



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

HUMA • NUMBER 060 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, June 6, 2017

—
Chair

Mr. Bryan May

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

Tuesday, June 6, 2017

• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Can we come to order, please?

Good morning, everybody. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, May 4, 2017, the committee is commencing its study on advancing inclusion and quality of life for Canadian seniors.

Before we get going, I'd like to welcome member of Parliament Rachel Blaney to our committee, who will be joining us for at least this study.

Welcome aboard.

Karen, are you a stand-in or are you...?

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): I'm standing in for a few meetings.

The Chair: Fantastic. That's excellent.

We're going to get right to the witnesses.

First, and I would think that what's most important with regard to this study is the reason we are here: the member of Parliament Marc Serré.

The next 10 minutes is all yours, sir. Welcome aboard.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to all members of the human resources committee. Thank you so much for all the work you do.

Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts with the committee today. I'd like to begin by sharing some wisdom that was related to me by Senator Sharon Carstairs: there are as many ways to age as there are Canadians who are aging. Seniors are defined by how they live, not by their age.

Canadians have recently heard alarming statistics with regard to our aging demographics. This motion sets the stage for all levels of government to work towards servicing our seniors population across Canada. The time for action is today, and planning for the future is where motion number 106 comes in.

I want to thank the House of Commons for approving this motion on May 17. It sets the wheels in motion to formalize and develop a national seniors strategy.

[Translation]

As you perhaps know, my motion M-106 opens the door to dialogue with the National Seniors Council. A study will provide the recently reformed council with information on the best way to develop and implement a national seniors strategy that will bring about positive change in quality of life and well-being for seniors and those caring for them.

[English]

I would be remiss if I didn't thank the all-party seniors caucus—MPs Deb Schulte, Mark Warawa, and the NDP's Alistair MacGregor—for their work relating to seniors. This is work that goes across party lines to discuss ways to improve the quality of life for seniors.

Here's why I decided to focus my private member's business on developing a national seniors strategy.

[Translation]

My motion was inspired by two factors: first, my family and then, the seniors living in poverty on nothing but a fixed income.

I have heard about this all over my constituency of Nickel Belt, and in other places in Canada. My father became an MP in the House of Commons in 1968. He is the oldest in a family of 16 children. My mother is the oldest in a family of 15 children. We are a large, French-Catholic family from northern Ontario, with 60 aunts and uncles and more than 100 cousins.

Sometimes, family members take care of one, two or three people who are related to them. I am concerned about them. Of course, we should be there for our families. However, I know that not all Canadians have large families like mine. That is why we are studying ways to take care of our seniors as families get older.

[English]

What's more, we are now seeing a rise in the number of seniors caring for seniors. This includes seniors who are caring for their senior spouses, friends, and even parents who are aging in this stage of life. Often, these seniors are on fixed incomes and/or have certain mental or physical challenges of their own, making it difficult to care for their loved ones and even themselves.

It's been an honour to discuss this across my riding and with many MPs, and to talk with staff and seniors at assisted living centres, such as the Au Château home for the aged in Sturgeon Falls, St. Gabriel's Villa in Chelmsford, the Saint Elizabeth centre in Valley East, and St. Joseph's Health Centre and Finlandia in the City of Greater Sudbury, and throughout the riding of Nickel Belt.

[Translation]

I have met with people from a number of community organizations, like the golden age clubs in River Valley, Field, St. Charles, Verner, Sturgeon Falls, Lavigne and Azilda.

[English]

There are also the golden age clubs, like Warren, Mulville, Capreol, Chemesford, and Onaping-Levack.

Furthermore, as the northern Ontario caucus chair and vice-chair of the rural caucus and a member of the Algonquins of Ontario first nations community, I continue to learn and understand the needs and challenges faced by seniors living in rural areas and of indigenous communities across Canada.

What I have heard are stories of the resourcefulness of seniors, who want to remain independent and live in their homes for as long as possible, but are unable to afford the cost of making their homes accessible and friendlier to their needs.

I've heard stories of caregivers who work tirelessly to support their loved ones, but at a cost to their income and sometimes their mental and physical well-being. I've also heard stories of seniors who want to be happy, healthier, and active in their community, but are having a hard time making ends meet.

Above all, I hear stories of people who love their families and who want to ensure that they live long, happy, and healthy lives. That motivates me to focus my private members' business on developing a national seniors strategy.

I completely agree that one of the most important topics this committee can study, with regard to improving the quality of life of seniors, is more affordable and accessible housing.

• (1110)

[Translation]

According to the Canadian Medical Association, caring for the elderly in their homes and in their communities is one of the most cost-efficient ways in which Canada's healthcare system can meet the needs of the seniors who are not suffering from complete dementia or are not gravely ill.

[English]

I would like to acknowledge the presence today of the president of the Canadian Medical Association, Dr. Granger Avery, who has been actively campaigning for this cause among MPs in the House of Commons and Canadians for the past three to four years. I would encourage all committee members and Canadians to visit demanda-plan.ca

[Translation]

ou, en français, exigeonsunplan.ca.

[English]

This plan has already signed up 50,000 Canadians.

Thank you, Dr. Avery, for all the work the association is doing and your work on behalf of seniors across Canada.

The need to encourage treatment of seniors in their homes and to enable seniors to live in their communities as long as possible is something that nine out of 10 seniors have said is critically important to them.

According to a CMA study, most home care in Canada is provided informally by unpaid family, friends, and neighbours. In fact, the Conference Board of Canada report in 2007 estimated that unpaid caregivers provide ten times more hours of home care than paid workers. Put another way, in 2007 roughly 3.1 million people delivered unpaid care to seniors in Canada, which is over 1.5 billion hours.

A Senate report called "Canada's Aging Population: Seizing the Opportunity" by retired Senators Carstairs and Keon in 2009 noted that family and friends provide about 80% of all home care to seniors living in the community and up to 30% of services to seniors living in institutions.

[Translation]

In my opinion, federal and provincial governments need to participate collectively in a study to assess the current system of financial support. That could help seniors to receive a basic income that would allow them a respectable and dignified retirement, as well as to reduce poverty among the elderly.

[English]

A significant element of the seniors strategy should also identify and provide support for improving seniors' social determinants of health. These include income, social status, social support networks, education, employment, continued working conditions, the social environment, and physical environment, and should provide for personal health practices, and coping skills, while also looking at gender and culture.

[Translation]

It should also consider the way in which the federal government can support the expansion and improvement of leisure, social and support programs for the elderly, particularly for Canadians living with Alzheimer's disease or dementia. There are fewer programs of this kind for people with those conditions, and they generally cost much more than others.

[English]

In fact, as a permanent member of the status of women committee, I heard Tamara Daley, a professor CIHR research chair at York University, tell the committee last Tuesday that these programs cost up to \$30 to \$40 a day, a cost that many seniors can't afford, unfortunately.

A great example of a centre that offers such good programming in Ottawa, which is here today, is the Good Companions Seniors' Centre.

Thank you, Monique, and the board for being here today to support this motion.

This day program offers seniors minimal assistance for \$18 a day. It's those types of programs that we have to look at for best practices all across Canada. I'm glad to see they are here today, as well as seniors from these centres.

I would also like to thank Carolyn Pullen from the Nurses Association for being present and also helping with this motion.

[Translation]

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to the committee for undertaking this study in order to discover how the government can both support seniors today and prepare them for tomorrow.

• (1115)

[English]

I'm looking forward to your questions.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, *meegwetch*.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, MP Serré.

First, we have Mark Warawa up for questions. Go ahead.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Marc Serré, thank you, and congratulations on motion bill that is before us here today.

The issue of an aging population is a very serious one for Canada to grapple with, and it's not just Canada. All the western nations have an aging population. It was recently announced that there are more seniors in Canada now than young people. Right now, one in six Canadians is a senior. In five and half years approximately, it will be one in five. In 12 years it will be one in four. This is a major shift in the population of Canada.

We need to get ready for that because 50% of provincial and territorial medical costs are already incurred for seniors. If that percentage changes, it means that we're very likely to have increased costs of medicine in Canada. On the other end of the equation, I believe that four and half Canadians are working to support seniors in Canada, and that will be changing to two and a half, so fewer people will be working to support seniors, but the needs will be greater.

We need to be smarter and prepare for this tidal wave, as some describe it, of grey. Canadians are living longer and are healthier, but Canadian seniors still have unique needs.

