

Mr. John Williamson, M.P.
Chair
Standing Committee on Public Accounts
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Colleague:

The following information is further to the Government's Response (tabled in the House of Commons on March 31, 2023, pursuant to Standing Order 109) to the Twenty-third Report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts – 44th Parliament, 1st Session – entitled '*Report 23: Access to Benefits for Hard-to-Reach Populations.*'

I am pleased to provide a report on progress in response to Recommendations 3 and 4 of the Twenty-third Report.

The Government thanks the members of the Committee for their continued interest and attention to the efforts of the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada to address the issues identified in the Auditor General's audit.

Please find enclosed the report on progress.

Sincerely,

The Honourable Diane Lebouthillier, P.C., M.P.

**REPORT ON PROGRESS: TWENTY-THIRD REPORT OF THE
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS – 44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION
(RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATION 3 and 4)**

INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Government of Canada, on March 31, 2023, the Minister of National Revenue tabled the Government's Response to the recommendations contained in the Twenty-third Report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts entitled '*Report 23: Access to Benefits for Hard-to-Reach Populations.*'

As requested, the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) are pleased to provide a report on progress related to Recommendations 3 and 4.

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Recommendation 3: *“On measuring the effectiveness of outreach strategies – That, by 30 June 2023, the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts with a joint progress report on actions taken to better measure the effectiveness of outreach approaches, particularly on their key performance indicators; and on pilot projects and cooperation on developing and implementing consistent performance measures. A final joint report must also be presented by 30 June 2024.”*

Government Response (as tabled on March 31, 2023): *“The CRA and ESDC support this recommendation and agree to deliver a joint progress report by June 30, 2023, and a final joint report by June 30, 2024. Both the CRA and ESDC are working to identify better ways to measure the effectiveness of outreach approaches, recognizing that such measures often require the collection of personal information or additional steps for the individual. Finding the right balance is essential to obtain the insights needed to effectively allocate resources and to adapt methods to achieve increased access to benefits. The CRA and ESDC are jointly working to identify better performance indicators, and an interdepartmental working group has been established to do this work and to identify potential pilots to explore measures and methodologies. This collaborative work will help to establish consistent measures that will inform decision making regarding outreach and other activities that may contribute to improving benefit uptake by hard-to-reach populations.*

The CRA and ESDC will build on the strategies developed in response to Recommendation 2 and ensure they align with the strategies created to improve current measures of the effectiveness of outreach activities. Current measures to understand the effectiveness of outreach approaches focus on understanding the number of individuals taking advantage of the offered service, the nature of their enquiries, the proportion of communities benefiting from outreach activities, and the number of partners collaborating to reach those most in need. For example, in the 21-22 program year, the Agency conducted 3,084 benefit outreach activities to a total audience of 47,387 registered participants. Our data also informs us that some 574,330 individuals accessed Community Volunteer Income Tax Program clinics, resulting in the filing of 638,610 tax and benefit returns in 2021. This represents an increase of 8% to individuals helped and an 11% increase in returns filed from 2020.

Similarly, in FY 2020-2021, Service Canada's outreach services shifted to the promotion of its new service delivery channels in response to the temporary suspension of in-person outreach activities due to the pandemic, including eServices Canada and the Outreach Support Centre (OSC), a toll-free dedicated telephone line for Indigenous communities and clients who face barriers to accessing services. Through 19,117 engagements with community organizations to promote the new service delivery channels, in FY 2020-2021, the OSC received 41,126 calls, including 8,225 from Indigenous communities, resulting in 49,274 service requests, and in FY 2021-2022, the OSC received 27,258 calls, including 4,961 from Indigenous communities, resulting in 31,833 service requests for ESDC programs and services. In addition to these new service delivery channels, in FY 2021-2022, Service Canada's outreach teams continued to engage with community organizations that support vulnerable populations. Through a blend of these newly adopted approaches and traditional outreach activities, outreach staff engaged 5,605 community partners, including 698 Indigenous communities, and delivered 2,512 information sessions, conducted 386 clinics assisting 9,079 participants and 97 clinics to Indigenous communities, resulting in 1,462 service requests. Finally, Service Canada led three Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) call campaigns targeted for seniors; through these campaigns, 32,754 calls were made in June 2021 to clients whose benefits were about to be suspended because Service Canada had not received information regarding their income to determine eligibility.

