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Thursday, February 28, 2019

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Chair

Mr. Bryan May

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

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, January 31, 2019, the committee is resuming its study of the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (B), 2018-19: votes 1b, 5b and 10b under Department of Employment and Social Development.

We welcome several witnesses from the Department of Employment and Social Development. We have Mr. Graham Flack, deputy minister of employment and social development; Chantal Maheu, deputy minister of labour; Leslie MacLean, senior associate deputy minister of employment and social development, and chief operating officer for Service Canada; Benoit Robidoux, associate deputy minister of employment and social development; and Mark Perlman, chief financial officer and senior assistant deputy minister, chief financial officer branch.

We'll have opening remarks, I believe, from Mr. Flack.

You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Graham Flack (Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I don't propose to take 10 minutes. I did want to thank you for the welcome to the committee, as a relatively new deputy minister for Employment and Social Development Canada.

I'd propose to very briefly walk you through the supplementary estimates that we have before you, which, as you know, see the department seeking a total of \$181.5 million in voted appropriations.

The first item is \$163.5 million to write off student debts for which all reasonable collection efforts have been exhausted. ESDC seeks this authority on an annual basis.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): The interpreters are saying it would be easier if they had the documents.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I didn't get that.

We'll just pause for a moment as we pass out the speaking notes. Thank you for catching that.

It's a good thing you don't need all 10 minutes. If you wouldn't mind starting from the beginning, Mr. Flack, that would be great. Thank you.

Mr. Graham Flack: To make it simple, we did distribute a copy of our remarks

[Translation]

in English and in French, in case the committee members want to follow along.

I propose to briefly walk you through the supplementary estimates (B).

[English]

The department is seeking a total of \$181.5 million in voted appropriations. First is a \$163.5-million request to write off student debts for which all reasonable collection efforts have been exhausted. ESDC seeks this authority on an annual basis. This is due to various factors such as expiration of the allowed period to use legal means to collect, bankruptcy, small balances, extreme financial hardship, and compromise settlements.

[Translation]

The department is requesting the amount of \$3.4 million for the youth employment strategy to help us continue to deliver placements under the Canada summer jobs program. These funds will support the screening of the high volume of applications received by the program to deliver quality work placements for youth in the summer of 2019.

On accessibility, there are two items to mention.

First, the department is requesting \$5 million to increase support for the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities and to establish an accessibility secretariat to administer the Accessibility Canada Act.

Second, the department is requesting \$1.1 million for the accessible Canada initiative through the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities.

This amount will serve to connect employers and persons with disabilities, and to help businesses develop effective recruitment and retention strategies.

[English]

The next item is the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. The department is requesting \$7 million to support the establishment of a sustainable development goals unit and to support the creation of a new SDG funding program. The department is also including a transfer of \$96,500 to the Department of Indigenous Services Canada to support policy and engagement activities related to indigenous housing and homelessness.

[Translation]

The final item is the request for \$1.6 million to replace aging communications equipment by migrating to a government-wide call centre platform through Shared Services Canada.

[English]

We would be happy to take your questions, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Flack.

Up first we have MP Barlow for six minutes.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Mr. Flack, for coming over, especially as you're relatively new to the post. I appreciate your making some time and bringing this information forward to us.

The first questions I would like to ask relate to the Canada summer jobs program.

You mentioned in your presentation some additional funds to help sift through the applications received through the program. Earlier this year, there was a move to extend the deadline on applications. Is this funding to address that?

We've had some concerns from constituents that the application process is more onerous this year and that it is more difficult to get through. Have you had that same feedback? Is this going to address the application process itself, or is it just a means to address the volume of applications that are coming through the department?

• (1110)

Mr. Graham Flack: Leslie is going to walk you through it, but one of the key changes from last year is that we are looking to ensure that employers are providing evidence of the quality of work environment. That includes mentoring for students as well as a safe work environment.

I can see from an employer perspective how they would say it is more onerous in the sense that they are now providing more information about that to be able to demonstrate they're doing that. That does create a corresponding pressure on us to be able to review that.

Leslie has really been leading the work on this, and if it's okay, I will turn to her.

Mr. John Barlow: Certainly.

Ms. Leslie MacLean (Senior Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development) Thank you, Graham.

Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

Indeed, the application this year does require more demonstration from the employer around the quality of the work experience. For example, we ask employers to not just tell us that there's a mentoring plan but to explain what the mentoring plan is for the student, and what the tools are that they have in place to ensure that the work environment is free of harassment and discrimination. Where there are issues around things like hazardous substances, potentially, in the workplace, again, the employer is demonstrating that to us, and that is around the focus on the quality at work description.

Those MPs who have provided us helpful feedback on local priorities, or indeed, upcoming potential projects that could be funded, would note that this year—and this is all transparent in the application—it makes it clear that priority is being given for quality jobs. The learning opportunities and the salary being offered to the student are those sorts of factors that are considered.

The second principal criterion.... Again, the points are clear in the application form itself around respecting national priorities. There is everything from employment opportunities in the skilled trades to employment opportunities where the youth would be supporting seniors, or they're from under-represented groups.

That extra funding—the \$3.4 million you referenced—is absolutely to help us deal with the increasing volume of applications, but also, if we've asked employers to give us proof of a mentoring plan, we need to look at that and not simply pass lightly over the work that we're asking employers to do.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you very much for that explanation.

Obviously, last year we had a lot of concerns with the attestation of the Canada summer jobs application process, and I understand that the Liberal government has had to back down from that. They realized that they had made a mistake with that. I'm hoping that, with the changes to the Canada summer jobs program, it will be very clear what is asked of people who are applying.

The minister also mentioned on Tuesday that the number of jobs doubled through the new program; however, the concern that we have is that those numbers may be a bit skewed by the fact that some of those were 12-week jobs where one position became two positions for six weeks. It was easily manipulated to make it look like we had a lot of new jobs, but a lot of those jobs were of much shorter duration than they would have been previously.

You may not have this information on hand, but Mr. Flack, do you have any numbers to show what the difference was and how many of those jobs became two jobs over six weeks compared to one job over 12?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I'm happy to speak to the detail of that.

Mr. Graham Flack: Go ahead.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: We have been tracking for the last few years the number of jobs that Service Canada would have recommended to MPs for input. One of the things that affects our ability to have longer job durations is that the minimum wage goes up in provinces, and obviously, employers need to respect minimum wages. That's one of the tests for responding to local laws.

In terms of the program, what Service Canada recommended to MPs was a range from an eight-week to a 12-week duration. We just got the data this morning. After MP input and review, there was a very slight increase in that, to 8.1 weeks on average. Our recommendations had been eight weeks' duration, and then 8.1.

Obviously, that's something we're always looking at in terms of quality jobs for youth. We try to give as many jobs to as many youth as possible, but we also have to make sure they are of a reasonable duration.

One thing I could point out if it's helpful for the committee, Mr. Chair, is that we surveyed employers for the 2018 program for the first time. We found that almost 80% of them were either satisfied or very satisfied with the program. Thirty per cent of them chose to extend the student beyond the period we had been able to fund through the program.

That speaks very highly to the objective of trying to provide quality work experiences for last year's students, and this year—as the minister would have noted Tuesday—for youth between the ages of 15 and 30.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. John Barlow: Can I ask if the witness could table that information as part of the study?

The Chair: Of course.

MP Sangha, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much for giving this information today and educating us.

You have asked for \$5 million for the new bill, which is Bill C-81, an act to ensure a barrier-free Canada, and \$1.1 million for the accessible Canada initiative through the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities. The \$5 million is for the new accessibility secretariat under the new act.

Can you give the committee information regarding what the \$5 million will be going towards for the secretariat? What is that, in the broad sense?

Ms. Chantal Maheu (Deputy Minister, Labour, Department of Employment and Social Development): As you have pointed out, we are seeking money for the accessibility secretariat and some money for the opportunities fund. This funding now will be in support of the accessibility act, but it doesn't require passage of the legislation in terms of being able to proceed.

The accessibility secretariat will be permanently funded within the department of ESDC, and its role will be to maintain the implementation and ongoing administration of the legislation. Its staff will be working on the regulation and general advancement of all the initiatives that support the legislation. That funding, which is about \$5 million as you mentioned, will support the secretariat.

