

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE SECOND REPORT OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS STANDING COMMITTEE ON CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION ENTITLED, “Immigration in the time of COVID-19: Issues and Challenges”

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Canada would like to thank the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for its report, entitled *Immigration in the Time of COVID-19: Issues and Challenges*, which was tabled in the House of Commons on May 13, 2021, and re-tabled on February 4, 2022. In particular, the Government of Canada extends its appreciation to the witnesses who gave their time and shared their experiences in support of the Committee’s study. The Government, and the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC) specifically, benefit from the opportunity to hear and learn from clients and stakeholders on the challenges that have been brought into focus during the pandemic.

The pandemic has significantly disrupted the way all people in Canada and around the world live, work and travel. Without question, COVID-19 has been an unprecedented challenge for immigration, cross-border mobility and for newcomers and refugees, and the Government appreciates the Committee identifying many of these challenges in its report. From the beginning of the pandemic, the Government of Canada has prioritized public health and safety. To prevent the importation of COVID-19 and its new variants, the Government has taken a multi-layered approach, with the swift imposition of travel restrictions and the introduction of safety and prevention measures along the entire travel continuum. Two Orders in Council under the *Quarantine Act* currently set out the parameters of the travel restrictions and requirements for testing, quarantine, and other public health measures upon entry to Canada.

The Government recognizes that COVID-19 increased client anxiety and uncertainty related to the status of their applications and ability to travel, and their need to receive clear and complete information to help them take the appropriate next steps.

Despite the pandemic’s significant impact on IRCC’s domestic and overseas workforce (e.g., a 55% reduction in overseas mission staffing levels, many IRCC staff not fully equipped to work from remote locations early on, etc.), as well as impacts on the Department’s partner organizations (e.g., during the peak of the pandemic, roughly 84% of Visa Application Centres (VACs) worldwide were closed or offered reduced hours; as of February 28, 2022, 159 out of 162 VACs (98%) are open to the public), IRCC has been committed to finding innovative solutions to adapt to disruptions and continue to serve Canadians, permanent residents of Canada, newcomers, foreign nationals in Canada temporarily, and overseas clients. Many of these innovations were new, such as new programs and processes to manage travel restriction exemptions.

While the pandemic and its challenges have been, and continue to be, disruptive, they also served to accelerate innovations IRCC already had in development. This is particularly true in the case of the Department’s continuing focus on improving services for clients – a focus of many of the Committee’s recommendations – such as streamlining processes, offering more virtual services, and introducing more digitally-enabled application processes. The Government is pleased to provide more information on these and other measures introduced during the pandemic in its Response.

In addition to the significant effort to respond to pandemic-related challenges, the Department has continued to advance its broader mandate, including continuing to deliver core programming and critical services, responding to non-pandemic emerging issues (such as the deteriorating rights environment in Hong Kong and the crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine), implementing the most ambitious level of planned permanent resident admissions in Canada’s history, and supporting whole-of-government priorities, while remaining focused on Canada’s recovery.

The Government of Canada agrees with the overall intent of the Committee’s report and is taking action in several areas. The Committee’s recommendations are addressed under the three themes below:

1. COVID-19 Emergency Responsiveness and Recovery

2. Improving Service Delivery and Communication
3. Responding to the Diverse Needs of Our Clients

1. COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSIVENESS AND RECOVERY

The Committee identifies a number of areas where COVID-related disruptions have made it more difficult for foreign nationals and permanent residents to acquire travel documents or enter the country. It also highlights the many ways the pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and created new challenges for newcomers and the settlement and resettlement organizations that serve them.

IRCC has innovated and mobilized across all programs and policies to deal with the disruption caused by the pandemic. The Department also had to adapt quickly and respond to challenges as they arose, and worked with other federal departments to align measures and policies. For example, IRCC and the CBSA worked closely to increase health checks of travellers arriving at ports of entry. The Department has also benefited from strong working relationships with the provinces and territories as well as the tremendous efforts of partners, such as settlement service provider organizations.

COVID-19 created disruptions which necessitated program and policy changes to federal immigration programs, and some of these changes had an impact on Provincial and Territorial (PT) programs. For example, at the start of the pandemic, the Department heard from PTs about concerns over the timeliness of federal information and data sharing. The Department addressed this concern by facilitating better information sharing with PTs through 129 multilateral and bilateral engagements between the period of March 2020 and February 2021.

PTs also expressed concern with some of the measures put in place by the Department in response to challenges posed by COVID. For example, with borders closed, the federal government implemented measures to facilitate the permanent residency of in-Canada populations, including a large number of candidates in the Canadian Experience Class, to reach 2021 immigration levels targets. Some PTs thought that this initiative created competition for candidates in their Provincial Nominee Programs and was not undertaken with sufficient or timely consultation with PTs.

Ultimately, IRCC made best efforts to be nimble and to adapt to the changing circumstances and new realities posed by a global pandemic, while finding innovative ways to meet the objectives of Canada's immigration system. As Canada recovers from the pandemic, IRCC will continue to engage with stakeholders, provinces and territories, and other government departments and agencies, and to communicate about new measures that are developed and implemented.

In this section, the Government highlights many of the measures introduced in response to the unique challenges posed by the pandemic and the related travel restrictions across immigration and citizenship systems.

Responding to New Challenges

(Responds to Recommendations 5-6, 18)

A key area of focus for IRCC during the pandemic has been supporting Government-wide efforts to protect the health and safety of Canadians, permanent residents of Canada, and foreign nationals in Canada. This has meant that the Department has been an active partner in border management.

At the same time, the Orders in Council under the *Quarantine Act* included, at various times, exemptions to the prohibition on entry to:

- support critical infrastructure and the Canadian economy by allowing workers to enter, which has supported critical sectors like health care, transportation, and agriculture;
- facilitate the arrival of foreign nationals approved for permanent residence;
- allow foreign nationals to enter Canada for compassionate reasons; and,
- reunite immediate and extended family members who had undergone the undue hardship of being separated as a result of the long extension of the travel restrictions.

Recognizing the challenges clients faced in accessing services and documents required for applications during the pandemic, IRCC simplified and streamlined processes. For example, IRCC moved to online submissions of applications for temporary resident visas, work and study permits and some permanent resident programs, and extended documentation deadlines across programs.

IRCC also moved quickly to adapt the Express Entry system to new conditions presented by the pandemic. The validity period of an invitation to apply for permanent residence was temporarily increased from 60 to 90 days to provide clients with additional time to prepare their applications, in response to new pandemic-related challenges in acquiring the necessary documentation. As well, IRCC targeted its invitations to apply at Canadian Experience Class eligible candidates, who are more likely to be physically located in Canada and therefore less affected by border restrictions. Although as of June 29, 2021, the validity period returned to the 60-day timeframe to support IRCC in processing higher volumes of applications in an expedited fashion, facilitation measures for clients who are unable to provide complete applications due to the effects of the pandemic remain in place.