Subsequently, 10,000 calls were made in November 2021 to seniors whose GIS benefits were suspended, and 10,250 calls were made in January 2022 by outreach staff to OAS recipients who were potentially eligible for the GIS but had not previously applied.

Although these performance indicators demonstrate that the outreach activities of the CRA and ESDC are indeed reaching individuals to inform them of the benefits available and to assist them in applying for benefits, some information gaps still remain. The CRA and ESDC will continue to work jointly to identify other measures that may be available to understand other aspects of the effectiveness of its outreach activities while respecting the authorities under the Income Tax Act, the Department of Employment and Social Development Act, and the Privacy Act.”

Report on Progress (June 30, 2023):

This progress report outlines the steps the CRA, ESDC, and Service Canada (“the entities”) have taken and are currently taking to advance commitments made in the Government Response to improve measurement of the effectiveness of benefit outreach approaches. The entities acknowledge that more work is needed to ensure that the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG’s) recommendations are addressed

Actions taken by the Government in order to better understand the needs and uniqueness of hard-to-reach populations can be broadly characterized as follows:

- establish the research and development framework,
- assess existing complexities and solicit external expertise,
- secure metric samples where currently feasible,
- and maintain engagement in order to improve measurement of the effectiveness of benefits outreach.

Establishing the research and development framework

In conjunction with the findings of the OAG’s May 2022 report entitled *Access to Benefits for Hard-to-Reach Populations*, the OAG recommended that the entities-establish a joint prioritization, planning, monitoring and reporting process to improve how they measure the effectiveness of benefits outreach approaches. The entities have taken the following steps to ensure systematic governance for all recommendations. It has:

- Leveraged existing and implemented new interdepartmental forums to formalize governance for ongoing prioritization, development, and reporting on the effectiveness of benefits outreach to hard-to-reach populations,
- Redefined and documented the existing roles and responsibilities for each of the entities to reflect what is required to improve measurement of outreach effectiveness and develop a better understanding of hard-to-reach populations.

The formalized governance structure supports the entities in improving how they measure the effectiveness of benefits outreach by:

- Finalizing an environmental scan and assessment of current practices, methodologies and data used to quantify and continuously improve benefit outreach activities.
- Identifying specific opportunities and measures to improve processes, including the development and alignment of common definitions and associated data requirements.

Assessing existing complexities

Complexities in the benefits processes prevent the CRA from establishing a direct line (an “attribution”) from benefits outreach activity/intervention to a subsequent tax filing and associated benefit entitlement. These complexities stem from a number of factors, particularly:

- the variety of vulnerable populations and the intersections that can exist between them;
- the number of diverse benefits provided by different departments each with its own distinctive eligibility criteria; and
- the variety of filing methods available to taxpayers

As such, the CRA continues to work on the development of measures that indicate the contribution of an outreach activity to a subsequent benefit entitlement. Note that this would be but one of a host of factors.

Recommendation on interdependencies

As noted in its April 2023 Joint Progress Report on Recommendation 2 of the Twenty-Third Report, the CRA, ESDC and Statistics Canada are working together to measure the take-up rates for the identified population segments in order to develop a better understanding of these segments; to identify data gaps around them; and to improve the measurement of benefit consumption. Activities previously undertaken include:

- Collecting and examining socio-economic and socio-demographic data needed to develop profiles of different segments of the population to better understand their perspectives, needs, and barriers with respect to filing taxes, and applying to benefits programs and receiving benefits.
- Estimating different segments of the populations’ participation in the benefit system to better understand tendencies in benefit take-up for these populations.
- Examining the tax filing behaviour of different segments of the population to determine if they accessed the benefits for which they were eligible.

Interjurisdictional scan

ESDC and CRA studied different approaches to develop and implement performance measures. The scan targeted government organizations that deliver social initiatives targeting hard-to-reach populations like those offered through ESDC’s Reaching All Canadians (RAC) initiative.