Marc, I want to thank you for raising this issue. It's one that's been raised at this committee for the last year and a half, and it's unfortunate that we didn't begin this study earlier. With hindsight we should have, but finally we're dealing with this.

I also want to thank Dr. Avery and the Canadian Medical Association for the incredible work they've done. I've been honoured to sit on a panel with Dr. Avery in my riding of Langley, at the

Langley Senior Resources Society. The CMA did an incredible presentation there and met with Canadian seniors and answered questions. Also, Dr. Avery spoke to the parliamentary seniors caucus and provided great input and advice.

What I've heard, Marc, from professionals in senior health care is that it will not be possible in those 12 short years to prepare and build enough housing to house this growing population, and it's not what Canadian seniors want. They would like to age in place. Therefore, it is critically important to train health care professionals in home care, geriatrics, and palliative care if we are to be able to take care of our aging population. It's achievable and affordable. As you pointed out, it's much more affordable to have somebody age in place—but we need the staff to do that.

Taking care of a newborn baby is very heartwarming and satisfying, so it's very popular to train in pediatrics, but not so much in geriatrics. It's important even just to talk to seniors, and thus for us to ask how we can get people to volunteer to visit rest homes, to show our aging population dignity and kindness, for somebody to show them their value and visit them when they're lonely. People who have retired and have the time now to be able to do this and who will also be living in places like these pretty soon say they don't want to go near these places any sooner than they have to. They don't want to visit.

It's a dilemma. How do we engage Canadians to show love, dignity, kindness, and caring to our aging population? Also, as you pointed out, 85% of the support for seniors comes from friends and families, and in many cases at great personal cost physically and financially. How do we support them?

• (1120)

That said, I do acknowledge your great work. Thank you.

But first, I do hope the government will some time soon to appoint a minister for seniors, because I think its slowness in acting is because it doesn't have an advocate for seniors. There's a minister for youth, yet there are more seniors than youth. There's a minister for youth but not a minister for seniors. I hope you'll bring that message to the Prime Minister, that we need a minister for seniors, and we need to get a plan, a strategy, which we're going to deal with here.

Are you also advocating for appropriate funding in such a plan, because a plan without an engine, without an allocation of funds, training, and work with the provinces and universities... Will you encourage the government to make sure there's appropriate funding in the next budget allocations to be able to make the plan work?

The Chair: He has left you literally five seconds.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I'll give you 30 seconds. Go.

Mr. Marc Serré: Five seconds. I'll use 10.

This is part of the work of the committee here and of the seniors' caucuses and members of Parliament who are currently working closely on this issue. Obviously, we have Minister Duclos, Minister Philpott, and Minister Qualtrough looking at the issue of accessibility, and even Minister Hajdu. We have several ministers right now looking at ways to improve the quality of life for seniors across Canada. So yes, I will continue advocating closely, working with you, all the members of Parliament here in the committee, and the caucuses, to ensure that we're moving forward. We've already made some investments in our first two budgets, but moving forward, how we can better the quality of life for seniors?

The Chair: Thank you, and over to Mr. Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to MP Serré, first off, for your presentation and for taking the time and having the commitment to bring motion 106 forward. I think it's something that's very necessary for the country, and the fact that we're going to spend some time now studying this and talking about seniors and their issues is of utmost importance, I think.

To echo my colleague, the numbers are staggering, and I certainly learned that during the campaign of 2015, going door to door. My riding is Saint John—Rothesay in Atlantic Canada, and certainly has the highest percentage of seniors in Canada at 20%. Compare that number with Alberta, which has 12%. So Atlantic Canada is aging, and we know that nationally it's the first time that we have ever had more seniors—I think it's 5.9 million seniors versus 5.8 million people under 14 years of age—so the numbers are staggering and this obviously presents a challenge for governments. As people get older, they need more health care and home care, more government care. I think you'll obviously see the demands on government continuing to grow as time passes.

We certainly have a challenge in front of us, but I think my first question to you, MP Serré, will be about our going door to door and talking to seniors and learning about seniors' issues. There are certainly more single seniors, more single female seniors across this country, but I want to ask you to expand on the need for day programming for seniors. How do you feel the federal government can support this better? What's the best approach?

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you for your question, and thank you to all the MPs here for the work you're doing in your ridings also.

When we talk about day programs, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, we have the Good Companions of Ottawa here. I know that all of you have had the opportunity to witness some of the seniors' programming in your ridings. Expanding the day programs is so important. Moreover, when we look at the aging population, there's the issue of Alzheimer's disease and dementia, and we also need to look at how to get our aging population active and participating in the community. Also, we have challenges in some rural areas with transportation. I've heard that in rural Canada versus urban settings.

• (1125)

Mr. Wayne Long: How do you feel the federal government can support this?

Mr. Marc Serré: Basically, one of the things is that we have to be working with the provinces. It's crucial. When you look at the cost of a hospital bed for a day, it's \$842; a long-term care bed is \$126; and a

day program is \$4 or less. So how do we look at investments? We've invested already in the home care program for the provinces. Part of the home care program has components that try to encourage more day activities.

I've heard from many organizations and seniors how important it is to be active, and when I reference the senator's report of 2009, one of the critical elements of getting seniors involved also helps in many other areas.

From a federal perspective, motion 106 sets the wheels in motion for a dialogue and to get the provinces involved, looking at best practices and how that leads local organizations and municipalities to follow through. This is the first time in the history of the House of Commons that a national seniors strategy has been approved by it. It gets the ball in rolling for that.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you for your comments. They're great, and I appreciate it.

Can you drill down and speak specifically on how important you think seniors' day programming is for seniors and people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease?

Mr. Marc Serré: It's one of the number one issues. When we look at income security, income security is number one, but when we look at programming, activities in our communities to engage seniors are crucially important.

One of the components of your study here that I'm looking forward to seeing will be the social determinants of health from a seniors' perspective, and I invite the committee to ensure that you invite witnesses to look at ways to improve day programs, as well as best practices to share across the country.

Mr. Wayne Long: That's great. Thank you for that answer.

I want to switch gears. You led me to it, actually, with your comment on seniors' income security. I was very proud to be part of a government that made changes to the GIS for single seniors living in poverty, with an increase of 10%.

Can you elaborate how the federal government can be a better partner in helping seniors with income security across the country?

The Chair: Please keep your response brief.

Mr. Marc Serré: Obviously, as indicated, the 10% increase in the GIS is the first increase in 30 years. More is needed. We have a large percentage of seniors living in poverty. The GIS helped over 900,000 Canadians, mostly women. In regard to income security, we need to find ways from a federal perspective, and also provincially, to ensure that we have more disposable income for seniors such that we have seniors living with dignity in retirement.

So how do we find ways to provide more income for seniors who are living in poverty? They then have the choice to look at day programs. They could choose the areas in which they want to participate. Right now, because of the low levels of income for seniors, they're limited with the choices they have, to participate in, for example, the day program that you mentioned.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Blaney, you have six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you. I'm very happy to be here having this conversation after many years of advocacy by the NDP to have a national seniors strategy. We're at a breaking point. We really need to face that reality, that this is something that is much too late. However, I'm still glad to be here.

Of course, I want to express my appreciation to Dr. Avery from the CMA. I'm very proud that he comes from a community in my riding and understands the diversity of seniors across this country, and what it means to be in a smaller community and what it means to be in a larger community.

Your predecessor, the NDP MP for Nickel Belt, Claude Gravelle, worked for years to create a bill on a national dementia strategy. His bill was specific. There were requirements, actions to be undertaken by the Minister of Health to initiate a strategy. Unfortunately, his bill was defeated by a single vote in 2015 because a Liberal MP forgot to stand up.

The motion we have in front of us does not offer that level of required action. Don't get me wrong; I'm really glad that we're here and that we're advocating for long-term NDP policies, but what's really missing for me in this motion is action. We will be spending countless hours creating recommendations for a parliamentary report that might one day help shape a national aging strategy. I think your motion says, "provide advice on implementing a National Seniors' Strategy", but what assurance do you have that one day we really will have a strategy that's effective and moving forward for seniors in Canada?

• (1130)

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you for your comments.

On the dementia bill, 167 other MPs voted against it, too. I just want to clarify the record in that regard.