The Committee makes two recommendations about the ability to obtain and extend the validity of Immigration Medical Examinations (IMEs). In response to global pandemic restrictions, IRCC introduced measures to facilitate travel where possible, while still working within its mandate to protect public health. For instance, the Department temporarily extended the time period within which overseas clients were required to submit their IME results and other documentation for their immigration applications. As well, for those clients who had already undergone an IME, IRCC was able to reassess the results when eligible, exempting those clients from having to undergo a new IME for another 12 months. IRCC has made several temporary changes to IME requirements to reflect pandemic challenges. To facilitate permanent residence for a broader range of applicants living in Canada, the Minister approved on June 28, 2021, a temporary public policy to exempt low-risk, in-Canada clients from having to undergo a subsequent IME if they have submitted an IME in the previous five years. IRCC's global network of third-party physicians, who conduct IMEs on the Department's behalf, continue to provide service to clients around the world. Even considering closures and restrictions due to COVID-19, 98% of the global network is currently operating and booking appointments for IMEs. As a measure to support a whole-of-government approach to pandemic management, IRCC launched in June 2021, the COVID-19 Immigration Vaccination Initiative whereby all overseas Panel Physicians with access to Government of Canada-accepted vaccines for border entry now offer overseas IME clients vaccination on a voluntary basis.

Temporary Residents

(Responds to Recommendations 24, 31-32)

The pandemic and related travel restrictions have had a significant impact on those wishing to come to Canada temporarily, whether to visit, work or study. The Department introduced a number of measures to address pandemic-related challenges for temporary residents.

With respect to work permit holders, the Department moved quickly to help protect temporary foreign workers by amending the *Immigration and Refugee Protections Regulations* in April 2020. As a result, employers are now required by regulation to not prevent TFWs from meeting the requirements under the *Quarantine Act* or any provincial legislation that governs public health in response to COVID-19. Employers are also required to pay wages to TFWs who must isolate or quarantine upon arrival in Canada to prevent workers from being left destitute.

Additionally, penalties have increased for employers who do not cooperate with inspections. Employers who provide accommodations for their TFWs workers (e.g. agriculture workers) must also follow additional quarantine-related conditions to support positive health outcomes for their staff. TFWs who are at risk of abuse in the context of their employment in Canada can apply to the *Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers*, a temporary and non-renewable permit generally issued for 12 months. This program helps workers quickly exit situations of workplace abuse and find a new job without compromising their authorization to work in Canada.

In May 2020, IRCC introduced a policy enabling foreign workers on employer-specific work permits to more easily change employers by expediting their work permit applications. This

change has also benefited Canadian employers with urgent labour needs in sectors including agriculture, agri-food, and health care.

Some requirements were waived, such as exempting temporary foreign workers in key industries affected by VAC closures from biometrics collection, and in some instances, collecting biometrics at select ports of entry from these workers. Other measures were introduced to address the challenge of providing biometrics information, including exempting certain foreign nationals in Canada from the biometrics collection requirement in support of their pending or new application (i.e., for temporary resident status, work permit, study permit, or temporary resident permit). Another temporary measure in place from July, 2020 to August 31, 2021 provided workers and other foreign nationals in Canada who had fallen out of status during the pandemic with more time to restore their temporary resident status. A measure introduced in August, 2020, and set to expire on February 28, 2023, enables certain visitors with a valid job offer to apply for an employer-specific work permit from within Canada. Complementing these policies, the Government of Canada has also launched new features on Job Bank that enable temporary foreign workers to search for jobs from eligible employers. These features will help workers, and the community organizations that support them, connect with employers through a reliable source they can trust.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the essential role newcomers and temporary workers play in Canada's economy and health care system. The Committee recommends that additional pathways be created for those performing essential work during the pandemic. The Government of Canada has taken concrete and significant steps to recognize the many contributions of temporary workers who have performed essential work throughout the pandemic. The Committee highlights one of the pathways, "Guardian Angels", which is a temporary public policy introduced in December 2020 providing a pathway to permanent residence to certain pending or failed refugee claimants who work in Canada's health-care sector and their in-Canada family members. Qualifying individuals are those who claimed asylum before March 13, 2020, and demonstrate 6 months of experience in the designated occupation and have until August 31, 2021 to acquire this experience. The initiative recognizes their extraordinary contribution in providing direct care to patients during the COVID-19 pandemic and putting their own lives at risk.

On May 6, 2021, the Department introduced a new pathway to permanent residence for international graduates, health care workers and other essential workers. This pathway comprises six streams: temporary workers in health care (up to 20,000 applications); temporary workers in other selected essential occupations across all skill levels (up to 30,000 applications); and, international students who graduated from a Canadian institution (up to 40,000 applications), which are also available to French-speaking candidates outside Quebec on an uncapped basis, contributing to the Government's objective of supporting the development of official language minority communities. In addition, to ensure applicants may continue working without disruption, the Department has introduced an open work permit for those applying under the pathway.

The Government has also taken additional steps to ensure the health, safety, and quality of life of those who come to work in Canada—the importance of which has been reinforced by the unacceptable experience of some temporary foreign workers during the pandemic. Budget 2022 proposed a number of measures to increase protections for workers, to reduce administrative burdens for trusted repeat employers, and to ensure employers can quickly bring in workers to fill short-term labour market gaps

The Government of Canada also recognizes the importance of international students to Canada and has taken steps to permit entry of international students while protecting their health and safety and reducing the transmission of COVID-19. From October 20, 2020, until January 15, 2022, unvaccinated or vaccinated international students with valid study permits, those who had been approved for a study permit and received written notice of the approval but who had not yet arrived in Canada, or those who could apply for a study permit when entering Canada were exempt from Canada's border restrictions so long as they were attending a designated learning institution with a COVID-19 readiness plan. These institutions are those that have been determined, by the provincial or territorial government, to have appropriate measures in place

to ensure that the students who attend them can meet their quarantine or isolation obligations under the *Quarantine Act* Orders in Council. As of September 7, 2021, fully vaccinated international students were no longer limited to attending these institutions. As of January 15, 2022, international students 18 years and older are only permitted to enter Canada if they are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 with a Health Canada accepted vaccine. During the first year of the pandemic (from July 2020 to January 2021), IRCC introduced a temporary two-stage approval process for international students who could not submit all of the documents needed to complete processing of their applications, and who chose to pursue programs through distance learning. This effort reduced the administrative burden on prospective international students who sought education in Canada by distance.