Preliminary scan results echo the findings of the OAG, in that, while metrics on individuals helped via the CVITP are available, there remains a gap in demonstrating the correlation between outreach efforts, filing and consequential increase in benefit uptake. ESDC and CRA are collaborating to test a number of performance indicators by the end of the 2023-24, with the view to introducing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) more broadly during the course of 2024-25.

Inventory of data

While some performance indicator pilots were introduced by the CRA in response to the findings of the OAG, the results were deemed to be inconclusive from a data integrity perspective. In response, ESDC and CRA inventoried existing data sources and measures associated with outreach activities as a next step before developing new KPIs. The inventory shows the gaps in existing reporting and desired KPIs as well as indicate possible next steps. The departments also included potentially useful projects that could inform KPI development in the future.

Logic model for Outreach activities

The CRA and ESDC are developing clear visual roadmaps (logic models) to show how a program's actions (inputs, activities) will lead to outputs and achieve outcomes. They will include indicators around awareness of programs, satisfaction with their outreach experience, applications, individuals receiving benefits, and benefit take-up rates for hard-to-reach populations. This will be used to inform the development of new KPIs and pilots relating to outreach.

Soliciting external expertise

The CRA will be engaging third-party subject matter expertise on establishing performance metrics for outreach, including efficient ways to monitor, report and validate with hard-to-reach populations. This engagement will better position the CRA and ESDC to introduce a set of measurable performance indicators.

Securing metric samples where currently feasible

In order to leverage sample data from current outreach operations, the CRA is also piloting the use of data elements that are associated with specific benefits outreach activities. Tracking these data elements and related activity will provide a sample count that demonstrates the effectiveness of specific outreach efforts on benefits uptake. The CRA will use these sample results as part of its evaluation of the relative effectiveness of CRA benefit outreach activities on a broader scale.

Conclusion

As noted above, the entities have taken solid steps towards establishing viable and sustainable performance measures in order to ensure that vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations can access and receive the benefits to which they are entitled. The entities will continue to abide by its commitments to improve the measurement of the effectiveness of benefits outreach. A final joint report will be presented by June 30, 2024.

Recommendation 4: *“On integrating targeted outreach activities – That, by 30 June 2023, the Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts with a joint progress report on actions taken to improve the integration of their outreach activities and with those of other government departments and agencies, to reach individuals requiring a high level of support to access benefits. A final joint report must also be presented by 30 June 2024.”*

Government Response (as tabled on March 31, 2023): *“The CRA and ESDC support this recommendation and agree to deliver a joint progress report by June 30, 2023, and a final joint report by June 30, 2024. The CRA has actively collaborated with ESDC on outreach activities targeted to specific vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations for the past five years and will continue to do so in pursuit of a seamless client service experience. This collaboration is evidenced through initiatives such as joint “Super clinics,” where the CRA and Service Canada collaborate to provide complementary services; the co-located Northern Service Centres in the territorial capitals of Whitehorse, Yellowknife, and Iqaluit; the “Let us help you get your benefits!” pilot; the Canada Child Benefit Journey Mapping project and nudge letter initiatives (i.e., letters informing individuals of the ways available to receive benefits for which they are eligible).*

The CRA and ESDC have established a joint working group to explicitly identify opportunities to further integrate outreach activities and assist individuals requiring a high level of support to access benefits. This collaboration will include defining the extent of the support that both entities can provide, determining any service gaps, and developing specific approaches for certain populations while respecting respective roles and responsibilities and any applicable privacy provisions in legislation.”

Report on Progress (June 30, 2023):

This progress report outlines the steps the CRA and ESDC (“the entities”) have taken and are currently taking to advance commitments made [in the Government Response to improve the integration of outreach activities. The entities acknowledge that more work is needed to ensure that the OAG’s recommendations are addressed.

Actions taken by the Government in order to better understand the needs and uniqueness of hard-to-reach populations can be broadly characterized as follows:

- establish the research and development framework;
- assess potential intersection, specifically client referrals between the CRA and ESDC;
- formalize the structure of “Super Clinics” that include both the CRA and ESDC in order to provide integrated services to clients at one physical location; and
- maintain engagement in order to improve the provision of integrated services to clients on the benefits they may be entitled to receive.