Essentially, the action we're taking today—we've added dollars for affordable housing, we're developing a national 10-year program—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, so the reality is that you don't have one. There are more studies—

Mr. Marc Serré: —and we're setting it in place.

We do have this, and we'll be looking at... This will be setting the stage. What we're looking at here for the first time is that there has been now an expression—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: But there have been a lot of studies. One of them is from the Senate from 2009—

Mr. Marc Serré: Yes, it's a very important one.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: They had a great report with 32 specific recommendations that have gone practically unanswered. Which one of these recommendations do you think this committee should prioritize? Which one is a priority for you?

You were just talking about affordability. That's a recommendation, number 8, on supportive housing. The CMA has done a great job of talking about really seeing an investment in infrastructure for seniors. That's something that we desperately need across Canada.

The other thing that we talked about earlier was the GIS—that's recommendation 19—

Mr. Marc Serré: That's correct.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: —and we have pharmacare.

What do you think is the most important, and have you read the report?

Mr. Marc Serré: Yes, I have read the report, and I'll correct you. We have taken action already. We've increased the GIS, we've looked at home care and mental health services with the provinces, and we have an accord with all but one province signed already. There have been dollars spent, then, for home care, for mental health—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm glad we've made those steps, but this is—

Mr. Marc Serré: —that will have an impact for seniors. There's also the GIS—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: —really about asking why...and the steps towards action.

Mr. Marc Serré: That's right.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I really appreciate the motion. I understand that we're doing this important work, which is going to bring advice, but how do we know that it is actually going to translate into meaningful action?

Mr. Marc Serré: That's what I don't understand. We are doing—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: In my riding of North Island—Powell River I held 11 town halls. We've definitely seen some steps, but having a national seniors strategy would really address the issue. Right now, as Stats Can has told us, we have more seniors than we have children between the ages of zero and 14 years. This isn't something that was a surprise. Here we are, much too late, having this conversation. We knew that the senior population was growing, that we needed a national strategy to address those issues in a meaningful way across all levels of government to really be of support to service providers within the communities and across Canada.

I'm wondering why the focus of your motion was really about more research instead of research with a real strong outcome of action.

Mr. Marc Serré: The motion itself also acknowledges a lot of the actions that we've already taken: the GIS; home care, as I said; mental health; also, reducing the old-age requirement from 67 to 65. We've already taken some measures. I agree that there are more to be taken, but we have to acknowledge what we've done in the last year and a half.

Also, I would encourage you to look at participation by you and the entire committee in moving forward on other elements. Yes, it's pressing, but we have to look at what we've acknowledged, what we've done to date, and then we have to look at moving forward.

Developing a national seniors strategy... You could have a national housing strategy, you could have a national home care strategy, you could have a national pharmacare strategy, a dementia strategy. Each of these could have its own internal national strategy, but let's take a step forward. I'm proud that the federal cabinet has agreed for the first time to sit at the table, work with organizations, work with the provinces, work with members of Parliament to develop a national seniors strategy.

I would encourage you, then, to continue your feedback, to continue your advocacy, as you've been doing, so that we could look at specific ways to improve the quality of life of seniors all across Canada.

The Chair: There are about 30 seconds.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: My response to that is that I'm glad that some of these actions are being taken, and I'm wholeheartedly happy to be here having this really important conversation, which, as I said earlier, is long overdue. What I'm also reminding you, however, is that much of the work has already been done. We are now asking seniors to wait.

My question for you is, how long do you think it's acceptable for seniors across Canada to wait for real solutions that will make a difference to their lives?

• (1135)

Mr. Marc Serré: There are 900,000 seniors who are very happy with the increase in the GIS. That's one. Many seniors are happy with the reduction in the age of eligibility 67 to 65. Many seniors are now looking at the affordable housing component. Many seniors are looking at the home care and mental health services. We have, then, had some successes. Right now we have to build upon them.

I disagree, then, with your saying we haven't taken any action. We have taken some action. We need to do more, and this is part of the process.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Now we go over to MP Robillard, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): Good morning, Mr. Serré. Welcome to the committee.

My congratulations on your motion and thank you for your efforts to help our seniors.

I have two questions.

I am sure that, in your preliminary consultations, the theme of the isolation of seniors often came up. I would still like your opinion on the technological isolation of our seniors and the place the issue has in a national strategy designed for them.

Do you think it would be important for that strategy to consider the fact that many of our seniors are more isolated because they do not have the tools to use modern technology to its full potential?

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you for your question and for your work.

That is a very good question. We have also heard that technology allows some people to abuse the elderly. Some organizations take advantage of the fact that seniors lack some knowledge.

This is an important factor. We have to find ways to educate our seniors and to make sure that they are going to take part in their daily activities, as was mentioned earlier, but also to make use of technology. Those daily activities must include—as most do already—access to computers, to Facebook, to email. The more information we can provide to our seniors, the more able they will be to recognize certain elements of technology, to fend off potential abuse and to prevent groups from taking advantage of them. These are often even family members.

Using the technology available today and all the everyday programs, we really have to look for ways to make sure that seniors in their homes or in community centres are informed about the latest technological trends. It is very difficult.

I am 50 years old and I still have difficulty mastering all the technology that is being offered to us all the time. It certainly enters into the equation.

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

However, I also believe that they are ready to learn. Let's encourage their families to get them the equipment they need.

Mr. Marc Serré: Yes.

Mr. Yves Robillard: I will use the time I have left to follow up on my initial question.

Budget 2017 announced an investment of \$29.5 million over five years for a new digital literacy exchange program for not-for-profit organizations that implement initiatives that teach basic digital skills, including to seniors.

I use the example of training offered in Laval, and elsewhere in the country, where our seniors are learning to use iPads so that they can communicate with their grandchildren.

Do you think that a national seniors strategy should encourage projects like that?

Mr. Marc Serré: Yes, definitely. As you say, it is important to learn to use iPads and social media. A number of seniors are currently on social media but they do not recognize things that can lead to fraud. We should include that in the program. That is an aspect that I would encourage the committee to focus on also, because it is about education in the broad sense.

It has been mentioned on several occasions. A former NDP member, Lynn McDonald, did a study on it in 2015. It is something that we should focus on and it is important, because a number of elderly people, like my grandparents and my aunts and uncles, have Internet access and are on Facebook. We have to look at how we can address it in terms of specific programs for our seniors.

• (1140)

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Sangha, do you have any thoughts or questions? You have about a minute, sir.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha (Brampton Centre, Lib.): I have a short question.

First, congratulations to you for initiating motion 106.

Being a senior, I've come across other seniors in Brampton. I visit their facilities. I find that they have health issues. They are not able to reach their doctors properly because of federal-provincial legislation and other problems. Seniors think they are not being provided the help they require with regard to their medication.

What do you suggest to the committee here today? What steps should be taken to facilitate their access to medication, and so that doctors, chiropractors, and others visit them more often?

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Mr. Marc Serré: I don't have any specific recommendation on medication for seniors. Unfortunately, I can't provide any specific recommendations other than to say that now that we've established the need for a national seniors strategy, let's get the dialogue going, because it is a very important issue. It also falls a bit into what we talked about on the education side. We're looking at family physicians as being very important when you look overall, but also there are nurse practitioners and how those come into play, as well as the education related to that. So it's very important, but I don't have any specific recommendations for your questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ruimy, go ahead, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): Thank you very much, MP Serré, for being here today and for all of your work on this file.

This is obviously a complex issue. Studies have been done in the past, absolutely. We just finished doing our poverty reduction study, and in that, we heard from a wide variety of vulnerable people, including seniors, about some of the challenges that they face. I like to think that some of the elements in budget 2017 are actually due to the witness testimony that we heard. A great example of that is the housing situation, and we have allocated \$11 billion over 10 years in budget 2017. It is unprecedented to allocate \$11 billion over 10 years to housing. That's for low-income people, for seniors, for shelters. This is unprecedented. So does the suggestion that we're not acting make sense to you, or do you see that we are moving forward on this file?