The Committee notes the importance of ensuring international students can safely study in Canada. IRCC operates a global service delivery network complemented by a client support model that aims to provide students with clarity, reassurance, and to build trust and confidence with IRCC as they navigate their client journey. During the pandemic, IRCC has made efforts to continue virtual outreach activities to ensure that students and stakeholders alike are provided with the most up-to-date information in order to help them navigate this challenging period. Throughout their journey, clients will use various support channels such as: the IRCC website (self-serve), *MyAccount* (tool-assisted), or the IRCC Client Support Centre (personalized).

In addition, IRCC provided flexibility on eligibility rules for the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program and allowed students to complete their studies entirely online from in and outside of Canada during the academic session without penalty in future Post-Graduation Work Permit applications. IRCC, in partnership with GAC, also ensured student fairs overseas continued through virtual sessions. In April 2020, IRCC temporarily lifted restrictions to enable international students in Canada to work longer hours if they were providing essential services during the pandemic. Under normal circumstances, international students are only permitted to work a maximum of 20 hours per week in an off-campus job during an academic term. Further, in recognition that many international students would continue online learning from abroad for several more months, the Department announced an extension in February 2021 of the expansion of the distance learning facilitation for the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program. This change, originally effective until December 31, 2021, but extended to August 31, 2022, allows for a student to complete up to 100% of their program online from outside Canada and remain eligible for a post-graduation work permit.

With respect to caregivers, the Department is committed to supporting those workers who provide essential care for Canadian families across Canada, during the pandemic and beyond. IRCC and partners are unable to endorse the recommendation relating to caregivers, noting that caregivers with employer-specific work permits may benefit from the temporary policy, described above, which enables workers to change employers as necessary and in some cases to begin working in their new job while awaiting a decision on a pending work permit application. In addition, the 2019 Home Child Care Provider and Home Support Worker pilots provide eligible applicants with an occupation-specific work permit, and with three years to obtain the required two years of Canadian work experience to qualify for permanent residence. These are important features which allow caregivers to transition employers quickly and easily, and provides some flexibility for those whose hours of work have been interrupted by the pandemic.

Given the importance of agricultural workers in the labour market, the Government prioritized processing of work permit applications in this sector to facilitate travel for workers to Canada during the pandemic. IRCC implemented changes for agricultural workers by introducing digital applications for the seasonal agricultural stream in Mexico, which streamlined the approval process in 2020–21.

The Government will continue to prioritize timely and efficient entry into Canada through proposed investments in Budget 2022 to provide \$385.7 million over five years, and \$86.5 million ongoing, for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Canada Border Services Agency, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to facilitate the timely and efficient entry of a growing number of visitors, workers, and students.

Permanent Residents

(Responds to Recommendations 2, 4, 19, 23)

With the Government's primary objective being public health and safety, foreign nationals who held a valid *Confirmation of Permanent Residence* (COPR) received after March 18, 2020, were prohibited entry into Canada, unless they met another eligible entry exemption or were travelling from the U.S. and the purpose of their travel was deemed non-operational and non-discretionary. On June 21, 2021, Canada lifted this requirement for pre-March 18, 2020, approval, thereby allowing the entry of all persons newly approved for permanent residence. This, in turn, supported Canada's efforts to reach its admissions target of 401,000 new permanent residents in 2021. In 2021, Canada welcomed over 405,000 new permanent residents, a record in the last century. IRCC achieved this objective by completing over half a million permanent residence final decisions, while focusing mostly on those who were already residing in Canada, those who applied to reunite with family members in Canada, and others facing humanitarian crises and seeking refuge in Canada.

During the pandemic, IRCC introduced several temporary policies to support applicants for permanent residence, including an exemption from having to give their biometric information if they previously provided their biometrics in support of an immigration application within the last ten years. In lieu of the collection of new biometrics, the previously submitted biometrics are used for screening purposes to support the processing of these applications, and to ensure the safety and security of all those who live in Canada. With this measure, IRCC has been able to process and make decisions on pending and new applications for permanent residence without compromising the integrity of Canada's immigration system. Similarly, IRCC exempted permanent residence applicants in Canada from having their photo taken during biometric collection during times when the removal of face masks is not permitted at Service Canada offices due to COVID-19 protocols. While applicants' fingerprints continue to be collected, this public policy facilitates the continued processing of these applications without a photo.

The Government is unable to endorse the recommendation relating to the issuance of letters with a scannable barcode for permanent resident visas. IRCC implemented in-Canada virtual landings for permanent residents and created a public policy to exempt some applicants from the requirement to present their visa to an officer in person. Foil-less visas and electronic *Confirmation of Permanent Residence* extensions for some foreign nationals provided facilitation in cases where IRCC offices were unable to print documents due to stay-at-home orders. The Government notes, however, that outside of crisis periods there remains a strong rationale for maintaining the use of physical documents in many cases. For example, the use of permanent resident counterfoils remains preferable as it accords with global travel practices, including the norms of the International Civil Aviation Organization.

The Committee recommends that Canada recognize expired permanent resident cards during the pandemic, which the Government is unable to endorse. The Government notes that permanent residents with expired permanent resident cards have been, and continue to be able to use existing provisions under the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* to return to Canada, including being able to obtain a permanent resident travel document.

The Committee's report notes the challenges some sponsors may face in meeting financial requirements during the pandemic. The Government recognizes that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the earnings of many Canadian citizens and permanent residents, including those interested in sponsoring members of their family. For this reason, IRCC introduced two temporary public policies enabling those sponsors who must meet an income requirement to count regular Employment Insurance benefits and Canada Emergency Response Benefits towards their income calculation for the 2020 and 2021 tax years. In addition, under the same temporary public policies, the income threshold for sponsors of parents and grandparents was reduced to the minimum necessary income (low income cut-off) for the 2020 and 2021 tax years.

The Committee calls for the Department to lock in the age of dependent children so that COVID-related processing delays do not disadvantage them, which the Government is unable to endorse. The Department's existing process for locking in the age of dependent children who are included on permanent residence applications has allowed applicants and their children the comfort of knowing their children will not "age out" while the application is being processed.

Asylum and Refugees

(Responds to Recommendation 33)

The Committee's report notes how COVID-19 may be affecting asylum claimants and refugees. Over the course of the pandemic, Canada has continued to receive asylum claims, subject to restrictions. To enable the processing of asylum claims from within Canada, IRCC introduced a temporary policy to allow in-Canada claims to be initiated electronically, without the need to apply in person. Moreover, IRCC is providing temporary accommodations for asylum claimants who do not have their own means to self-quarantine as required under the *Quarantine Act* Orders in Council.