In addition to that, there's some funding that was sought through the estimates for the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities. That program supports and assists people with disabilities in finding jobs, developing a skill set and reaching out to employers. The specific funding sought in the estimates is to support employers and

assist them in recruiting and identifying persons with disabilities, and raising awareness for employers in terms of how they could develop workplaces that are welcoming for persons with disabilities.

There will be about \$200,000 in vote 1 for the operation, and \$1.1 million in vote 5 for Gs and Cs that will be distributed to service providers who will pursue these objectives.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Do you think the \$5 million you are asking for under the accessible Canada act will also include pay and other allowances for the employees who will be working in the establishment?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: If you mean the establishment of the organization under the authority act, no. That will be funded from the \$290 million that was announced for the accessibility act, but that will come later, once the legislation has received royal assent. Once the legislation is there, the department will come and seek funding to establish the different machinery—the standards organization, the accessibility commissioner and the accessibility officer. That will come later on. This is really for the secretariat within the department, to support the activities that can be started before the legislation actually comes into force and will continue after its coming into force.

• (1120)

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: What will this amount be used for? Is \$5 million only for building the secretariat? I'm not sure about it.

Would you explain it, please?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: It will engage in a number of activities related to accessibility, starting the work on the regulations and starting the work in terms of outreach to stakeholders in identifying the standards that should be developed first for accessibility. That work prepares the groundwork for once the legislation has received royal assent. Then we are equipped to move with the machinery changes that I mentioned earlier. It's doing the preparatory work so that, once the legislation receives royal asset, we're ready to move very quickly.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Thank you very much.

I have another question about the student loans. ESDC is demanding \$181.5 million and \$163.5 million to write off the student loans. You mention the conditions for writeoff: expiration of the allowed period to use legal means to collect; bankruptcy; small balances; extreme financial hardship; and the last is compromise settlements.

What kind of feedback do you have from students or employees regarding this program?

Mr. Graham Flack: In terms specifically of the writeoff, the situation around that and how that's changed over time, the committee may find it helpful to have a historical trend line on what that looks like.

The best measure of student default that we use is a default rate after three years. That's a kind of standard tracking rate we use. That rate has declined almost like clockwork by about 1% a year since 2003-04, when it was at 19%. The rate this year, as we're asking for the writeoff, is the lowest rate we've had, which is 9.0%, but it's been a relatively straight decline year after year.

That's a combination of factors over that time that includes more flexibility for students in terms of repayment. As you may be aware, students do not have to start repaying until they start earning an income of \$25,000. If they run into trouble, there are flexibilities provided to them in terms of when they start the payments. It also reflects more effective collection efforts on the other end so that we can reduce the amount of the writeoff. I would say the trend line is moving in the right direction.

I did ask for a bit of an international comparator, because that's sometimes helpful. It's hard to do apples to apples. The U.S. system is the closest we came to, and their rate in comparison to our 9.0% rate is about 10.8% or 10.9%. The trend line has been good on this, but it reflects both sides.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madam Sansoucy, please.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I must admit that after reading the supplementary estimates (B), 2018-19, the questions I have are more about what's not included.

First, you mentioned opportunities for persons with disabilities. There's another measure for them, the disability tax credit. We've seen the rejection rate jump by 60%. I have to wonder why.

We just finished a study where we heard from many witnesses living with episodic disabilities. They told us how important this measure is for helping them make ends meet. These are often people with serious and prolonged impairments.

What's behind the 60% increase in rejections?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Thank you very much for that question.

The disability tax credit is administered by the Canada Revenue Agency. The CRA is responsible for reviewing applications and following up with the applicants to determine whether they are eligible. The CRA would be better equipped than us to answer that question.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I hope I've gotten you interested. After all, your job is to support persons with disabilities. What questions has this raised within your department? How are you going to work with the CRA to ensure that the people who have these needs are heard?

During our last study, witnesses told us they're required to reapply for the registered disability savings plan every year and explain that they are still missing a leg. They are having trouble accessing this funding. The program is administered by the CRA, but your mission is to integrate these individuals and improve their quality of life.

● (1125)

How concerned are you about this? How do you approach the CRA about such a massive increase in rejections?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: As you know, about a year and a half ago, the CRA created the Disability Advisory Committee. We support the CRA. We work with it when it needs expert advice. We also work closely with the CRA to help it understand the realities that persons with disabilities live with, but ultimately, the CRA is responsible for administering its own legislation, and it's up to the CRA to make recommendations.

