let me ask another question. On this project, you said you billed, related to ArriveCAN, approximately \$4.5 million each year, so about \$9 million total. Is that correct?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: That is not profit to you. Is that right? That is your cost, where you are getting money from the government and you are paying the people that you engaged to work on this project. Is that correct?

Mr. Kristian Firth: We were not given \$9 million. We billed \$9 million for time and material, and for engagement.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: As you said, your markup was at industry-standard levels.

Mr. Kristian Firth: It was between 15% and 30%, yes.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Perfect. I'm not going to pry further into that.

Let me also understand, because you're saying that you didn't supervise the people. When you say that, did you did supervise certain aspects of the task. For example, since you were the employer of record, you would have made sure they got to work and they were doing the job they were supposed to do. You just weren't directing them as to the technical specifications they were supposed to build. Would that be correct?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes.

Obviously, everybody was working during this pandemic. This is the whole reason we built this application, because everybody was working from home. The project managers and the team leads, provided by the organization, would be monitoring, maintaining and making sure.... We would only get a call if they weren't performing and they needed to have a resource replaced.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: The manager of the team.... For example, did you assemble people who were working for a manager within the government, or did you also have a team manager for the people you assembled?

Mr. Kristian Firth: There was a combination of both.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: There was combination of both. How many managers did you have amongst the people you engaged as contractors?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Do you mean the employees?

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Of your employees, who were sub-contractors to the government, how many people in total were the team and how many were managers?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Over their tenure, there were five or six subject matter firms that each had their own project leads.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Each had a project lead. Okay, perfect.

Now, I know you guys are not technical, but I imagine you understand enough about what was built to be able to distinguish between a hackathon, where people take plans that were already developed over the course of a weekend, don't build a back office that speaks to the CBSA system and don't build in the need for vaccination proofs versus what people did over 18 months of complex engineering. Could you speak to me how we would best differentiate what happened over a weekend versus what you put a team together to create over 18 months?

For example, as somebody coming from the industry, the way I would look at it is almost like you build the plans for a race car that can go 300 kilometres an hour, and the race car is set to the best safety standards. Then somebody, after two years of work on this, will copy the plans and build a model of the car that doesn't have to drive and doesn't need to meet safety standards. Would that be a fair analogy?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I'm glad you referenced that I am not a technologist. I'm a generalist, but I fundamentally understand that.

Again, I know we did a very good job, and we executed on everything we were charged to do, but, from what I read, the things that were mentioned that weren't considered were, from my understanding—and again we weren't part of that—some of the most intricate and most detailed pieces, which is, like you said, back-end integration.

The organization had legacy systems that needed work. There are the vaccinations. There was a lot of stuff that were.... I saw a quote that we can all trace the Mona Lisa, but that doesn't mean it's a masterpiece.

● (1630)

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Yes, those who would try to paint what happened over a weekend versus the app you helped the Gov-

ernment of Canada to develop.... It would be a totally unfair comparison. It's not apples to apples; it's apples to an orchard. Is that right?

Mr. Kristian Firth: That's exactly right.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left, sir?

The Chair: You have 29 seconds.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Given that I won't be able to finish any real questions, I just want to thank both of you for coming today. I know it's not easy coming before a parliamentary committee. Thank you so much.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

Ms. Vignola, you have six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Firth, if I understand correctly, GCStrategies is acting as an intermediary and has received \$4.5 million for its services.

Were you directly involved in the production and programming of ArriveCAN or did you choose people from the government to act as programming managers?

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: We are an IT staffing firm. We are not involved. We have no direction on the projects or the objectives. We are not in any conversations for budgeting or cost controls. We have quality control. If a resource isn't performing, we will then work with the government to replace that.

To answer your question, our team, under the guidance and supervision of the federal government, was responsible for the programming and the development, but again, it was only for certain aspects of ArriveCAN and not the full overall build.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: All told, how many people worked with GCStrategies on the ArriveCAN app?

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: During the two years, it scaled up and down. The team could be anything from 17 or 18, which was the lowest number, to 25 to 30.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: During question period yesterday, the Prime Minister said that the \$54 million reported by the media included future costs.

Can you give me more details on what these future costs include?

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: I can comment on exactly what we did, which was, again, a component that was responsible for the mobile and web application and, subsequently, the 150-plus releases that came out over the three years.

For the future, the costs would be maintaining the staff, depending on whether the pandemic comes back up and on whatever the decision is to do with ArriveCAN moving forward, but the application needs to be maintained while it's still in service.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: So it's your responsibility to continue to update ArriveCAN as long as the app is needed, right?

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: For the team we provided that was approved by the federal government and takes direction from them, yes, that would be part of their tasks and deliverables, which the government outlined for each individual.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: So we're talking about \$54 million. You're telling us that you received \$4.5 million a year over two years. That makes a total contract of \$9 million. Were you approached directly for this contract or was there a call for tenders so that several companies could offer their services?