Canada has also continued to resettle refugees where conditions permit, including those under the Urgent Protection Program, with entry exemptions granted in Canada's national interest by the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, while following public health measures implemented to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19. IRCC used innovative measures to continue to facilitate resettlement during the pandemic, including through virtual interviews and through the creation of a new booking tool for use by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to coordinate refugee arrivals. IRCC also signed an agreement with the IOM to deliver additional pre-departure medical services specific to COVID-19 for all refugees being resettled in Canada, including testing, vaccinations where available, pre-embarkation health checks, isolation services, as needed, and information on Canada's public health measures.

With changes to travel restrictions now permitting people approved for permanent residence and who have written notice of that approval to come to Canada, the Department is continuing to process refugee resettlement applications and facilitate movements where possible. More recently, IRCC expedited the processing and resettlement of thousands of Afghan refugees, including issuing Temporary Residence Permits (TRPs) to facilitate travel to Canada where necessary, and arranged for streamlined Immigration Medical Exams (IMEs) to be conducted while refugees were undergoing their mandatory quarantine after arriving in Canada.

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Canada put in place measures to temporarily restrict asylum claimants crossing between designated land ports of entry from the U.S. to Canada beginning in March 2020. In August 2021, Canada started reaching out to asylum claimants who had been directed back to confirm their intent to return to Canada to pursue their claim, and on November 21, 2021, the prohibition came to an end. Since these restrictions were eased, there has been a steady increase in asylum intake – a trend which is expected to continue in 2022-2023.

As the COVID-19 situation in Canada continues to improve and border restrictions ease, the federal Government is committed to ensuring that Canada's asylum system has the long-term resources it needs. Budget 2022 proposes to provide Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Canada Border Services Agency, the Immigration and Refugee Board, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service with \$1.3 billion over the next five years, and \$331.2 million ongoing, to support the long-term stability and integrity of Canada's asylum system.

2. IMPROVING SERVICE DELIVERY AND COMMUNICATION

The Government of Canada agrees that clients want clear and meaningful information, in real-time, through intuitive services, and IRCC is committed to continuously improve its services to make them more accessible, less complicated and easily understood by clients. The Department interacts with millions of clients in Canada and across the globe every year, and recognizes that open and transparent communication with clients is essential.

Since 2012, personalized support for IRCC clients in Canada has been centralized at the Client Support Centre (CSC). Support is available by telephone and by email (via the online web form). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, IRCC's client support operations rapidly shifted to a remote work environment and IRCC stood up a virtual call centre operation. In 2020-21, the CSC received over 4.2 million calls (2.6 million asked to speak to an agent) and 1.5 million email enquiries. Between April 2021 and January 31, 2022, the Client Support Centre received over 6.1 million calls (3.7M asked to speak to an agent) and is on track to receive 8 million calls by end of the fiscal year. This represents a 100% increase compared to 2020-21.

volumes. Email volumes also grew at an accelerated pace in 2020-21, driven in large part by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; increasing by 53% over the previous year. For 2021-22 (April to January), IRCC has already received 1.5 million emails, exceeding the total email volume received in 2020-21.

Since August 2021, the Client Support Centre has been providing a single point of contact for assistance via a dedicated telephone and email to vulnerable clients, both in and outside Canada, who have been affected by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Most recently, IRCC also created a dedicated phone line and web form to prioritize questions from those affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

IRCC was supported by investments from Budget 2019, as well as internal reallocations to support improvements to client support technology and reduce the root causes of calls. However, the volume of enquiries and demand for support at the Client Support Centre related to the pandemic and global crises has exceeded the Department's forecast and is expected to grow at a significant rate as more clients have questions and face uncertainty. While IRCC increased its call answer rate in 2019-20 to over 44%, the rate fell to 40% in 2020-21 and is currently at 28% for 2021-22 (April to January). Email processing times similarly improved in 2019-20 (four business days) but have since increased to 7.4 business days for 2021-22 (April to January).

Budget 2021 announced an additional investment of \$74.4M over three years to uphold personalized support for clients, especially those facing service barriers, by maintaining capacity at the Client Support Centre (achieved post Budget 2019) and its established public-facing service standards. More recently in Budget 2022, the Government provided IRCC's Client Support Centre with \$187.3 million over five years and \$37.2 million to improve its capacity to respond to a growing volume of enquiries and to invest in the technology and tools required to better support people using our services.

IRCC understands that ensuring access to client support is an important part of making sure individuals feel respected, welcomed and valued whether they choose to come to Canada (temporarily or permanently) or to obtain citizenship. The pandemic and recent crises in Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Ukraine have reemphasized the importance of understanding how clients engage with and experience the full cycle of IRCC services as well as how the Department maintains timely access to client support services during challenging times.

Digital Transformation and Modernization

(Responds to Recommendations 1, 9, 12)

The Committee recommends that IRCC and the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) fully digitize the immigration and asylum systems, while retaining the possibility of paper applications to ensure broad access to these systems. Both IRCC and the IRB agree that improving overall efficiency of the asylum system and the client experience rests in no small part on transitioning to digital systems and services, while remaining cognizant of access barriers for some clients. In fact, both IRCC and the IRB have already begun this work. However, even though many aspects of the asylum system can be digitized, the nature of the refugee determination process limits the ability to go fully digital as decisions involved require consideration of complex issues that have a significant impact on human lives.

The disruption of services due to the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the urgency of moving to an operational model that is fundamentally digital, making IRCC more nimble and more resilient in the face of shifting domestic and international conditions. IRCC's existing system depends on paper-based processes and an aging IT infrastructure. Yet, clients expect fast, personalized and intuitive services. IRCC's long-term goal is to transform into a truly digital organization, in alignment with the Government of Canada's Strategic Vision to enable a digital government, and ultimately to better manage and deliver services in alignment with client expectations.

To date, IRCC has undertaken extensive work to transform the Department's programs. This includes "back-end" technology and administrative efficiencies, as well as client-facing tools and service delivery channels. The Department has already taken steps to process certain categories of applications virtually: electronic applications, digitization of certain applications

received on paper, e-communication of information and videoconferencing with applicants for interviews. For instance, IRCC has held asylum eligibility interviews remotely, where possible, while the IRB adopted a remote hearings model (while retaining in-person hearings for urgent and particularly sensitive cases). Canada has welcomed nearly 143,000 new Canadians at virtual citizenship ceremonies and Canada is among the first countries in the world to offer online citizenship testing.

In April 2021, IRCC began work to re-platform and re-design *MyAccount* (clients' online account) to, among other things, provide more case status information and enhance clients' ability to self-serve for support. In May 2021, the Department introduced the Citizenship Application Tracker, which allows clients to check their application status in real-time, see the next steps they need to take, verify the progress of their application and the timeline of their citizenship grant application history. A similar Family Sponsorship Application Tracker has also been developed, and is available for people sponsoring or being sponsored as a spouse, partner, or dependent child.