Mr. Marc Serré: As I indicated earlier, we are taking many actions in our budget 2016-17, and the minister will be speaking to the committee and outlining a lot of what we've done in these first

two budgets. I would encourage the committee to look at the following budgets. As we indicated earlier, there are elements in play that we could look at to support. If we look at the housing strategy, if we look at home care, if we look at mental...there are a lot of good elements in there right now to look at how we can better improve the quality of life for seniors. More can be done, yes, but we need to have that dialogue to make sure that we have our partners, the provinces, community organizations, and municipalities involved in that dialogue.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

Before I got elected, I owned a coffee shop-bookstore, and we had lots of community engagement. We had lots of events, and I saw seniors who were 88 years old coming to the shop and getting involved in the discussions we were having and interacting with young people. They were healthier. They were happier. You could see their quality of life. The flip side of that was that I saw a lot of seniors who, for whatever reasons, wouldn't leave their home. They wouldn't go out and get involved. They would stay home; they would watch TV, if they had cable, and because they weren't engaging with anybody, their health would start to deteriorate, and that's a shame, because the wealth of knowledge that they bring to our country is incredible. So the question I have for you is how do we tap into that and encourage them to get out? What are the pieces that are missing for them to actually get involved in the communities? That's an extremely important aspect of this.

• (1145)

Mr. Marc Serré: I totally agree with your comments and I will answer in two ways. One is that when we look at, as we indicated earlier, day programs, it's very crucial that we look at reinforcing and expanding the day program including technology and other activities and looking at transportation for the rural aspect. The other important elements here, as we talked about, are seniors caring for seniors, and caregivers. I would encourage the committee to really look at how we can support caregivers. How can we support family members caring for seniors? There are a multitude of different recommendations along those lines to support financially and in other ways, through tax credits and those kinds of elements, but we have to find a way to look at how we can recognize the importance of caregivers in the strategy and the lives of seniors across Canada today. Caregivers are supporting many—as I indicated, 80%—today. So how can we recognize them? Also when we look at seniors and the value that retired seniors right now are providing on a volunteer basis to many of the homes, the stories are amazing and the commitment and the work, but as a society we're probably not recognizing the caregivers enough, and those could be spouses.

My mom right now is looking after my dad, who was just diagnosed last year with dementia, and her health is not the greatest, but she's taking care of my father. I'm afraid that her health will deteriorate. So how do we look at balancing that and having day programs, and having a break for some of the live-in caregivers like my mom? It's very important to be doing that. I appreciate that, and we have to find ways to make that happen.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you.

Because you mentioned it, yes, there is an unprecedented \$6 billion for home care. This is something the federal government has not done, so that's another thing we have taken action on, and it's up to the provinces to make it work.

I want to go quickly into how seniors are very vulnerable for plenty of different reasons, and that's what makes it so complicated. One issue that keeps coming up—and we heard this in our poverty reduction study—is senior abuse. Whether it's in the family home or inside institutions, it's a huge problem.

Are there any thoughts on how a seniors strategy could help to fix this?

Mr. Marc Serré: Definitely, it's an issue that has come up. It's not something I've heard about on a regular basis, but it has come up as an issue. As I indicated earlier, Lynn McDonald did a study in 2015, just recently, that looked at a large percentage of this abuse.

The recommendation, as I discussed earlier, is how can we look at enhancing the education component: literacy, computers, trying to see the technology? How can we enhance the education via day programs to look at that engagement? For many seniors, the number one issue is isolation. If they don't have large families, they isolate themselves, and then it's an issue. How do we get more of these activities and programs in place to support that? That's what I would be doing.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Karen Vecchio, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much.

Marc, first, I want to clear the record. You noted something about the GIS and the first time there was an increase in it. I know there have been multiple budgets prior to this budget where there have been increases, as well. So, I just want to clear the record on that.

I want to go back to looking at old age security and where the future is going to be. I fully recognize that our seniors need support now. We need palliative care. We need home care. We need a variety of cares for them, but we also need to look into the future.

Last night when I was speaking in the House of Commons regarding Bill C-44, I was talking about the debt servicing we have to do. Back in 2015-16, more than \$62 billion was spent on servicing our debt. We know with the current government that there's going to be continuous debt loading on here, so we are going to see an increase, of course, in that \$62.8 in 2015-16.

I recognize that there were many concerns about the increase of the age of eligibility for old age security from 65 to age 67. That is one thing that your government campaigned on and had people believe that this was the best thing. From my own experience, people of this generation thought their old age security was going to be taken away from them, although the changes to it wouldn't have started until 2023. They would still have had an impact on older sister, nonetheless, who is just 55 years of age now.

Let's look at the fact that we have to service all of this debt, spending out over \$62.8 billion just in 2015-16. We know that in the future it is speculated that the ratio of seniors to workers is actually going to be two workers for every senior. How are we going to be

able to continue to prioritize and have good services for all Canadians—education, health, etc.—without studying the impact of the old age security and looking at reviewing the age eligibility once again?

Is that something that you would consider in this study, knowing that a 2:1 ratio is expected in the next 12 to 15 years, and knowing the enormous debt we'll have in this country? I'm asking for the 46-year-olds of this country, like myself and Wayne.

I'm giving you a call-out there, Wayne. We know you're not 46.

I'm asking for future generations.

When we're looking at this, we have today's generation, but we also have future generations of seniors. What are you willing to do in this study? Are you willing to look increasing the old age security eligibility, knowing that these ratios are also going to be diminishing?

• (1150)

Mr. Marc Serré: First, I'll let the committee members decide on the angle of the study itself. I think you've already looked at some of the parameters.

As for me, I campaigned on this, and then I met seniors, so I feel very comfortable talking to seniors in my riding about the fact that we reduced it from 67 to 65. That's something I'm proud of: our government made a campaign promise and did it. Are you suggesting that we have to find ways...? I can't remember the exact number, but that reduction eliminated many seniors from living in poverty—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: The problem we had was that there was such a dialogue that was going off on tangents, and what people believed and what was actually happening were two different things. As a constituent assistant for 11 years, I had people coming in and asking when their old age security would be reduced. That was the messaging getting out there.

It was very well done, and bravo to those people who were sending out that negative messaging. However, as I indicated, it was not going to affect anyone until 2023. There was not one single senior at that time who was going to be affected by the changes in the old age security.

That said, I do recognize that for some people it's difficult. If there's 70-year-old man married to a 50-year-old woman and they have to look at the allowance and the GIS, there are different things we need to look at there. But the fact is that not one single senior in the 2015-16 election would have been affected by these proposed changes put forward by the former government in 2012.

With the demographic changes that we are going to see, do you think it's necessary to review old age security so that future generations can also have it? We recognize that the debt ratio is going to be an issue, as well as the work ratio. Do you think that's something that should be studied in this as well?

Mr. Marc Serré: The short answer is no. I think it should remain at 65. It was also part of our government's commitment to work with the provinces on enhancing the CPP.

So the short answer is no. I think it should stay at 65.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Do you think old age security will be sustainable when there will be only two employees working for every senior in 2030?

As a 46-year old person, I have 19 years to address my retirement as well. However, we have to understand that this government is piling on debt and more debt. We're not going to have a lot of money left for our priorities. All we're going to be doing is taxing more and more people. That's why I have this question for you.

• (1155)

Mr. Marc Serré: My comment on that is—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Marc Serré: —that we have to find ways to support our seniors. We have to find ways to support income levels and seniors in retirement.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Future seniors, though.

Mr. Marc Serré: We have to find ways to do it, and we have time to plan for it now, so let's do it.

The Chair: Now over to MP Dhillon, please.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you so much for coming in, MP Serré, and for your motion.

My first question is, how important is it to measure the impact of what we have done before commencing another round of programs, to make sure that the predicted impact is felt by seniors?

Mr. Marc Serré: It is very important.

My motion did talk a bit about what we've done. Today we've talked about our two budgets in 2016-17. It's very important. We'll also have Minister Duclos speak further on some of the successes we've already had. To answer your question, it is important to recognize what we've done.

Now let's look at how we move forward. We talked about the human resources committee doing a study, but also the motion. We haven't talked about reforming the National Seniors Council. Right now there are five vacancies, and I encourage Canadians to apply online to be a member of the National Seniors Council. That council will be making recommendations. It will be taking your recommendations from the committee here, but it will also look at engaging professionals, experts all across Canada. It will also be making recommendations to the minister, to all of cabinet, as I indicated earlier, that have a specific portfolio related to seniors. Engaging the National Seniors Council is very important, and acknowledging what we've done. However, moving forward on new initiatives is also very important.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: On housing, let's be clear, we have more than doubled the base funding last year, from \$2.2 to \$4.8 billion. We are adding \$11.2 billion for the new housing strategy and are also adding \$10.9 billion in new below-mortgage loans and guarantees. When combined with the renewal of operating agreements and health accords, it's a significant program.