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: The government came to us and asked us to put together a team to help them carry out their COVID objectives. We did this process and it continued for about two years.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: So it was a sole-source contract.

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: The contract was a sole supplier.

The engagement and why they chose us—my understanding is that you'll be asking the same question to CBSA and PSPC—is that we're good at what we do. We have a proven track record of working with the government on other projects providing best-in-class talent.

We had already been engaged with them since early 2019. We had provided a team on projects with similar skill sets and knew they could deliver.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Of the \$54 million that was reported in the newspapers, \$9 million was paid to you, as we know. Given the situation, do you think \$54 million for the entire ArriveCAN program, including advertising and information provided domestically and internationally, is an exorbitant cost, a cost that may be high, but reasonable, or is it more than reasonable?

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: I can only really speak of the component we staffed for the government. Again, they never missed a deadline, they worked on 150 releases over three platforms and maintained

all of those for two years. I think the \$9 million that we charged was value for money.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Do you know of any other company in the world that has been asked to do much the same work that you've done for Canada?

[English]

Mr. Kristian Firth: No. I'm assuming they were just not considered because they didn't have valid Government of Canada security clearances put out by PSPC, which are obligatory for any government contract.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: What flaws, if any, do you see in the ArriveCAN clone that was created in two days? What are the differences between that kind of clone, which was created as a marketing stunt, as I understand it, and what your teams managed to produce?

[English]

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt here because we're at six minutes. If we don't have time for an answer in our next round, maybe you could provide it to the committee in writing.

Mr. Johns you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Can you clarify how many employees you have?

Mr. Kristian Firth: We have two employees.

Mr. Gord Johns: And you live here in Ontario?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do any of your contractors work outside of Canada?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No.

Mr. Gord Johns: Not one subcontractor...? No one is outside of Canada.

Mr. Kristian Firth: They all have Canadian citizenship.

Mr. Gord Johns: In terms of the commission you talked about, is that commission based on the \$9 million? You're within 15% to 30% of the \$9 million?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Can you give us an idea? Are you up in the 30% or the 15%?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I cannot give you the exact numbers. My finance system doesn't go as intricate as that, that's why I tried to give you a bracket.

Mr. Gord Johns: You made, according to my math, between \$1.35 million to \$2.7 million between the two of you. You can't tell me what number in between that. Most people know how much they made.

Mr. Kristian Firth: That would be accurate, pre-tax.

Mr. Gord Johns: That's over two years for the two of you.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes.

Mr. Gord Johns: Are you doing other contracts as well on top of this?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes, what I mentioned previously.

Mr. Gord Johns: Mr. Weber, do you have any idea of how much could have been saved by developing this capacity in-house rather than contracting out the development of this app?

Mr. Mark Weber: I don't. Again, we were not consulted on any part of this process. At no point were we or anyone working at the front line asked how this should be done, sourced or put together.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you see this as a systemic issue at the CBSA, where we see inflated contracts going to outside companies when they could be developed internally? Maybe you could speak about what needs to be done to ensure we can deliver services like this in-house and to make sure we're supporting unionized workers or hiring more unionized workers.

Mr. Mark Weber: Thank you.

That's something that we do support. Right now, we do need other kinds of technology and other kinds of improvements at our borders. We have borders operating with no X-ray machines. We have marine ports with no boats. The situation in a lot of our ports of entry is dire.

As I said earlier, we need a lot more frontline officers than we currently have. We would estimate between 2,000 and 3,000.

When we look at things like ArriveCAN, I mean, you're almost putting up the wallpaper before you've built the foundation. Our foundation really needs a lot of work, and that foundation is the officers who work the border.

Mr. Gord Johns: Within CBSA, how can we ensure that IT specialists are being hired as part of the union that works for the government and not hired on contract?

Mr. Mark Weber: That's something that I hope the CBSA will look at. It's something that we encourage and push for. Again, we're talking about IT specifically here, but other than IT, when you look at figures like \$54 million, I think that could have done a lot more good than what was done with the ArriveCAN app, which really hasn't done much for us. It hasn't done anything for border security, and it has done nothing to speed up processing times at our borders.

Mr. Gord Johns: Speaking to that, how far could \$54 million go in addressing the staff issues at CBSA that we're experiencing right now, never mind the staffing shortages in terms of pre-dating the pandemic? You can also speak about that issue. Can you comment on how many officers are actually needed to address the current staffing issues?

• (1640)

Mr. Mark Weber: Across the entire country, we estimate between 2,000 and 3,000. If we're looking at a figure like \$54 million, by our rough math we could probably hire about 500 additional officers with that, which would be a really good start right now. One of the other difficulties we have is that the one college that we do training at can graduate only just under 600 people a year, which really just barely covers attrition. We don't have any ability right now to get those numbers up to what they need to be.