In addition, to further improve the experience of applicants and to enable the Citizenship Program to accommodate higher levels of applications, Budget 2022 announced that the Government intends to introduce legislative amendments to the *Citizenship Act* to enable automated and machine-assisted processing and the safe and secure collection and use of biometric information.

Over the next five years, the Department's transition to digital systems and services is being carried out through the third phase of its Digital Platform Modernization (DPM) programme. This generational investment will enable IRCC to replace its aging IT platform and introduce new data and technological capabilities, in turn enabling the Department to:

- meet heightened expectations for client-focused services and improve the client experience;
- provide clients with access to timely and relevant information on their application status;
- respond quickly to changing conditions and new priorities;
- reduce the reliance on outdated paper-based processes; and,
- better manage increasing application volumes while maintaining the integrity of migration programs.

While new IT capabilities are key, digital modernization is more than a technical upgrade. Rather, IRCC is undertaking a business transformation journey to bring the Department into the digital era and revolutionize service delivery, with the aim of delivering a world-class immigration system while protecting the safety and security of persons in Canada. To support the third phase of DPM, the Government of Canada announced funding of \$827.3 million in the 2021 federal Budget. This announcement builds upon the investment of \$127.9M over three years, beginning in fiscal year 2020-2021, for Phases 1 and 2, which is focused on stabilizing and standardizing the Department's legacy IT systems.

As this important work progresses over the coming years, it will place clients at the centre – designing and testing our services, policies and tools with clients and for clients. IRCC is fully committed to ensuring that new digital services meet clients' needs for timely, meaningful and transparent case status information, and are guided by the principles of transparency, privacy, fairness, accessibility, security, and human rights law, including anti-bias and anti-discrimination. The Department's digital transformation and the lessons learned from responding to the pandemic will enable IRCC and its partners to better respond to future crises, strengthening Canada's resilience. Providing services that meet client needs will be a competitive advantage as Canada seeks to attract global talent and meet its immigration objectives.

The IRB is also focused on digital transformation to enhance access to justice for those involved in immigration and refugee proceedings. In late 2019, the IRB developed a digital strategy that positions the Board to become increasingly paperless, to simplify processes and to improve the exchange of information with partners and clients through the use of the IRB's online portal (*MyCase*).

With the success of remote hearings over the summer and fall months, coupled with concern about the evolving public health situation, in January 2021 the IRB adopted a remote-by-default model, with 99% of hearings now being held remotely. Since June 2020, the Board has held nearly 50,000 remote hearings, with a satisfaction rate of over 95% in Refugee Protection Division post-hearing surveys. As health conditions improve, the Board intends to transition from a hearings operating model with almost all hearings held remotely, to a “hybrid” hearings operating model, with the majority of hearings still being held remotely, but an increasing number held in-person at IRB offices.

In addition to remote hearings, the IRB has scanned all existing case files across all divisions, which furthers its digital agenda and reduces the need to work with paper files. As a result of these efforts, members across all of IRB’s divisions are working primarily from electronic files.

The IRB accelerated the development of its MyCase e-portal during the pandemic, which now supports the exchange of electronic documents with counsel. Further functionality is under development with the intent to provide a single window view of case information for all parties, including IRCC and CBSA as referral organizations where eligible refugee protection claims are referred to the IRB, and provide opportunities to streamline intake and outgoing processes.

In coming years, the IRB will continue to focus on modernizing its case management tools for members and staff, enhancing the sharing of information across partner organizations, and continuing to improve the way parties receive from, and are able to send information and notifications to, the Board.

In response to challenges posed by the pandemic, IRCC began receiving electronic asylum applications in July 2020. Claims made since then are completely paperless and can be processed remotely by staff, up to the point of issuing an Acknowledgement of Claim which is also the key document required to access federal and provincial/territorial services, including Interim Federal Health benefits. While this is a temporary measure, in the future, via the Asylum Interoperability Project, government investments will enhance online applications by claimants in Canada and electronic information and document sharing between federal partners. These changes will bring efficiencies to the Canadian Asylum System that will improve program integrity by redirecting employees away from administrative tasks to processing, analysis and investigations, while simultaneously allowing all partners to more efficiently finalize decisions on all claimants.

Strengthening Communication, Transparency and Access to Information

(Responds to Recommendations 13-15, 29)

The Committee’s report underscores the importance of strong communication, transparency and accountability between the Department and the public. In particular, the report stresses the importance of client access to their case status and accessible appeal processes. IRCC provides publicly available information on official policy and procedures for citizenship and immigration processing on its website. IRCC meets regularly with internal and external stakeholders to ensure guidance is clear and to improve guidance when necessary. Since January 2021, IRCC has been publishing weekly updates on its website indicating the receipt dates of the applications being finalized for several citizenship and immigration programs.

IRCC values client feedback and offers many ways for clients to share their experience. While IRCC strives to meet client expectations, the Department acknowledges that despite best efforts, at times processes can be unclear. When clients have unmet expectations relating to the Department’s services, performance, or processes, IRCC encourages them to submit feedback through the online *IRCC Client Feedback Mechanism*. This feedback, along with feedback from other sources, is used to help inform service improvements.

A poor client experience has negative downstream effects for the entire Department, including increases in calls and emails to the Client Support Centre, Access to Information and Privacy requests, enquiries from Members of Parliament and enquiries to the Minister. Such enquiries and requests are a symptom of pain points our clients are experiencing when using our programs, services and tools.

IRCC understands that it can do more to improve transparency and accountability mechanisms so that clients can more easily address inconsistencies in processing, or to seek additional

information about officers' decisions on applications—two areas of focus in the Committee's report.

IRCC is exploring ways of interacting with clients to hear their concerns regarding not only the quality of the client service, but perceptions of bias in decision making processes, or broader concerns that equity is not sufficiently balanced with objective decision-making criteria. The creation of an ombudsperson, as the Committee recommends, would need to be considered alongside client service improvements we plan to make, as well as initiatives currently underway to identify and address systemic inequities which can lead to unequal outcomes.

The Committee notes that clients would benefit from having more timely confirmation that their applications have been received, being able to track applications in real time, and having more information about how their application is decided. In particular, IRCC acknowledges that clients want additional information regarding the reason(s) for their refusals and often contact the Department through the Client Support Centre or submit an Access to Information or Privacy request. Since fall 2021, IRCC has been working on revising its refusal letters, which includes usability testing with clients, to ensure that the language used is clear and easy to understand. The Department is also exploring ways that it can provide additional information on the reason(s) for refusals, including proactively releasing officer notes where applicable, at the time of the application decision. To increase transparency in appeal processes, IRCC will undertake to simplify and centralize information on its website to clarify the steps for clients to follow if they disagree with IRCC's decision. Currently, this information is spread across several different web pages and is not always easy to locate or understand.