How does it need to be profiled and delivered to accommodate an aging population?

Mr. Marc Serré: The Canadian Medical Association has made recommendations along those lines. They have consulted Canadians,

too. As I said earlier, 9 out of 10 senior Canadians say that housing is a number one priority and that they want to remain in their homes. They also want it to be affordable. That's the key here.

As we develop a national housing strategy, I'm encouraging the committee and all members of Parliament to make sure to advocate for a strong component of affordable and accessible housing, which will benefit a large portion of our seniors. We'll have an envelope nationally for a housing strategy, but we have to ensure with our advocacy that a large proportion of that would be directly related to affordability and accessibility for seniors. Currently, we have a lot of seniors housing that is not accessible. I've heard that much of that housing was built 20 or 30 years ago, and I've met quite a few seniors in my riding who are in apartment buildings with stairs and no elevator. They're seniors and they have to move.

It's very unfortunate that the current housing is not accessible to seniors. We have to find ways to adapt that. I would encourage all of us, when we look to our minister and the work that our parliamentary assistant, Adam Vaughan, has done on this file, to ensure that we have a large component that is affordable and accessible. I know from talking to our parliamentary assistant that this is a priority to look at, to make sure that it is accessible and affordable.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: I think I have time for one short question.

For the last 10 years we had debt without growth, so programs for seniors were stalled or cut.

How critical is it to invest in seniors programs, like housing, that not only deliver services but grow the economy and deliver new jobs as a way of making sure growth pays for new services for the economic vitality of Canada?

Mr. Marc Serré: That is a good question.

I know that you work on the status of women committee. We've heard a lot about the infrastructure money that has been spent in the past, such as on roads and bridges, which are important to municipalities, but also infrastructure spending in social programs. When we look at affordable housing for seniors and at the infrastructure for that, it's important that we focus on social infrastructure. Supporting municipalities is crucial and supporting social infrastructure linked to affordable housing for seniors is also very important. I'm glad to say that we're moving in that direction and it's something that we need to continue, making sure that we advocate on behalf of seniors. Seniors deserve a better quality of life. Seniors deserve a respectable income for retirement so they can live in dignity and participate in society. That's the key.

Finally, Mr. Chair, when we look at the seniors today we see that they want to participate, they want to be active, they want to be involved, and they want to contribute back to society. We, as members of Parliament and various organizations, have to find ways to channel that energy and experience and ensure that they support us in our decisions moving forward. As a priority, as a government, we have to balance a lot of different needs, but I strongly believe that we will be a better country if we focus and get our seniors more involved in providing a quality of life for them in retirement.

•(1200)

The Chair: Thank you, Marc.

On that note, we do have to suspend for a moment to allow the minister to come in.

Thank you very much.

Congratulations on your motion getting to this point. We look forward to studying this with you.

We'll suspend for just a few moments, guys.

•(1200)

(Pause)

•(1205)

The Chair: Okay, everyone, we want to have as much time with the minister as possible, so let's come to order, please.

Welcome back.

It's my privilege and honour to welcome the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Jean-Yves Duclos. Thank you so much for being here today, sir.

I understand you're accompanied by Kathryn McDade, senior assistant deputy minister, income security and social development branch with ESDC. Welcome as well, and thank you for being here at the onset of what I expect to be a very fruitful study.

We just heard from the author of M-106, MP Marc Serré, and we're looking forward to hearing your perspective, sir. We're giving you the next 10 minutes to introduce.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Mr. Chair, committee members, thank you for giving me the pleasure and privilege of being with you this morning as you begin your study of how the government can support vulnerable seniors today.

As you pointed out, I am accompanied by Kathryn McDade, the senior assistant deputy minister, who will be pleased to provide any clarifications that are needed.

The study was prompted by the motion put forward by my colleague, Marc Serré, member of Parliament for Nickel Belt. We must commend him for his commitment to seniors and his interest in Canada's aging population.

His motion included a request that the committee study the development of a national seniors strategy and report back to the House. The government is as committed to seniors as I am, which is why we supported the motion inviting the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities to undertake this study.

[*English*]

The protection of seniors in Canada is one of the main reasons I entered politics. Before I ran for office, I spent 23 years as a researcher and professor at Université Laval where Canada's aging population was one of my primary research interests.

As the members of this committee are aware, a few years ago the previous government decided to increase the age of eligibility for old age pensions from 65 to 67. I became worried because it appeared that the government at the time had conducted zero scientific studies on the effects of this change, especially on the most vulnerable seniors. The previous government appeared not to bother to count, and appeared not to bother to care.

I did what any economist would do: I went looking for the facts, and I put together a small research team that studied the likely impacts of that change to the age of eligibility. We found that the change would plunge 100,000 seniors, age 65 and 66, into severe poverty every year. This would have tripled the poverty rate of those seniors from 6% to 17%.

Elderly women would have been the most affected, with their median income dropping by a third. Vulnerable seniors would also have been the most affected by the change. They are the least able to protect themselves by adjusting their work and savings behaviour.

I thus entered politics to be a voice of advocacy for the aging population in Canada, so I am especially pleased with the work done by our colleague from northern Ontario, and with the collaboration of your committee, Mr. Chair, in undertaking a study of the well-being of Canadian seniors.

This topic is of great importance to me as the minister responsible for seniors, to our government, and I am sure for all parliamentarians.

•(1210)

[*Translation*]

The timing of your study aligns well with new data from the 2016 census that was recently released by Statistics Canada. The census shows that, from 2011 to 2016, the number of seniors grew by 20%, the largest increase since Confederation. By comparison, Canada's overall population grew by 5% during the same period.

Based on demographic projections, seniors will represent approximately 23% of the total population in 2031, up from 17% in 2016. These changes present both challenges and opportunities, and I expect that your study will be very helpful in that respect.

[*English*]

The government has been working to implement the seniors agenda to advance four primary policy objectives, namely, (a) improving seniors' access to affordable housing, (b) improving the income security of seniors, (c) promoting healthy aging and improving access to health care, and (d) fostering the social inclusion and engagement of seniors.

We believe—and I think you all believe—that all Canadians deserve access to housing that is safe, accessible, and affordable. Housing is a key aspect of building any inclusive society. Our government has therefore been very active in improving seniors' access to affordable housing. Through budget 2016 we invested \$200 million over two years in the construction, repair, and adaptation of affordable housing for seniors. Budget 2017 further proposes to invest more than \$11.2 billion over 10 years in the implementation of the first ever national housing strategy. This will help build, renew, and repair Canada's stock of affordable housing, and help ensure that Canadians, including seniors, have affordable housing that meets their needs and improves their lives and those of their communities.

I am looking forward to your deliberations and recommendations as we develop together a national housing strategy to re-establish federal leadership in housing, especially as it relates to the very important issue of housing for seniors. But that is only part of the solution. We must also tackle broader issues such as social inclusion and healthy aging. On this, I am especially pleased to learn that your committee will study this issue prior to the summer recess.

[*Translation*]

In the area of improving seniors' income security, the government has acted decisively. One of the first measures we implemented when we took office was to lower the age of eligibility for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement from 67 back to 65. We also increased the maximum amount of the guaranteed income supplement top-up by up to \$947 per year for single seniors. This has improved the financial situation of close to 900,000 people and allowed approximately 13,000 Canadian seniors to exit poverty, the vast majority of whom are women.

We have also introduced legislation to ensure that couples receiving the guaranteed income supplement who are involuntarily forced to live apart are able to receive benefits based on their individual income. All Canadians should have access to a dignified and secure retirement. Looking ahead for tomorrow's seniors, we enacted legislative changes to enhance the Canada pension plan. The Canada pension plan enhancement will increase retirement benefits by increasing the replacement rate from one quarter to one third of pensionable earnings.

It will also increase the limits on pensionable earnings by 14%. This enhancement will be phased in over a seven-year period, beginning in 2019. Among other things, these changes will reduce the number of families at risk of income insecurity in retirement from 24% to 18%.