Mr. Gord Johns: How is the morale in the union when they hear that \$54 million was spent on an app and 500 more officers could have been hired instead?

Mr. Mark Weber: The morale is really low. For every port that I go to visit as a union president, you would think that one of the first things that would come up is the topic of union issues, labour issues—we currently have no contract—and I can tell you that, for the members I speak with across the country, the first thing they say is, "We need more people because we cannot do our jobs anymore." We have ports operating on almost unlimited overtime. This is not sustainable.

Mr. Gord Johns: After the launch of the app, can you describe the experience that frontline officers had with it?

Mr. Mark Weber: It was extremely negative. We have a really hard time understanding why all of these questions and this app were implemented the way they were. All those questions were included in the app, when all we were doing at the border was verifying if someone was vaccinated. That could have been done simply by having a traveller show you their phone. As far as we know, no contact tracing was being done.

It was a long-drawn-out process that a lot of people had difficulty completing. At the border, short-staffed as we are, rather than doing everything we could to fulfill our mandate and keep the border safe, we spent almost all of our time acting as IT consultants and helping people complete the application.

Mr. Gord Johns: That's unreal. Do you have comments about CBSA's use of technology in general? Has the focus been on improving working conditions for officers and for travellers' experience, or do you see technology and automation being used primarily as a cost-cutting measure, which we clearly haven't seen here?

Mr. Mark Weber: It's absolutely being used as a cost-cutting measure. No piece of technology will speak to a child to ensure they're travelling with the adult they should be travelling with. They're not going to find the synthetic opioids that they want to keep out of Canada. They're not going to find the guns that are being smuggled into Canada. We need people to do all of these things.

It's not the first time that we see these kinds of band-aid solutions with technology. It's the same principle that was applied when ABC machines were put into airports, when PIK machines were put in and eGates and with remote reporting that we can't attend.... ArriveCAN is just another one of those. They really provide the worst for both worlds, in that they not only reduce security but they also slow things down.

The Chair: Mr. Weber, I'm afraid that's our time for Mr. Johns.

We're going to move to Mr. Barrett for five minutes, please.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I would like to circle back to that initial phone call. Based on your staff size—and we have 100% of the staff here—one of you gentlemen took that call from the government. I'm just very curious as to who was on the line and what their position was. That's critical information.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Again, I don't have that information right now.

As I mentioned previously, we were already engaged and had been for a year prior to the pandemic where we were providing similar services to the CBSA. Whether it was a phone call or a conversation, they were engaged. They saw the team we had. They saw that it was a similar skill set. They were available. They were Canadian-cleared. That's how it was—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay. You have undertaken to provide that name to us. Is that correct?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I said I will try my best to find it for you.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

On your website, there are several endorsements from unattributed senior federal public servants. They are quite glowing, to your credit. They include a senior executive with the Government of Canada, a VP of cloud services at a major crown corporation, a chief information officer for the Government of Canada, an assistant deputy minister at the Government of Canada, and a chief data officer from the public sector.

Do you know who those officials are?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I don't have that on me right now. These are quotes that have been contributed to our website over the seven years since we started.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Would you be able to attribute those quotes in your written submission to the committee?

Mr. Kristian Firth: What's the purpose of this? I'm sorry. Why would that be necessary?

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's important for us to understand how this relationship came to fruition.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Absolutely, but would the fact that we were working there for a year and that we were working on similar sorts of engagements not be sufficient?

• (1645)

Mr. Michael Barrett: No. The names of them would be great.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Okay.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

At any time, did you have any contact with ministers' offices or members of cabinet in any of these calls?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you know of any benefits or hospitality that was received by anyone working for the Government of Canada from any of your subcontractors or from your organization?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I don't know. I'm not privy to that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

In this contracting process and in the development of Arrive-CAN, was Alex Benay involved in the development and implementation of this process?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: To follow up on Mr. Housefather, do you or any of your subcontractors have any connections to the Liberal Party of Canada or Data Sciences Inc.?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Do you have any subcontracts with frontline officers who are employed concurrently with the Canada Border Services Agency?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In scoping out that work.... The Arrive-CAN app has over 615,000 reviews on the Apple App Store, which is unbelievable. I've completed one app review in my entire life, so I'm shocked by this.

Were you ever asked by anyone in government to increase the number of reviews for the app?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Do you know of...? Have any of your subcontractors ever purchased reviews for—

Mr. Kristian Firth: I don't know. Again, I'm not technical. I'm an IT staffing company. I have never had conversations about that.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Do you know if any of your other apps have ever received 600,000 reviews in the App Store?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I can tell you they haven't.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

In the case study section of your website, there's a link to a video about ArriveCAN, but the video is now private.

Are you able to provide the committee with that video?

Mr. Kristian Firth: Did it identify as private or was it just not up there?