As part of the broader DPM agenda, described above, IRCC is actively pursuing updates and improvements to its MyAccount functionality that will allow for the better communication of case status information to clients, a deeper client profile and having a central portal for clients to obtain information regarding their journey with IRCC. Usability testing is currently being performed with clients on the new MyAccount features being considered, to ensure that the proposed new features are clear and easy to understand. The new MyAccount functionality is expected to be incrementally rolled out in the next few years. IRCC also committed to issuing full or modified acknowledgements of receipt to 90% of all Permanent Resident and Citizenship Grant clients within 10 weeks of their submission by June 30, 2021.

IRCC remains committed to providing open, transparent, and accountable service and has developed a long-term strategic plan to improve the management of access and privacy requests. IRCC met its commitment to provide the Office of the Information Commissioner with information on the concrete results and impacts of all specific, measurable actions stated in the Department's work plan by the end of 2021. IRCC also included this information in its *Access to Information Act* Annual Report for 2020-2021, which has been published on the Department's website.

Taken together, these efforts will contribute to improving departmental effectiveness and efficiency, enhance transparency and client service, and reduce the need for clients to engage intermediaries to resolve their complaints.

3. RESPONDING TO THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF OUR CLIENTS

(Responds to Recommendation 10)

Many of the Committee's recommendations address matters that may have been brought into focus during the pandemic but that concern broader areas of interest, such as supporting positive outcomes for international students, foreign workers and newcomers, family reunification, and putting in place new migration measures to address the troubling erosion of rights and freedoms in places around the world such as Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Ukraine. While responding to COVID-19, the Department has continued to deliver on its core programs and responsibilities, including responding to non-pandemic urgent issues. The Department is committed to serving the diverse needs of its clients and to addressing systemic inequities, which can lead to unequal outcomes. IRCC also strives to ensure its services are accessible to clients with disabilities. For example, following consultations with key disability stakeholders, IRCC expanded the accommodations measures for the 2020 Parents and Grandparents

Program's interest to sponsor period which was used for both 2020 and 2021 intakes. As part of the expanded accommodation measures, an "Alternative Process" was put in place to ensure that the Interest to Sponsor form was accessible in 3 different formats (large print, paper copy, and braille). Persons with disabilities were also able to request these alternative forms one week before the opening of the online format in 2020.

Immigrants, especially recent newcomers, have been hit hard by the pandemic's economic consequences. Budget 2022 committed to growing Canada's workforce by addressing barriers faced by newcomers and other people who are underrepresented in Canada's workforce, including by improving labour mobility and foreign credential recognition, and creating opportunities for persons with disabilities. For example, Budget 2022 proposed to provide \$115 million over five years, with \$30 million ongoing, to expand the Foreign Credential Recognition Program and help up to 11,000 internationally trained health care professionals per year get their credentials recognized and find work in their field.

As Canada moves towards recovery, IRCC continues to monitor and target interventions, using tools such as Gender-Based Analysis Plus and an anti-racism lens to consider intersecting vulnerabilities and systemic inequities. To support this important work, the Department shares the Committee's view on the importance of disaggregated processing and application data. The Department is working to improve the collection, use and dissemination of data broken down by individuals' socio-demographic attributes, in a manner that respects the *Privacy Act*. IRCC has started to include questions that allow for the identification of specific racialized groups on some voluntary IRCC client surveys such as surveys focusing on passport applicants, settlement service clients and applicants from economic, family reunification, refugee resettlement and asylum admission categories. Through the establishment of an IRCC Disaggregated Data and Analytics Framework, in the future these efforts will be consistent with Statistics Canada and Government of Canada wide approach to disaggregated data standards. IRCC will also release anonymized annual disaggregated data set of finalized applications (permanent and temporary residents) via the Government of Canada's Open Data Portal, by fall 2022. This information will be further complemented by 2021 Census results on those who were admitted through different admission categories by race, religious affiliation and ethnicity.

Embedding Anti-Racism into the Client Experience Framework reflects IRCC's commitment to collecting client feedback, in a manner consistent with the *Privacy Act*, to support equitable access to services for all clients. As part of this effort, IRCC's annual voluntary client experience survey regarding citizenship and immigration programs, launched on February 25, 2022, and for the first time, included questions aimed at improving IRCC's data collection as it relates to issues of accessibility, gender, and race. This will allow IRCC to start examining differential outcomes related to its services and address inconsistencies in a systematic way.

As IRCC becomes an increasingly data-driven organization enabled by a modern digital platform, it will be better able to identify and analyze how different client groups experience its programs and policies. Although new data-driven technologies have the potential to reinforce existing biases, data can also help to identify and monitor progress in addressing bias, as noted above. Given the potential risks related to bias, fairness and discrimination with the use of data-driven tools, IRCC is engaging in Gender-Based Analysis Plus to assess the differential impacts of these new tools and will remain proactive in monitoring and evaluating them for inequities. The Department follows industry best practices, such as working with the originators of data to understand its intricacies and seeking peer reviews by outside experts. Risk mitigation measures are designed to meet or exceed the Treasury Board Secretariat Directive on Automated Decision-Making. IRCC is also one of the first federal departments to establish detailed internal guidance on the responsible use of artificial intelligence, advanced analytics and automation.

Supporting Positive Outcomes for Foreign Nationals

(Responds to Recommendations 3, 7, 11, 25-27, 30)

The Government recognizes that strong settlement services provide newcomers with a solid foothold to contribute to Canada's economy and society in the years to come. All permanent residents, refugees and protected persons are eligible for federally-funded settlement services

up to the acquisition of citizenship. While there are exceptions related to regional economic initiatives and the newly-introduced Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) public policy, temporary residents are not eligible for federally-funded settlement services, nor to the Interim Federal Health benefits. During the pandemic, IRCC has worked with its network of settlement service providers to ensure that newcomers are able to access vital settlement services either virtually (online, by email, over the phone) or in person, when allowed by public health measures. The Department shares the Committee's view that the settlement needs of temporary residents on study and work permits should be better understood, and is working in collaboration with provincial and territorial partners to collect data on provincially and territorially funded services for diverse groups of temporary residents, and to assess their different needs and service gaps.

IRCC has been working closely with over 500 settlement and resettlement service providers, the private sponsorship community, as well as with provincial/territorial counterparts and other federal departments, to ensure that refugees and all newcomers are well-supported and that services are adapted to meet their needs in the COVID-19 context. Early in the pandemic, IRCC took steps to lessen administrative pressures on service providers to ensure they are able to serve clients, including those with limited access to technology, in the online environment.