If the advisory committee has recommendations that go beyond what the CRA has to do, we would of course work with the CRA to provide support, but it's really up to the CRA.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: All right, thank you.

As of January 1, 2019, seniors are automatically enrolled for the guaranteed income supplement when they turn 65. Many seniors in my riding aren't receiving it. When they come to us for help, we realize they're not getting that money.

How much money would have to be included in the supplementary estimates for your department to ensure that seniors across the country receive this benefit that they are entitled to?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Thank you for the question. I'll do my best to answer it.

With regard to our efforts to ensure that we're reaching our goal of continuing to increase the number of people receiving the benefits they're entitled to, we don't need to seek supplementary funding. It's part of our normal duties.

However, over the past few years, we've really stepped up our efforts to contact every individual who may be eligible for the guaranteed income supplement and old age security.

Over the past few years, for example, we've written hundreds of letters to individuals we think are eligible, asking them to apply so that we can register them and so that they qualify for the program.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Wouldn't it be simpler to just register them automatically, as you do for seniors turning 65?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I was just getting to that.

The law was amended a little while ago. It came into force in December 2017. That means that since January 2018, we've been writing to people as soon as they turn 64 to notify them that, without having to do anything, they'll be automatically enrolled for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement. We tell them they don't have to do anything, apart from file their taxes, obviously, and they'll be automatically enrolled and considered for both programs, based on their income, of course.

That means that since January 2019, people have been automatically qualifying for both benefits at once. Right now, we're working on ways to go back and reach people who might be eligible, but whose eligibility predates the change in the law.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I sincerely hope that in the near future, things will change so all seniors are automatically eligible.

The minister appeared before the committee and told us that employment insurance would now offer more choice and flexibility and that it should reflect the conditions of families and workers in 2019.

We know that 60% of workers are currently not eligible for EI. If we break it down by gender, 30% of women and 50% of men qualify.

The minister said he wants to implement a reform, which leads me to my next question.

Within the department, have you started working on a reform to reflect the new realities of the job market, especially for women in precarious work?

[*English*]

The Chair: That's time, but I'll give you a chance to answer it briefly, please.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Graham Flack: As the minister said, we're in the process of examining what form that reform or study could take, so yes, we are working on that issue.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Up next, we have MP Ruimy, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): Thank you very much for coming today.

I want to spend a little bit of time on the Canada summer jobs program because that's one of my favourite programs. I think it's a program where MPs can actually make a difference in their communities. I know that in my riding we've been able to increase not only the dollar amount but the number of jobs and the number weeks that have been given. I actually make it a point to visit almost every single one and look at what they're doing, what organizations are working with them, what kind of skills they are learning, and whether they match what they're taking in school. It's one thing to have somebody at a gate to take a ticket, but when you have a hatchery, as we do in our riding, and they're hiring students who are actually taking environmental studies in school, what a great experience it is.

You had mentioned that the money being spent there is providing the surveys. That's very interesting to me because in order to make good policy, you need to be able to understand the impact of the things that you're having to do. As an example, this year you no longer actually have to be a student. Could you explain what that is and how that came about, please.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Mr. Chair, in terms of the change in emphasis, the minister spoke to this quickly on Tuesday. The focus has really been around quality work experiences. I think one of the considerations is around the move from student to youth. This ensures there's a broader range, obviously, of individuals who can be supported, ensuring one of the five national priorities around under-represented youth, and that really ensures the broadest possible applicability of what is an extraordinarily popular program. We do receive a large number of applications every year, and it has been steadily increasing year over year.

Very simply put, I think the focus on youth is very much to ensure that those people who may not be able to be in school, whatever their personal circumstances, or who may not be planning to return to school, are still able to get into the job market and still able to get a quality work experience with the goal of ensuring that they get exposure to the labour market, build attachment to the labour market, and even possibly receive funds to enable them to consider returning to school if they so choose.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Excellent.

You've already done surveys for the previous year, and you said that there were 80% satisfied customers. It doesn't mean we're there yet. I can remember our first year in doing this, and there were a lot of challenges in 2015-16. I can remember people coming to me and saying, "Well, it's coming to us too late." It's hard to hire somebody sooner, especially university students.