Mr. Michael Barrett: It identifies as private.

Mr. Kristian Firth: I can get back to you on that answer. I will give you an answer in writing. I don't have the answer to that right now.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

There were a number of documents that I referenced, and I appreciate your acknowledging that the request was from the committee to the government to provide that information.

Instead of seeking that the committee pass a motion ordering production of those documents, I would like to request—and you can tell me if you would receive this request or if I should proceed with seeking the will of the committee—proof that subcontractors' work was done in Canada, that subcontractors have current security clearances, proof of the deliverables that were asked for, how much everyone was paid, the names of all subcontractors and delivery partners that you worked with, and the total amounts you received from the Government of Canada for the app.

I would gladly provide that in writing just in case there's anything missing.

Would you be able to provide that back to the committee in writing?

Mr. Kristian Firth: First of all, I can assure that all the approved resources are from reputable organizations. They all hold valid security clearances. I know it's my word, but we do have NDAs in place and confidentiality agreements with all of our subcontractors. At this time, I can't disclose them.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, I would move that the committee request the production of those documents.

The Chair: Are you going to move a specific motion?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes.

The Chair: I will suspend your time. You had about three seconds left.

Go ahead, please, with your motion.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I move that the committee request the documents listed in the original production order to the government, including the total amounts received from the Government of Canada for the ArriveCAN app, the names of all subcontractors and delivery partners that GCstrategies collaborated with, how much all entities were paid, what the deliverables were for work, proof that the subcontractors have current security clearances, and proof that the subcontractors' work was done in Canada.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Barrett.

I believe that is in order, but let me follow up with our clerk.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thanks.

The Clerk: Do you have anything written down? I was making notes, but I don't—

Mr. Michael Barrett: No. I appreciate your taking notes. I just wanted to seek if they would provide this. I didn't plan to move the motion. I thought perhaps they'd be able to. They're unable contractually, so I'm seeking to use the power of production of documents that this committee has in order to request them.

• (1650)

The Clerk: If you wouldn't mind repeating it so that I can make sure my notes are correct, I would appreciate it. Do you have the list there?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes. Absolutely.

The Clerk: Thanks, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I'll read it so that you capture what's in the original motion, Clerk, if you don't have that.

Those documents are, in their unredacted format, documents related to planning, contracting, subcontracting of app development and launch, including all requests for proposals, RFPs, all documentation related to contractors and subcontractors; and that the committee also receive the total amounts that GCstrategies received from the Government of Canada for the ArriveCAN app, the names of all of the subcontractors and delivery partners, how much they received in payment, what the deliverables were for payment, proof that subcontractors have security clearances, and proof that subcontractors' work was done in Canada.

The Clerk: Okay. I think I got it all.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you very much, Mr. Clerk.

The Clerk: Thank you, Mr. Barrett. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Before I call for debate, do you wish to speak on it, Mr. Barrett?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, I appreciate that the witnesses have come here today. They've provided the information that they can. They've articulated that they have some restrictions that prevent them from being able to offer it without being compelled to do so, so I'm seeking to do that.

I find it particularly important today, based on the information CBSA has provided with respect to all of the funds they've paid out. It doesn't match what vendors have been paid. It's going to be important that we see what the side of the private sector partners looks like and then compare that with what the government side looks like. It's important to see where \$54 million went.

The Chair: Are you suggesting a date and time as well, Mr. Barrett?

Mr. Michael Barrett: I would defer to the clerk on whatever the standard has been for a reasonable production order, noting that it's a two-person shop.

The Chair: There generally hasn't been a standard in our committee, because some of the results have been one page and some of them have been 500 pages. Perhaps it is a couple of weeks.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I think two weeks is reasonable. Perhaps we can just tack that onto the end of it there, that this be completed in two weeks.

The Clerk: Just to clarify, you're suggesting two weeks following the adoption of the motion, for example?

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes, sir.

The Clerk: May I suggest also a time of day be added? That is helpful, because otherwise the time of day ends up being midnight.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's 5 p.m.

The Clerk: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Johns and then Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Gord Johns: I would just hope that we would have them before we have the public servants here. I believe we're having them on the 27th.

Maybe you can share that with us, Mr. Chair. Is that the aim?

The Chair: I believe that would make sense.

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes.

I would hope that we would have the documents by 5 p.m. on October 26. That way we have them in hand before we see the senior public servants on this issue.

I hope my colleague would be supportive of that amendment to his motion.

• (1655)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Johns has a good point. Unfortunately, because it has to be translated, it won't be done in time.

I suggest that maybe we pick a date and then, on anything from CBSA and PSPC, for those who come next Thursday, we can bring them back at a later date, after the documents arrive if necessary, driven by what's in those documents.

Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Chair, given that, again, we were supposed to be questioning the witnesses and this is now taking away from the time of other parties to question the witnesses, may I ask that this discussion on the motion—hopefully with the agreement of Mr. Barrett—be deferred to a certain point, such as 5:20, 10 minutes before the meeting ends, so that we can continue our questioning? We can then have time to get this in writing and read through it.

The Chair: I understand what you're saying. I think my preference would be that we just settle this and go to a vote, if necessary. That seems to be the will of the majority of the committee. Then we can get to the questioning.

I hope, Mr. Anthony, that Mr. Weber and Mr. Firth will be willing to stay until 5:30 and we can get through another round.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Chair, with respect, I would like to see this motion in writing.

Number one, I want to understand it better. Right now we're talking about the amount this company has received, which is \$9 million of the \$54 million. It's not the \$54 million or whatever that is. These are also documents that the government has already been asked for. This is a duplication. We're now asking a company with two employees to gather a mountain of documents within 10 days, when the government departments are already doing this. I find it a little bit strange to ask for the same documents from two different parties.

I would like time to consider the motion, and I would like to see in writing what it says.

The Chair: Since we have a hard stop at 5:30, I'm not inclined to do that. You can put forward a motion to adjourn the debate, and we can vote on it.

I understand what you're saying, but I sense it's the will of the committee to adopt this. I may be wrong. We can put it to a vote, end it quickly and then move on to the questions.

Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: I want to just add that there shouldn't be a concern. Mr. Housefather has made it clear that we've already asked for these documents. He shouldn't be opposed to our asking for these documents from them as well. I don't see any reason why we don't just move on this and vote on it.

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Vignola and then Ms. Kusie.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'm trying to understand, and two questions come to mind.

We've already asked the government to provide us with the documents. Why should we ask this company to provide them as well?

Legally, does the committee have the right to require a company to provide it with documents?

These are frank and honest questions I'm asking, given that the committee has already requested the documents, and we had said that we would talk about this once we were able to analyze the documents.

[*English*]

The Chair: To answer the first question, yes, we can ask for the documents.

Mr. Barrett, do you want to answer her question as to why?

Mr. Michael Barrett: In response to my colleague's question, today's report in The Globe and Mail is what's precipitated my query to the witnesses and this document production request. It's that the government said in this one example that ThinkOn Inc. was given \$1.2 million. That's what the parliamentary secretary signed in response to an Order Paper question. CBSA did the analysis and said here's the list of contracts, including \$1.2 million to this organization and the CEO of ThinkOn Inc. today said he got zero dollars.

It's important to see.... The government is saying one thing and a private company is saying, no, we don't know where that \$1.2 million went, but we didn't get it. We are looking for a second document set to compare with what the government is offering. That's the rationale. It's transparency and I think it's important.

• (1700)

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Johns and then Mr. Housefather.

Mr. Gord Johns: I see no problem asking for this information. Government is the tenant of public procurement and it requires transparency. These are public dollars, so diving into a private company that has a contract for public dollars I have no issue with whatsoever.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Chair, I think there are two different issues here.

Number one, whether or not we go ahead and adopt the motion.... Again, I think it would be good order to have the motion in writing in both languages so people can actually read it. I think that the normal custom of this committee has been that we talk to each other about our motions in advance, we share them and we don't come up with them at the meetings at the last minute when nobody's seen what they actually say. That would be number one.

Number two, again, the amount in question that my colleague is referring to is not related to the amounts paid to this company, so there isn't going to be any divulgence from this company that is going to deal with the \$1.2 million, clearly, because it's from a different document that the Canada Border Services Agency gave. They have made it very clear that they have no relationship with that third party company.

The third thing, Mr. Chair—and this is where I really have an issue—is that we adopted a motion on Monday and we all agreed on what would be produced as part of that motion, and my understanding at the time was that we were not going to have witnesses on ArriveCAN until the we got the documents so that we would be prepared with the documents for the witnesses. Then suddenly, again, without consultation, witnesses were invited for ArriveCAN today on Thursday, so the documents were only supposed to be produced in 10 days after the Monday meeting, and my understanding—and that's what we discussed on Monday—was that the documents were going to come first and then we would have the witnesses. The reason there is a request for duplication today isn't related to what the government has provided. The government hasn't provided anything yet because we're not at the deadline yet. In the end, should the company produce this, I'm not going to stand in the way if everybody else also wants them to produce it, but I don't think the sequencing makes much sense.

The Chair: Okay. That is noted.

If no one else wants to chip in, I think we'll call the vote.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

Mr. Michael Barrett: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jowhari you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Mr. Firth, you indicated that you are an IT recruitment firm and, in your opening remarks and your responses to some of my colleagues, you talked about 150 releases and you also said that you are not a technical developer or a programmer. Let's start at the top. With full disclosure, I am, or I was, an IT consultant. I ran a consulting firm and I have extensive experience in program management and project management as well as product development.