My colleague, the Honourable Jane Philpott, Minister of Health, leads our government's efforts with respect to healthy aging and access to health care, which form an important part of our seniors agenda. Under her leadership, the Government of Canada has advanced a number of initiatives benefiting seniors, ranging from new funding for provinces and territories to invest in home care, to advancing the implementation of age-friendly communities in Canada, to working with partners to address dementia. Of course, I encourage you to take a close look at these programs.

Finally, in support of our fourth policy objective of fostering the social inclusion and engagement of seniors, we are making

investments that enable seniors to be active and independent and to fully contribute to the development of their communities.

For example, through the New Horizons for Seniors program, we are collaborating with local governments, institutions and organizations to reduce the social isolation of seniors and improve quality of life for Canadians.

Through the leadership of the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, the government is developing accessibility legislation that will remove barriers in areas of federal jurisdiction. This will help improve access and foster inclusion for all Canadians, including the elderly.

Our government also recognizes the critical role that many Canadians play in supporting family and friends with serious health conditions, disabilities or aging-related needs, often while balancing work and other personal responsibilities.

● (1215)

For this reason, budget 2017 commits nearly \$700 million over five years for the creation of a new employment insurance caregiving benefit that will cover a broader range of situations where individuals are providing care to an adult family member.

We are also working to advance the work of the National Seniors Council. The council reports to both me and Minister Philpott on the challenges and opportunities related to the well-being and quality of life of seniors. The strength of the council lies in the expertise and experience of its members.

That's why, as terms of current members end, Minister Philpott and I will be using a new, open, transparent and merit-based appointment process to fill them. In fact, a call for nominations for both the chair and members of Council was launched on May 18.

In closing, through all the measures I have described, the government is seeking to improve the social and economic inclusion of seniors. We have taken significant steps, but of course there is much more to be done. So I trust that your report will contribute to the effectiveness of the government's actions in favour of our seniors.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Up first, we have MP Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you, Minister. It's a treat to have you at the committee. There is such a thing as a good Liberal, and I would suggest that you are.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Mark Warawa: You are well respected.

At the beginning of your comments, you said that the government is as committed to seniors as you are. I would suggest, or at least hope, that your commitment far exceeds what we have seen from the government at this point. I appreciate your commitment to help seniors.

As you know, we have a very quickly changing aging population in Canada. Right now it's one in six. In approximately six years it will be one in five, and in about 14 years it will be one in four. You highlighted that in your comments.

The vast majority of Canadian seniors would love to age in place, and the only practical and affordable way to take care of this aging population is to permit them to age in place. We cannot afford to build enough housing, and it would not be appropriate to warehouse our Canadian seniors. It's not what they want, and it's not what we can afford. We don't have enough time to build enough houses to house them. For all those reasons, we need to focus on aging in place.

In your comments, you shared that there is a national seniors housing strategy, which is going to include some housing for seniors—and we do need to provide some more housing for end-of-life care, palliative care, hospice care. We need those extra beds for that, but a major focus needs to be on providing home care.

You touched on that. You said that the Minister of Health included investment in home care in the negotiations and agreements with the provinces and territories, so that's a question on that. Then I have one for you on access and the Minister of Sport.

Could you provide details about what the government is going to do to ensure that we have home care that meets the needs of an aging population? Is that going to include a number of new people with training in geriatrics and palliative care to provide that home care? Is that part of the agreement with the provinces?

●(1220)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Mark. It's always a pleasure to receive such questions, not only of deep value but also of deep concern for our seniors.

I entirely share your view as to the circumstances and the will of our seniors. In most cases, our seniors want to age at home, and that's why it is so important to look after all of their needs, which would ensure that they have the ability to stay at home.

In that context, as you said, housing is a key issue. We are, of course, going to make progress over time. Housing takes time to renovate and to construct, so the impact will be seen over a relatively long time period. As you also signal, when it comes to aging with dignity and security, housing makes sense when services are also offered. Proper health care services matter a great deal. The investments the government is making in supporting provinces and territories in providing home care will make a difference and will provide the type of support that you rightly mention.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Do I have another couple of minutes?

The Chair: You have almost two minutes.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you.

In your presentation, you mentioned the Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities and that the government is developing accessibility legislation. One of the number one causes of shortness of life and injury to seniors is accessibility so that they can age in place. If they fall, there's the likelihood of their breaking their hip and getting pneumonia, and then their life ends very quickly. Accessibility is critical, such as a ramp to the front of a home, particularly after a stroke. You would have an occupational therapist assess where they're living and how to make that home liveable so that they can age in place.

When will you be introducing that accessibility legislation in the House? This all needs to happen fairly quickly, and to be honest, I'm disappointed that it took a year and a half for us to even have the discussion we're having today. This all needs to move very quickly. When are we going to have the legislation that you referred to in your speech?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you again.

As we know, this is going to be the first ever federal accessibility legislation. We all look forward to it and are eager to see it put in place. I would like to give you a more precise timeline. I would prefer to delegate that to my colleague Minister Qualtrough who would be better informed than I am on the precise timing of the law.

That said, we all agree that accessibility matters for all Canadians, and in particular, again, for seniors. As you rightly stressed, our seniors age in different manners. In many cases, they require adaptation to their housing in order for them to stay at home and to live well.

I expect the accessibility legislation to make a key difference in the lives of many of our seniors and to achieve exactly those objectives. On the details of the timeline, again I would delegate to my colleague.

●(1225)

Mr. Mark Warawa: As one quick point, I would suggest that if there were a minister for seniors, as there is for youth, we would have better guidance and a stronger voice in the government. I continue to ask for, and actually most Canadians would like to see, a minister for seniors.

The Chair: Thank you, Mark.

Now we'll go to MP Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister Duclos, for coming in and presenting to us today. Thank you so much for your leadership and your passion and the direction that you're giving the government with respect to those living in poverty. Obviously, today we're talking about seniors.

We have an issue across this country and we have a challenge, but with every challenge comes opportunity. I was reading up on it last night, and the statistics are no surprise, that for the first time in our history, I think, we have more people—5.9 million, in fact—of senior age versus those aged 14 and under at 5.8 million people. As a side number, there are 8,230 Canadians over the age of 100. Those numbers are startling.

With an increasing seniors' population.... In particular, I come from the riding of Saint John—Rothesay in Atlantic Canada, where we have the highest percentage of seniors in Canada, at 20%. If you look at that versus, say, the west coast, and Alberta at 12%, we have our challenges in Atlantic Canada.

It was a learning curve and a learning process for me in 2015, and certainly one of the things I learned going door to door and talking with seniors was how they did feel forgotten, how they were concerned about the change in the eligibility age from 65 to 67. I used to talk to a lot of seniors about what they felt had happened or what is out there from a government perspective to benefit them. A lot of people talked about, or certainly the previous government talked about, the tax-free savings account. I talked to many seniors certainly in Saint John and those living in poverty, and they didn't invest in the tax-free savings account; they didn't have any money to invest in such an account.

First and foremost, minister, from a government perspective on budget 2016-17, can you elaborate on the steps that our government has taken to change the lives of seniors and to pull seniors out of poverty and provide a better life?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Wayne.

I don't want to be too focused on your own work, knowing that everyone's work around the table matters immensely, but I've had the good fortune of seeing you in action in your riding, and I have seen your passion and your compassion for those Canadians who need better health and better support when it comes to being and doing well.

Coming back to the change in the age of eligibility, we all know the importance of the challenges and the opportunities for an aging society and aging population. There are ways to improve the living conditions of our senior citizens as well as their savings and work behaviours. However, this must be done with great care and with appropriate sensitivity to the well-being of the more vulnerable seniors. When that change was made—and I'm saying this with complete transparency—unfortunately, too little evidence was produced on the adverse impacts it was going to have on our more vulnerable seniors. The seniors who would be the most affected by this change in the age of eligibility would have had the least ability to protect themselves through changing their work and savings behaviour while enduring the greatest impact.

Just to give you two figures, the top 20% of those seniors, aged 65 and 66, would have lost 5% of their income. The bottom 20% of those seniors would have lost 35% of their income. The men in the median of that age category would have lost about 10% of their income. The women in the median would have lost 33% of their income, and that's because women in that age group are more vulnerable than men. A social sensitivity lens would have been useful in that debate before thinking of implementing such a dramatic change that would, again, have plunged 100,000 seniors into severe poverty.

I think it was important to recognize this very early in our mandate, which we did by changing the age to 65.