IRCC is exploring ways to better support service provider organizations in the online delivery of services, including through the creation of a special committee on technology in the settlement sector under the National Settlement and Integration Council. In-depth consultations were held with service providers and other stakeholders and recommendations were put forward to the Department in May 2021 on the benefits and challenges of online service delivery. In response to these recommendations, and to build capacity in the settlement sector to help agencies continue serving newcomers online, a digital tool library is being developed. In addition, as part of the Service Delivery Improvement Fund, 78 new projects will support newcomers and the settlement sector in recovering from the pandemic, for example by testing the use of technology to more readily deliver settlement services.

The report is also concerned about the process for international students to obtain co-op work permits. IRCC recognizes that international students are important for the country's prosperity and bring innumerable benefits to campuses and communities across the country. As such, the Department has sought to attract international students through various outreach programs and policies, in cooperation with other government departments. For Canada, a successful International Student Program must balance facilitative measures with program integrity to ensure that Canada remains a top study destination of choice and that international students benefit from a positive and quality academic experience while in Canada. IRCC continuously assesses the appropriate balance between reducing administrative requirements and mitigating program integrity risks.

The Department understands that international students expect to receive consistent and timely information. When requiring additional clarification, or reassurance, international students can reach out to the Department through the online client support web form or contacting the Client Support Centre by telephone (if in Canada). During the rapidly evolving pandemic, it has been a challenge for IRCC and other governments to provide timely and up-to-date information to clients, partners and stakeholders. IRCC will continue to work with the CBSA, the Public Health Agency of Canada, GAC, and provinces and territories to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on international students returning to in-person studies. To ensure better alignment of support and services offered to students, the Department is working to establish a "community of practice" comprising subject matter experts who will identify best practices for improved communication and services for students. As part of its work, the community of practice will undertake user research (including direct engagement with students) to identify gaps in current support service delivery and explore whether a specialized support channel is feasible and/or needed. The community of practice is expected to be established by the fall of 2022. It will be integral to ensure that GBA Plus is considered at key phases in the research in order to better capture the multilayered identities of international students that shape their current experiences and lived realities.

The Committee drew particular attention to efforts to facilitate the applications of African international students and access to VACs in Francophone Africa. As part of the Department's

accountability to Canadians and its clients, IRCC monitors and evaluates all of its programs, including the acceptance rates of international students. Continued application of a GBA Plus lens will offer a stronger understanding of possible inequalities that vary across racial and ethnic groups, and a means to examine acceptance rates for international students whose applications are processed in Africa. It will also enable IRCC to address considerations of identity that may negatively impact application success rates of students from this region and access to VACs in Francophone Africa. Moreover, IRCC is reviewing ways to address concerns regarding approval rates for international students destined to Quebec. IRCC is also examining immigration program outcomes to identify possible institutional mechanisms that may contribute to inequitable outcomes for clients and to further mitigate against bias and racism entering into final decisions. The Department continues to make efforts to attract eligible students in Africa and increase their acceptance rates, by engaging in outreach to partners as well as at public events. IRCC offices located in Africa participate in events such as EduCanada and EduQuebec and regularly host webinars to explain the study permit application process and requirements. In 2019, the Department expanded the existing Student Direct Stream (SDS) into Pakistan, Senegal and Morocco. This stream enables student applicants to demonstrate funds and their proficiency in Canada's official languages in a reliable way, leading to faster processing of their applications. A "Nigeria Express" initiative was also launched for residents of Nigeria. The Department further expanded SDS availability in the Americas in 2021 and will continue to review other countries for inclusion. IRCC also recognizes the value of having a solid network of offices in Africa to conduct engagement activities such as promotion and migration diplomacy, process applications and build business and risk intelligence. The Department has increased the number of diplomats being assigned to offices in Africa by 11 Canada-based Staff since 2018. An additional 31 Locally-Engaged Staff positions have been created in that same timeframe.

The Government is unable to endorse the recommendation that IRCC encourage and fund VACs in Francophone Africa to increase staffing to accelerate the processing of student biometrics and permits, as there is currently no backlog for biometric appointments for study permit processing in Africa. However, IRCC understands that while Canada has one of the most extensive VAC networks in the world, with 162 VACs in 109 countries, there may still be many individuals that lack easy access to them. And, although 94% of applicants can access a VAC in their country of residence, those with challenges accessing VACs in the first place may never even try to become applicants. VACs, which are paid by the Government of Canada for biometric collection, are run by private companies and are governed by a formal contract with the Government of Canada. Prior to the pandemic, the VACs in Francophone Africa were required to meet the global established service standards as per the contract. As VACs re-open, health and safety measures may impact the VAC's ability to meet service standards. However, IRCC closely monitors client behaviour, inventory and VAC capacities to ensure resumption of good quality and prompt client service levels.

The Committee notes the important role that "bridging open work permits" could play for permanent resident applicants in Quebec. Bridging open work permits helps in-Canada applicants who are in certain economic classes to bridge the gap between the expiry of their current work permit and the final decision on their application for permanent residence. The Department has broadened access to bridging open work permits for Quebec skilled worker applicants who are in Quebec and those whose permanent residence application is in process.

Family Reunification

(Responds to Recommendations 8, 16-17, 20-22, 28)

Since Canada's COVID-19 border restrictions came into force in March 2020, the Government has prioritized reuniting family members with their loved ones while protecting the health and safety of those who live in Canada. In June 2020, immediate family members (e.g., spouse, parents or step-parents, dependent children, etc.) of Canadian citizens and permanent residents became exempt from the prohibition on entry to Canada, regardless of whether the purpose of their trip was discretionary, if they were entering to be with an immediate family member for 15 days or more. On October 7, 2020, this exemption was added for the extended family members (i.e., those in a long-term, exclusive dating relationship, non-dependent children, grandchildren, siblings and grandparents) of Canadian citizens and permanent

residents, provided they satisfied the documentary requirements of the exemptions. On October 30, 2020, these provisions were updated to clarify that immediate and extended family members of persons registered as Indians under the *Indian Act* are also exempted from travel restrictions to Canada. As of January 15, 2022, immediate and extended family members travelling to reunite with their families must be fully vaccinated with a Health Canada approved vaccine to enter Canada. Unvaccinated children under 18 years of age continue to retain their exemption.

A number of the Committee's recommendations concern family reunification outside of the pandemic context, including the reunification of vulnerable family members, such as protected persons and adopted children with urgent medical illnesses. Canada has a strong family reunification program that enables the sponsorship of spouses, common-law partners, conjugal partners, dependent children (including adopted children), parents, grandparents, and orphaned relatives under the age of 18. Together, sponsored family accounts for approximately 27% of annual permanent resident admissions. As announced in its 2022-2024 immigration levels plan, Canada is targeting admissions of 105,000 sponsored family members in 2022. This represents an increase over pre-pandemic family class admissions: in 2019, a total of 91,310 sponsored family members were permanently reunited in Canada.