We understand someone called you based on your extensive relationships dating back to at least 2015 and said, look, we need these resources. At any point, did the conversation talk about the scope of

the overall project and the resources that were needed, and you said that you could get them these resources? Do you as an IT recruitment firm have an understanding of the overall project scope and the scope of the piece that was asked of you and your organization for staffing?

Mr. Kristian Firth: First off, this was not a relationship. We got the business from 2015. We were currently, in the organization, doing similar sort of work in 2019, so we were approached because we already had similar skill sets to what they were looking for.

Unfortunately, I do not have the intellect that you do surrounding technology, but the government came to us with a list of requirements, a statement of work and exactly what the task and deliverables would be for each resource. At that point, we were finding the resources. We weren't—

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you for that response.

At a very high level, can you give us an understanding of what the top three key requirements were and the scope of what your company was asked to resource?

• (1705)

Mr. Kristian Firth: There are different categories per resource, but you had iOS and Android developers that involved some wire framing, which is essentially building what the shell would look like, and then we had some technical architects and mobile architects who worked alongside the federal government or took direction for the overall architecture of the front end. You would then have the web application developers, who would do the same for the web as the mobile developers would do for the mobile.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Those are three areas where you were asked to provide resources. Can you explain how the 150 releases come into the picture? You said your staff has provided 150 releases. Can you expand on that?

Mr. Kristian Firth: There are three platforms: the iOS, the Android and the web. Every time there is a change in law or there was something that happened.... The pandemic was always changing, and objectives were always changing throughout those two years.

Sometimes some of those things required the functionality or the work flow of the app to change, whether it was proof of vaccination or there was an accessibility issue. Again, every time these things had to be fixed, they had to be fixed on all three platforms. I think the web had around 40. The Android needed about 60, and the iOS had about 70 different releases as a result of what was unforeseen.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Can you talk about who managed the overall project or the overall program?

Mr. Kristian Firth: It would be the CBSA, the federal government.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: The federal government had project managers. At no point was your organization asked to provide project management there.

Mr. Kristian Firth: No, we were not responsible for the direction of the project, the objectives, the budgeting or cost controls.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: During a regular program update or project updates, which are usually weekly, was your organization or were any of your members involved in providing project updates aside from the tasks that were assigned to them?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I cannot speak to every single resource's day-to-day activities. We're not in the trenches with those. We're an IT staffing firm. I'm assuming that, as part of the delivery team taking direction from project leads or employees, they would be facilitating those requests.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Just on the notes, the \$9 million of the \$54 million is about 16%.

Mr. Kristian Firth: I'm sorry. It's approximately \$9 million. I don't have the financial assistance that the government has for the exact numbers.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: How much of the scope do you think your resources covered of the \$54 million?

The Chair: Give a quick answer, please.

Mr. Kristian Firth: I can tell you that we've billed approximately \$9 million for the app.

We didn't build ArriveCAN, like I mentioned. We were responsible for certain requirements of the ArriveCAN application.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Vignola, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'd like a quick answer, Mr. Firth. Did you use any of the \$9 million to pay the people you had recruited or did the money used for their salaries come from another budget?

[*English*]

Mr. Kristian Firth: We paid all the resources, or the subject matter firms we received them from, directly to those.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Was your organization only responsible for programming the app or was it also responsible for managing the promotion of the app?

[*English*]

Mr. Kristian Firth: No, as an organization we were not involved in any of the day-to-day activities or the project management for the application.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much.

I'll now turn to Mr. Weber.

Mr. Weber, you said that ArriveCAN posed a number of challenges for border officers. One of the difficulties I heard was that some people hadn't entered the requested information into the app. Your officers had to help these people do it. Afterwards, these people were given a quarantine notice.

How could border services resources have been better used in this case? How could they have been used in a way that respects seniors and those who simply don't have a cellphone? How could

your services have been better used with respect to ArriveCAN and the pandemic in general?

• (1710)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Weber: Thank you for the question.

Our services could have been better used by having us actually do the job we're there to do at the border.

In terms of enforcing public health measures, the only requirement we saw being fulfilled through the ArriveCAN app, practically, was showing that someone was vaccinated. Again, that could have been done by someone showing us their phone or a printed-out piece of paper that showed that they were vaccinated. All the additional questions, time and difficulties people had.... You mentioned elderly people, or people without the technology available to them or who simply didn't understand a lot of those questions, which, to be honest, were complicated for somebody who doesn't work at the border. In many cases, there wasn't any need for any of that, which takes away the need for the app altogether.

The few officers we have at the border should have been concentrating on doing their border officer work, rather than on that.

The Chair: I'm afraid we're out of time.

Mr. Johns, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] do you think it's a worthwhile use of public funds to invest in its ongoing maintenance?

Go ahead, Mr. Weber.