• (1230)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you for that, Minister.

Certainly one thing that I was very proud to advocate for, and tell people door-to-door in Saint John—Rothesay, was the 10% increase in the GIS for single seniors living in poverty.

Can you elaborate to the committee how many seniors it affected?

The Chair: Make it a brief answer, please.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The overall impact is up to \$950 per year for each of these 900,000 seniors. For some of us around the room, \$950 might seem a relatively modest amount, but when you live in very severe economic circumstances as a vulnerable, single senior does, that makes a big difference. The impact, as I said, is that 13,000 vulnerable seniors were taken out of poverty. Again, the vast majority—90%—of these seniors are vulnerable women, so the gender lens when it comes to seniors is very important. Not only are there more women, they also happen to live longer, and they often find themselves in more vulnerable economic and social circumstances.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Now, for six minutes, we'll have MP Blaney, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

Thank you, Minister, it's very nice to have you here to talk about this very important issue.

I have the honour of representing North Island—Powell River, which is a very large riding with many rural and remote communities. Today, as I listen, I can't help but think about Sayward, with a population of 340 people who have created a volunteer program so they can have health services provided in their community. They now organize everything so the nurse can come into the community and do that work.

A lot of seniors across Canada are now at a stage where they may be very vulnerable economically, but at the same time, they're having to step up to the plate to care for a loved one, a partner, or to organize something like they have in Sayward. I hope we all remember that in this place when we discuss the importance of having a national seniors strategy.

You talked about four priorities in your report, but are you moving toward a national seniors strategy?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The reason I'm here today is exactly for that purpose, to encourage the committee to provide their views on whether this should be a priority for our government. I have my personal view. I would that say the actions we've taken in the last year and a half demonstrate quite clearly that we feel that the well-being of seniors is a key element of my mandate as the minister responsible for seniors.

I'm certainly very enthusiastic and very supportive of your work, and I look forward to your report on how we can move forward in a manner that you judge will be the best design for us to address all of the very important challenges and opportunities that our aging population presents.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: When you receive this report, you will have been two years in your mandate, so I'm curious about the following. Why do you feel it has taken so long for this priority to come to the forefront? Is there a national seniors strategy already in the works? Is that something that your office is already working on? What steps will be taken when this report is given to you? Do you have any sense of a timeline?

I think one of the things that I've heard loud and clear—not only in my riding, but as seniors critic for the NDP across Canada—is that seniors can't wait. They have been waiting a long time. They have needed some of these solutions. You know, they appreciate some of the steps, but the reality is that poverty is overwhelming. Housing for seniors is overwhelming.

I think, most importantly, it's all the gaps. Again and again when I did the 11 town halls in my riding, what I heard from seniors was, “We don't care what level of government deals with this. We want all levels of government working together so that these big holes aren't there for us to fall through.” As we see an aging and increasingly vulnerable population, what is the timeline for real action? Canadians appreciate that we have to do our work, but they want to see action. They don't want to see another report.

● (1235)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you.

Well, if we're looking for action, I think the last 18 months have been very clear. In less than a year and a half, what I summarized a few moments ago speaks extremely loudly: the change in the age of eligibility, the increase in the guaranteed income supplement, the substantial short-term and long-term investment in housing, the remarkable investment in home care and health care for provinces and territories, and the enhancement of the CPP, the Canada pension plan. Many Canadians had thought that the CPP enhancement would require a long time to process and negotiate with the provinces and territories, but it happened nine months after the government was elected. These actions speak very loudly, and now we're looking forward to receiving from the committee your report on how to make that coherent in a broader framework, how a national seniors strategy could make all of that fit even better together.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You talked about the National Seniors Council in your report. Do you agree that this council should have more leeway? If so, ultimately you have the power to ask them to report back to you, but we've only seen one public report in the last two years. With the reality that we're facing of an increasing number of seniors in our country, and the gaps that they are falling through, and their increasing vulnerability, why aren't you taking full advantage of their expertise?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's a very good question. We've had the good fortune of meeting and talking with the current members of the National Seniors Council. We've received some very useful advice from them.

I would summarize that advice around two different lines.

The first is that they want to have more freedom when it comes to guiding the government around the seniors agenda. Second, they want to have more independence when it comes to providing their advice. So, freedom of choice and independence of advice is what

we hear from them. Certainly, these are the options that we are currently following.

Minister Philpott and I haven't made the final decision as to the future structure and mandate of the seniors council, but, again, this context is perfectly suited for the committee to provide its own input into that reflection and the following actions that will take place.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now over to MP Robillard, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Minister. Thank you for being here today.

I believe that our seniors are very close to your heart. The New Horizons program is one of the initiatives that your department has already undertaken.

Could you tell us more about that program?

Seniors in the constituency I represent, Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, are better off because of it. I am sure that is the case for many other seniors across the country.

Do you feel that the program will support the eventual national seniors strategy?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I am very pleased to hear from you, Mr. Robillard.

As we have indicated on a number of occasions, the New Horizons for Seniors program provides significant improvements, whether in your community, in mine, or in the communities of the members seated at this table.

Our seniors want to be taken care of but they also want to take care of their communities. Most of them are living longer, and in better health. In most cases, they are also more inclined to contribute to the development of their communities and are available to do so. It is done in an environment that rests heavily on volunteers and that implies working with other members of their communities.

The New Horizons for Seniors program has the specific objective of help for seniors by seniors. Therefore, the contribution seniors make is central. They have talent and ambition. They contribute a lot of their time and their advice and that has very significant impacts on other seniors in their communities. It is a very good program.

Once again, however, I want to encourage the members of the committee during their work to reflect on and tell us about their views on the ways in which the program could become even better. Throughout the year ahead, we are going to be interested. We eventually want to redesign the program's parameters. Your views will be very useful in that respect.

● (1240)

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

As a Quebec member from Laval, I would like to hear what you have to say about the bilateral federal-provincial agreement that comes to more than \$400 million over two years and that is designed to improve Quebecers' access to affordable and social housing, as announced last January in Laval.

What impact will that agreement have on seniors in Quebec?

The intent is to increase access to affordable and social housing for our fellow citizens, especially our seniors. I assume that the announcement is one of many that were made across the country.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you again.

It has been said a number of times, today included, that housing is a key factor in the well-being of our seniors, especially those who are more vulnerable. As we said earlier, it allows seniors to live at home while receiving the services they need.

The national housing strategy, which we are in the process of implementing and which will extend over the next 11 years, will transform the living conditions of our most vulnerable citizens, especially seniors. The investments that we will be making and the work we will be doing with our provincial, territorial and municipal partners, as well as with the social and private sectors, will reduce by half the number of families presently living in unacceptable or unaffordable living conditions.

About 30% of seniors live in unacceptable housing conditions. That percentage is going to drop by about half. It will go from 30% to 15%. That means that the Canadian government's measures alone will bring about major changes in the lives of families and communities.

In addition, we are going to work very hard with other levels of government, municipal, provincial and territorial governments, as well as with indigenous peoples and the social and private sectors, to reduce even more the number of seniors living in unacceptable housing conditions.

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

I would like to share the rest of my time with my colleague Ramesh.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Thank you, minister, for coming today, and thank you for coming to Brampton to announce funding for the national housing strategy. Being a senior, I come across many other seniors in need of support. You could say that housing is a big problem for them. They sometimes have to decide between their medication and their housing—what to pay more for, and what to pay less for. That's a big problem for them. They deserve care and they deserve love. They should be getting in-house nurses coming to them with their medication.

I ask you, Minister Duclos, to please elaborate for the committee precisely how we can ensure that all our seniors are able to live a dignified life.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Ramesh. Again, it's a great pleasure and privilege to be here with you, to come and to commend you on your own efforts. I've seen you in your riding. I've seen how committed you are to making your families and your community better.

As we all know, for seniors, the most important dimensions of their well-being revolve around feeling safe, being safe, having access to affordable housing and appropriate health care services,

and being able to participate in their community. All these are key elements through which our government can make a difference.

As we mentioned earlier, the housing investments we are going to make over the next 11 years will transform the lives of hundreds of thousands of seniors. We have already started to do this since budget 2016. We hope to pursue that for a much longer time period.

As we know, the provinces and territories fully share our ambition to make home care and mental care key priorities. We are working with them very closely on pharmaceuticals. We know that the price of medicines is often a severe concern for seniors, who have to choose between buying their medicines, feeding themselves, and housing themselves appropriately.