IRCC continues to process applications of members of the family class, including spouses, partners, dependent children, parents and grandparents who are sponsored by Canadian citizens and permanent residents, as well as those of spouses, partners and children of individuals with protected person status. On June 18, 2021, the Government announced that it would increase the number of protected persons and their family members granted permanent residence this year, from 23,500 to 45,000.

Two of the Committee's recommendations concern new visa parameters for spousal sponsorship to better facilitate entry, one of which the Government supports, and the other it is unable to endorse. The Government supports the intent of the recommendation to develop a temporary resident visa for sponsored spouses, partners and children, in support of faster family reunification. As directed in the December 2021 mandate letter to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, IRCC is developing plans to implement a program to issue temporary residence status for sponsored spouses, partners and children during the processing of their application for permanent residence. The Government is unable to endorse the Committee's recommendation to remove the application of paragraph 179(b) of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations*, which requires a person to show they will leave at the end of their period of authorized stay, as this is a fundamental requirement of temporary residence. To further help facilitate reunification with family abroad, Canada continues to offer opportunities for temporary resident status, including the ability of parents and grandparents of Canadian citizens and permanent residents to apply for the Parents and Grandparents Super Visa, which is valid for up to 10 years and allows extended stays of up to two years at a time. The Department also continues to focus significant efforts on processing permanent residence applications from spouses and common law partners who are overseas, so that approved applicants can come to Canada with permanent residence status, their ultimate objective to be reunited permanently with their family in Canada.

The Committee notes challenges some clients have faced with respect to the application intake processes used for the Parents and Grandparents Program. While the Government is unable to endorse the related recommendation to create a weighted parent and grandparent sponsorship selection process based on past sponsorship, the Department continues to explore different approaches to improve the Parents and Grandparents Program intake selection process. To address accessibility and fairness concerns, IRCC engaged with disability stakeholder organizations and introduced improvements to the intake system in 2020. For the 2020 intake process, the randomized selection model was re-introduced to ensure fairness and transparency by ensuring that all interested sponsors have an equal opportunity to submit their interest to sponsor and receive an invitation to apply. The Department continues to review the intake selection process and explore other opportunities to enhance the program.

The Committee's report emphasises the importance of timely processing for adopted and to-be-adopted children. Throughout the pandemic, IRCC has strived to ensure that the processing of adoption applications has continued to be prioritized and expedited while managing the

impact COVID has had on critical international and domestic partners. The Department processes citizenship and permanent residence applications for adopted and to-be-adopted children on a priority basis and supports the need to identify cases of adopted children with urgent medical needs and to prioritize their processing, without unnecessary delays. The Department has made a coordinated effort to ensure that officers with expertise in adoption cases are processing these cases. Canada takes the rights of children seriously and is a party to international conventions that protect children's rights, such as the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. All rules or guidelines regarding adoption cases must be in adherence with current intercountry adoption protocols.

The Government is unable to endorse the recommendation relating to the automatic issuing of authorization letters. Authorization letters are no longer issued as there are no longer exemptions under the OIC that require these authorization letters. The Government of Canada has worked steadily to balance the goal of enabling overseas family members to enter Canada during the pandemic with the need to protect the health and safety of Canadians and foreign nationals already here. For example, the Department has offered priority processing of temporary resident visas and electronic travel authorizations for those clients who self-identified as meeting a family member exemption. IRCC has also offered pre-adjudication for family members who, under the exceptional temporary measures implemented in response to COVID-19, required written authorization to be exempt from the travel restrictions and to be eligible to travel to Canada.

Supporting Hong Kong Residents

(Responds to Recommendations 35-38)

The Committee makes a number of recommendations concerning temporary and permanent economic pathways and an asylum pathway to support Hong Kong residents in Canada and abroad. Canada strongly supports continued adherence to the One Country, Two Systems framework and remains concerned about the ongoing implementation of the National Security Law and the deteriorating rights environment in Hong Kong. In addition to an extensive array of existing pathways that Hong Kong residents can use to come to Canada, either temporarily or permanently, including the family reunification program, the Government introduced a suite of special immigration measures in November 2020.

A new temporary residence initiative was specifically announced on November 12, 2020, which facilitates access to open work permits of up to three years to those who have completed a degree or diploma (for a program that is at least two years in length) from a designated Canadian post-secondary institution in the last five years, or the equivalent credential from a learning institution abroad. Since the launch of the initiative in February 2021, and as of January 31, 2022, the Department has received over 11,000 open work permit applications under this measure.

In June 2021, the Department also launched two new pathways to permanent residence for Hong Kong residents in Canada who are workers or recent graduates. The first is for former Hong Kong residents who have gained a minimum of one year of authorized work experience in Canada and meet other criteria such as minimum language and education levels. The second pathway allows those who have graduated from a post-secondary institution in Canada to apply directly for permanent residence. Additionally, the public policy on open work permits for Hong Kong Residents was amended at the same time to include post-graduate educational credential holders.

The Government of Canada will continue to support the people of Hong Kong and stand up for rights and fundamental freedoms. Canada will also continue to offer safe haven to Hong Kong residents fleeing persecution, including through our existing resettlement program for those who are outside of Hong Kong. The IRB has identified claims from Hong Kong for triage as part of its Task Force on Less Complex Claims. This means that the IRB is examining these claims, based on country conditions, to see if they can be resolved without a hearing or through a shorter hearing, if there are only one or two key determinative issues to be resolved. No claim is denied without a hearing. If there are more complicated questions of credibility or identity, then it will not be addressed as a less complex claim. IRCC has also introduced a new refugee

stream dedicated to human rights defenders under the Refugee Resettlement Program. This new stream sets aside 250 refugee resettlement spaces annually for human rights defenders at risk, over and above previous levels. Human rights defender refugees from Hong Kong may be eligible for resettlement to Canada under this new stream. IRCC is working with leading international human rights defender protection organizations as well as the United Nations Refugee Agency to identify the human rights defenders most in need of resettlement to Canada.

In addition, due to the conditions in Hong Kong, Canada previously implemented an exemption to the 12-month bar on a pre-removal risk assessment (PRRA) for Hong Kong residents (which is no longer in effect). In most cases, foreign nationals have to wait 12 months before they are eligible for a PRRA after they receive a negative decision on their asylum claim or a negative decision on an application for leave and judicial review from the Federal Court, if applicable. The exemption to this rule for Hong Kong residents meant that some individuals who were previously ineligible for a PRRA would be eligible.