Mr. Mark Weber: I'm sorry, but you cut out for a second.

Mr. Gord Johns: Knowing that ArriveCAN is now voluntary, do you think it's worth taxpayers' dollars to continue to invest in its ongoing maintenance?

Mr. Mark Weber: I don't think it is whatsoever, no. We have so many other, more pressing needs. I mentioned a few of them before. We don't really look at rail or marine. We're examining a small fraction of what we should be on land borders. Some of them are falling apart.

I can give you an example. In Hamilton, we have a port of entry with 100 officers sharing one washroom. We're talking about some really desperate situations. I hear of some places where four officers are doing the job, but, just a couple of years ago, there were 20.

We need people. The situation we have now is not sustainable. The money being put into the border has to be put into personnel.

Mr. Gord Johns: We know there were major cuts at CBSA under the Conservatives. The Liberals promised to rehire people. Now you're saying that it's dwindling even further.

Can you give us a snapshot of where we're at and what we need?

Mr. Mark Weber: On overall numbers, I could give you 2,000 to 3,000, but on specific numbers, I could give you examples at some ports.

For example, at the Toronto Pearson airport, our busiest airport in Canada, we had approximately 600 frontline officers in 2017. We have under 300 now. We're at less than half. In Montreal, we were at 260 at the Trudeau airport in 2019. We're under 200. At Vancouver International Airport, we were at 181 in 2009. We're down to 77. At land borders, the situation is no better. At Rainbow Bridge, we're short about 100 officers.

These are not small numbers. We're dealing, in many places, with half or less than half of what we need. It makes the job of keeping our border safe almost impossible.

Mr. Gord Johns: This app, which went from \$80,000 to \$54 million, could have hired 500 of those officers you need.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to move a motion that I circulated to this committee. I believe everyone is in agreement with it. I'll read the motion:

That the Committee recommend the Auditor General conduct a performance audit to evaluate if the Treasury Board provides adequate guidance to federal departments on developing credible cost estimates in relation to make-or-buy decisions to achieve the objectives of best value and sound stewardship and assess departmental compliance with respect to applicable Treasury Board policies and guidance.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Johns. It doesn't meet the notice requirement, but I believe it does reflect the subject at hand.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay.

The Chair: Is there debate on it? Is there anyone opposed?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Johns. You have about 14 seconds left.

Mr. Gord Johns: I just want to say to Mark Weber and all CBSA staff, thank you so much for your patience and work. I'm very sorry that you've had to endure this difficult challenge at the border on top of the staffing shortages you already face.

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Johns.

We have two and a half minutes for Mrs. Kusie, two and a half minutes for Mrs. Block, and then five minutes for Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the span of the creation of your company, how many government RFPs would you say you have participated in?

Mr. Kristian Firth: I would say 50.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: You'd say 50. How many of those were during the pandemic? Did you receive a single, sole-source contract to do the \$44 million across all of those applications, or was every single application a separate contract?

• (1715)

Mr. Kristian Firth: I'm sorry. Can you repeat that again?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: You said you received approximately \$44 million to design a number of applications over the pandemic.

Mr. Kristian Firth: No, I'm sorry. We invoiced the federal government that. Not all of those were applications. Those were some existing contracts we already had in place. Our revenue, our accounts receivable, would have been \$44 million over those two years. That's over 20 departments too.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, it was \$44 million over the two years.

Would you say the ArriveCAN app contract was treated as a sole-source application, or was it a series of subcontracts that you distributed as a middle person?

Were you required to run other RFPs in-house to distribute to your subcontractors?

Mr. Kristian Firth: No, originally the first contract that the government approached us for was a \$2.3-million COVID-19 pandemic response that had mobile capabilities.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Subsequently, nobody thought the pandemic was going to last for two years. Subsequent amendments came to those contracts as the objectives grew, and the functionality had to grow as well as the application.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, and the amount grew.

Was there a new RFP? Was the contract adjusted every time?

Mr. Kristian Firth: It was amended—

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: It was amended every time. Okay.

If it was in fact a sole-source, was it used under one of the exemption clauses such as a natural disaster, for example, or in getting the initial contract were you required to respond to an RFP?

Mr. Kristian Firth: It was through the national security exception.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay, that's significant.

Mrs. Block, do you want to...?

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Yes, I can.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you to both of you for being here today. It's been a very enlightening conversation.

I guess I want to go back to the fact that you have confirmed that you are responsible for assembling the team that would actually do the work of building this program, this app. I'm wondering how you guarantee the integrity of the supply chain.

Mr. Kristian Firth: We propose a team and that needs to be accepted. We don't just assemble the team and give them over with no evaluation or background checks. These guys have worked in the government on many other projects that have proven to be successful. Again, we are proposing a team. We are not telling the government who they should use. Every resource is evaluated and it is determined whether or not they are suitable for each of their individual tasks and responsibilities.