Establishing the research and development framework

In conjunction with the findings by the OAG in its May 2022 report entitled *Access to Benefits for Hard-to-Reach Populations*, the CRA, ESDC, and Service Canada were advised to establish a joint prioritization and planning process to improve how they integrate benefits outreach approaches. The entities have taken the following steps to ensure systematic governance for all recommendations. They have:

- Leveraged existing and implemented new interdepartmental forums to formalize governance for ongoing prioritization, development, and reporting on the enhanced integration of benefits outreach efforts.

- Redefined and documented the existing roles and responsibilities for each of the entities to reflect what is required to improve client experience when engaging with multiple government entities.

The formalized governance structure supports the entities in improving the integration of outreach activities between them by assessing the current state and establishing a plan for continuous appraisal of the seamlessness of the client's interaction with implicated entities.

Assessing potential intersection

Inventory of ESDC and CRA Benefits Outreach

The entities have studied the inventory of ESDC and CRA outreach activities with the objective of reviewing and streamlining service flow for clients between the CRA and ESDC, thereby addressing service gaps for those requiring specialized service.

Analysis of Proposed Outreach Activities

Following the inventory assessment, the entities completed an analysis of proposed joint activities to determine viability for implementation at different points in time through 2023-2024. These activities will establish concrete approaches to ensure a seamless client service experience for hard-to-reach clients accessing the benefits while addressing their needs for a higher level of support.

Addressing client referral between organizations

In order to streamline processes for vulnerable segments and facilitate timely contact, the CRA and Service Canada have recently established a service referral and 'warm transfer procedure' between the two entities to support and promote a seamless client experience. A warm transfer procedure involves a personal greeting (salutation) from a call agent, an introduction from the agent (their name and user ID) and includes an offer of assistance.

Launched in April 2023, Service Canada and the CRA coordinated agents from the Outreach Support Centre call centre and the Individual Tax Filing Assistance line to support this initiative.

This collaboration has allowed for current services to be adapted to respond to the needs of vulnerable segments, lessen administrative burden and streamline access to benefits to which individuals may be entitled.

CRA and ESDC have entered into an agreement on service, procedures, reporting and evaluation of effectiveness of this pilot so as to better inform iterative improvements and expansion. Despite the pilot being in its infancy, this initiative continues to progress with referral volumes increasing steadily.

Formalizing the structure of interdepartmental Super Clinics and Multi-stakeholder Events

Super Clinics and multi-stakeholders events are delivered jointly with multiple partners to provide a full range of services to clients at a single location. The Super Clinic model eliminates barriers by providing essential supports in one place, at one time, to ensure that the needs of clients are being addressed holistically and consistently. Recognizing that greater rigor was required to ensure a level of consistency in Super Clinics across the country, the entities have formalized their arrangement and execution, providing a common standard for use across departments and regions.

In order to better target approaches and locations for Super Clinics, the CRA is using business intelligence for populations with a low filing rate, potential eligibility for filing supports such as the CVITP, compared with the presence of clinics (or the lack thereof), outreach efforts etc. geared towards hard-to-reach vulnerable populations. The Super Clinic model facilitates the government's ability to engage with vulnerable Canadians where they live, ensuring that they are provided with appropriate services, information, and communication from the most suitable location or via the medium best-suited to the situation.

Through the Northern Service Centres in Whitehorse, Yellowknife and Iqaluit, the CRA is able to demonstrate the effective functioning of the Super Clinic model which allows Canadians to have access to services from both entities in one place. Additionally, CRA employees are able to travel to remote communities in partnership with Service Canada, thereby responding to a variety of needs amongst some of Canada's most vulnerable communities, often times in their first language.

Conclusion

As noted above, a number of tangible steps have been taken to ensure a more seamless delivery of services by both the CRA and ESDC to those in the vulnerable and hard-to-reach sector. Work in this area will continue over the course of the current fiscal year as the entities move towards improved integration of outreach activities between them with the purpose of ensuring that vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations can access and receive the benefits to which they are entitled. A final joint report will be presented by June 30, 2024.