Finally, as I said earlier, the type of infrastructure they have access to—transport infrastructure, public transit, a healthy environment, including clean air and access to quality water—is also key to the welfare of our seniors. These are important dimensions of the infrastructure investments we'll be making in the next 11 years.

● (1245)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Now we go over to MP Ruimy, please.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I've had almost two years as a new MP. Coming into this, we've heard testimony from our poverty reduction study. We heard from quite a few witnesses about the lack of affordable housing and rental housing. The challenge is not only for seniors but also for low-income persons and youth. What has become painfully clear to me is that this is not something that has happened over the last year or two. It has been the result of years of neglect, of nobody paying attention to housing for our seniors.

I would like you to expand on the \$11 billion over the next 10 years for housing. How is that going to impact our seniors? What is the long-term picture? Where would that really put us over the next few years?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Dan, for your hard work and interest in the topic.

Again, we—and “we” is inclusive of everyone around this table, I'm sure—understand how important housing is as a cornerstone in the lives of families, as well as a pillar in the lives of sustainable, inclusive communities. That's why the disengagement of the federal government over the last 20 years.... It's not been a matter of one government but of several governments. In the last 20 years, the federal government has been neglecting its responsibility when it comes to providing the quality and affordable housing that our more vulnerable Canadians need and deserve.

We are changing this, because we believe that we can't go on ignoring the housing needs of our families and communities. We are also mindful of the fact that this re-engagement of federal leadership needs to be sustained over the long term. Our partners want a long-term vision and a long-term commitment. That is why the 11-year agenda is such an appreciated and valued engagement on the part of the government.

In working with partners—other governments and the private and social sector.... I insist on the social sector because they are there and want to support us in leveraging their human and financial resources. That is why by partnering with them we'll be able to make a huge difference in the lives of so many Canadians over the next 11 years.

Just to give you an example, we project that about half of Canadians currently renting a home will be taken out of the conditions in which they live now, which are conditions of inadequate or unaffordable housing. It's the same thing for homelessness. This will have a big impact on the number of chronically or episodically homeless Canadians. With the amount of investment we'll be making over the next 11 years, we predict that about 50,000 Canadians will either be prevented from entering into homelessness or be lifted out of homelessness in each of the next 11 years. That's a very significant impact on the lives of the most desperate Canadians of all. To live without a home is almost certainly the worst living condition in which a Canadian can find himself or herself. That is going to be tremendous for these Canadians and for our society as a whole.

• (1250)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Certainly when I meet with seniors in my riding of Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, the challenge I see, especially with senior men—single men—is that they're not ready to go to a home, but they have nowhere else to go. Indeed, some of them end up at the local Salvation Army. What I see is that their spirits are crushed, because they're not ready to be in there.

A lot of times people look at the federal government and say, "You fix this." Do you see this as something for one government to fix the whole problem or do you see it more as involving other municipal, provincial, private...? Where do you see that playing out?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: What we hear from Canadians and from Canadian organizations and stakeholders is great. They are saying that they have been waiting for us for a long time. They're saying that they have been very patient, but they're there now and ready to support us financially and with their human resources. But they need our presence. They need the federal government to establish this leadership through resources—and we know what these resources will be because of the budget last March—but even more important, with mechanisms through which they will be able to partner with us.

That's why it is so key to renew not only the leadership but also the mechanisms through which the housing investments will make a big impact in our communities. There will be details announced in the next few months on how we will work with provinces, territories, municipalities, and the private and the social sectors. There will be details around how, again, we will leverage the tremendous human and financial resources that partners outside of the federal government have been waiting so long for to invest in addressing the housing needs of Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

MP Vecchio, please.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much, Minister, for joining us today.

Today I'm going to ask you to take off your ministerial hat and put on your economist's hat, because I have had the opportunity to watch

you speak as an economist and I know what a great job you do in that.

I want to start with the old age security. You indicated why you had gone into politics and had done a study on old age security. It was because of the change from in the age of eligibility from 65 to 67, and then the reduction back down to 65.

A variety of other countries, such as the U.S., the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium, have adopted the policy of increasing the age to 67. I want you to speculate, if you don't mind, because we recognize that the workforce will be changing drastically in the next 15 to 18 years, with the ratio of the number of workers to seniors decreasing quite a bit.

Do you believe it is necessary for the government in turn to study the changes to old age security in the future? Do you think that might be a necessary step in the future as our demographics change?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Karen.

As you've indicated, I've had the fortune and the pleasure of getting to know you better in other environments, such as in Latin America not so long ago, but perhaps I should not speak about this in public.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I won't mention the gifts you gave me either, which, however, were very sweet, I should mention.

That said, the question is totally appropriate. However, it rests on a source of confusion, which I would like to address at the very start. Sixty-five is the age of eligibility. It's not the age of retirement. No one forces anyone in Canada to retire at a particular age. The age of retirement is a personal decision made by families and individuals on the basis of their health, their family circumstances, their ability to retrain if they have lost their job, or the ability to continue their job in the labour force.

The age of retirement is a personal decision. The age of eligibility says that, if needed, at 65 years old, Canadians can have access to a retirement pension that will prevent them from living in adverse and severe poverty.

• (1255)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much. So maybe elongating that time, where somebody could access the GIS later.... And I know there was the idea of adopting it later. I believe CPP has that. If you're taking it at a later age, then you are paid a little bit more. Maybe that's something we can look at for old age security.

Now I'm going to turn the dial a little bit. Yes, I know we both have this love for chocolate, Minister Duclos, so I may have to give you a chocolate bar after this, but let's start talking about the increased costs to seniors. We recognize that there are going to be more taxes for seniors. There are going to be more taxes for Canadians, but I specifically want to look at seniors. When there are going to be taxes on necessities, I'm wondering what the federal government is going to be doing about this.

The necessities, to me, include heating, hydro, gasoline, and things like that. We recognize that the carbon pricing is going to have an impact on this. Here in the province of Ontario, for instance, we have all seen our energy bills skyrocket. My mother and father happen to be here today. I know their taxes. I know their costs. Electricity and gasoline have increased substantially. We also know that there's also a 4% charge mysteriously hidden in the delivery charge of the Ontario government. That is part of their cap-and-trade work.

So I'm asking you, what are we going to do for seniors, and how is the carbon pricing going to impact our most vulnerable seniors?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Karen. Congratulations to your parents for having had the fortune to raise a daughter who has now come to the House of Commons.

In terms of the carbon pricing discussion, there are three objectives in that agenda. The first objective is to protect our environment and the health of our families. Clean air and a clean environment are key elements of the welfare of all Canadians but certainly also the welfare of seniors. Seniors also care about that, because they care about the welfare of their children and their grandchildren.

The second element in the agenda is to position Canada as a leader in economic development and innovation in—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Minister Duclos, I hate to interrupt, but we only have a few more seconds.

I recognize what's important for our environment. I totally understand that. We have different ideas of how we do that. The concern I have is that we know that the government does have this information. I know that you, as an economist, would also think that the information is very necessary. You've said that with old age

security it was necessary to look into what the poverty was going to be for our seniors. I have faith in you on the part of this government to actually do the dedicated work that is necessary for seniors so that we actually know what the negative impact will be on our senior population due to the increases from this environmental policy.

So perhaps you could stick to that part. There is data that our government has requested that we do not have, and I want to be sure that the information gets out there and we can provide for our most vulnerable seniors who will be impacted by this negative pricing.

The Chair: You have a very short time to answer.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: The data will show that if provinces and territories use the resources that carbon pricing will give them, they can do what we've done in the last 18 months, namely, lift a large number of Canadians, including Canadian seniors, out of poverty by reinvesting those resources and helping the more vulnerable Canadians. We've shown how to do this in the last 18 months. I would expect that provinces and territories in many cases will be inspired by that and do the same thing.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, that is our time today. I want to take the opportunity to speak on behalf of this committee and thank you, Minister Duclos, for appearing here today. We're very excited to be embarking on this study. We all agree that we as parliamentarians are obligated to ensure that we have a plan and a path forward for seniors.

Thank you to the folks to my left, my right, and behind me for making sure today went smoothly.

I hope Karen's parents have a fantastic visit here in Parliament.

Thank you. We are adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: <http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.parl.gc.ca>