Mrs. Kelly Block: On your website you state that "GC Strategies approach is to align themselves with one or multiple Innovative and emerging technology firms and offer their services as a true solution, ensuring cohesiveness and overall accountability for delivery." What does that mean?

Mr. Kristian Firth: We were approached to do a project. At that point, in this example, we did use two or three different subject matter firms to help deliver different pieces. There was an accessibility piece. There was the application development piece. With our proving and bringing forward best in class, the evaluation period is shorter because, again, they have things they can look at and previous work that can be reviewed to see if they have the right people.

Again, the reality is that all of these resources are evaluated and can either be turned away or accepted.

Mrs. Kelly Block: In terms of ensuring cohesiveness and overall accountability for delivery, if you're not responsible for the team that gets assembled, how do you ensure delivery?

Mr. Kristian Firth: They may have worked previously on other projects together. That accountability is that, if one of the people needs to be replaced or if delivery has faltered because there is a weak link, we would replace those people to make sure that the delivery of that project is still successful.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks, Mrs. Block.

Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I wanted to lend my voice to echo what my colleague across the table stated and to say thank you to the CBSA agents, the frontline workers at our borders who really stepped up to the plate in a big way and kept our communities safe and helped move traffic across the border—essential services, essential workers and essential traffic.

I just wanted to say thank you, Mr. Weber. Please pass along our sincerest thanks to your members.

You mentioned the need to consult. Looking forward, can you describe ideally the consultations that could have been carried out, what that looked like and maybe what insights they could or they would have yielded in this particular case?

• (1720)

Mr. Mark Weber: Thanks for that.

I think what the consultation could have achieved for us would have been to share with the developers the plan in general around the ArriveCAN app with respect to what the reality would be on the ground, what would happen when the lineups became long or when people arrived without having completed the app, and what would happen when they got to ports where there was nowhere to put cars that hadn't completed it or where they had to stay in line, or if the port did not have Wi-Fi accessibility.

There are so many different, individual permutations and specificities with each port that were really not looked at whatsoever. As well, there were a lot of questions like, "Are you a Canadian citizen or a non-citizen with a right of entry?" or people were asked for the address of the hotel they were staying at. Not many travellers know that. These are all things that meant travellers would be stuck waiting in line trying to complete all of this, and we would be helping them. I think that kind of thing could have really been addressed had we been consulted from the get-go on how this should have been rolled out.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you very much for that response and that insight, Mr. Weber.

I have a question now, going back to Mr. Housefather's, for Mr. Firth. Can you talk about whether the contracts your company had with the federal government were all sole-sourced? Were there competitive bids on which your company was successful?

Mr. Kristian Firth: This was the first sole-source contract or contract we were approached on in our seven- or eight-year career at GCstrategies. Every single other one was competitive.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Okay. How many competitive contracts would that be—just a ballpark figure?

Mr. Kristian Firth: There were some that were contracts for professional services, which are smaller contracts. There were 150 or 155.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: You've won a lot of competitive bids—

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: —in which your company was measured up against other companies and you came out on top.

Mr. Kristian Firth: Yes. There are tier 2 RFPs that go out to 250 other qualified vendors.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: You mentioned the fact that you are good at what you do. For a lot of Canadians who are just learning about what IT staffing companies do exactly, can you describe your specialization? What sets you apart and why was that important in this context?

Mr. Kristian Firth: As I said, between my business partner Darren and me, we have 30 years of experience dealing with IT companies, whether we are dealing with independent consultants or we have had the luxury of dealing with true subject matter firms. That's allowed us to build a network in which we know the people who have failed and we know the people who've been successful. That allows us to keep the list of people who are successful close to our hearts and to build a strong network. When it comes to opportunities where we are brought in to do some work, we know we're getting best in class, and we know we're getting people who are reliable and who have delivered multiple times before.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: What made this challenge unique? Why was it important, knowing the right people, the right person and the right time? What made this project unique and why was it important, again, to have your particular expertise here?

Mr. Kristian Firth: It was just the speed with which things were changing, how the team had to pivot constantly with requests and with different laws being approved, and with moving functionality. Every day was a moving target. They were never bored. Again,

there were a lot of things that were changing constantly, so it was about knowing the people who were not complacent or compliant with sitting and doing just one job but who were prepared to wear many hats, to step up and work weekends and to do long evenings because, again, we didn't miss a deadline. The team worked for two years and hit every deadline, as I mentioned, with over 150 releases of the application.

The Chair: I'm going to stop you. That's five minutes on the dot.

Witnesses, thank you very much for spending the time, for your patience while we worked out our technological issues and for the information provided. As always, if information has been requested, please forward it to the clerk. If there are items that were not brought up that you would like to add, please submit them in writing to the clerk.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your patience for my first day today, folks.

We are adjourned.

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