What else are you seeing from the reviews that you've received? Can you give me a few highlights of what has come back from those reviews?

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Thank you. I'd be happy to do so.

As I mentioned in my earlier remarks, we surveyed employers for the first time for the 2018 program, and that was where we were very pleased to learn that almost 80% were very satisfied or satisfied. I should note that we have been surveying the students themselves—it will be the youth for the 2019 program—and last year again we chose a different way to do that. We surveyed them via their employers and got a much higher response rate.

If I could share, Mr. Chair, some of the information with people, the results from the students were very positive. Some 90% thought they had improved their oral communication skills; 88% had developed mentor-like relationships with their employers; 80% thought they had developed leadership skills; and as an important note, 80% had saved money from their work experience to finance their schooling.

I would just note, we don't take that as an opportunity to rest on our laurels. The program is really designed to provide those quality work experiences for youth, so feedback from employers and feedback from the youth themselves is a very important part of how we want to continue to improve this extraordinarily popular program year over year.

• (1135)

Mr. Graham Flack: If I could just add one other piece, the program is, as you indicated, unique, in that members of Parliament are actually involved in helping to set priorities.

To go back to the very first question that was asked about things that had been heard from employers on whether the new program was too onerous or not, we really value the feedback on this. We've given you the operating constraints, the reason we've tried to put in a little more rigour in terms of what we're asking back, but given your unique involvement in the program, you will be getting a kind of feedback that will be very helpful for us. We'd like to continue to receive it, because we are trying to continually adapt and improve the program.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good morning to our presenters. Thank you for your presentations.

Mr. Flack, the government is investing additional funds in student aid to promote, for example, student experiential learning, paid internship programs and apprenticeships. It's a bit of a running joke that I always mention my riding, but in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay, which is a wonderful riding in southern New Brunswick, we were lucky enough to have a skills link program and a youth employment strategy program through the Human Development Council.

I do not like to rank them, but it is probably one of the most meaningful, transformational programs that I have advocated for. It's a collaboration between the Human Development Council, the Outflow shelter, the Teen Resource Centre and the Learning Exchange—all these wonderful non-profits in my riding—and it's offering training opportunities for at-risk youth and for youth that need a helping hand. It's just an absolutely wonderful program.

One example of the program is that there's a shop underneath Outflow where youth are learning woodworking skills. Truthfully, woodworking is a lost art. My dad was a woodworker, so when I see youth working on mouldings, frames, sashes and all these kinds of things, it's wonderful. As I said, it's a lost art.

The program is so well rounded that these youth, for example, are trained in woodworking and carpentry. Those youth are now working on a renovation in a building for affordable housing, which in fact some of them may themselves be living in. It's an absolutely beautiful, wonderful program.

Mr. Flack, can you elaborate on how the funds for that training internship program are being spent and will be spent moving forward?

Mr. Graham Flack: I'll start. We may ask one of our colleagues to come up who is more on the front line of the programs, but I can give some context, and I should state in full disclosure that I'm a proud Nova Scotian from the province adjacent to yours, so if you hear me brag about that, then we can maybe compete.

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay, very good.

Mr. Graham Flack: One of the big changes we've seen over the last decade is the degree to which the labour shortages we're seeing are not just in specific regions of the country, but literally from coast to coast. The paradox is this mismatch between jobs we know are there, including a considerable number in the skilled

trades, and our seeming inability to stream enough people to fill those jobs.

I would say the programming suite is in some ways experimental, in that it tries a range of different things to try to get at what the barriers have been to individuals entering into apprenticeship programs that we really need. That includes everything from the use of interest-free loans to allow people to take apprenticeship courses.... For women in particular, there are certain apprentice trades in which they are significantly under-represented, so there's been some experimentation around that as well.

• (1140)

Mr. Wayne Long: Yes. I'm going to talk about that in a second.

Mr. Graham Flack: There's a pre-apprenticeship program as well. There are some individuals who we find we can't just put into an apprenticeship program, so we design a pre-apprenticeship program to try to get them ready to be able to do that.

I'd say the full suite is used to try to get better results, but these are jobs that we have a high level of confidence—even given the changing nature of work—are going to continue to be required. They are good, stable jobs, and the program suite, as you indicated, is designed to address those issues.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you for that.

My riding is very industrially based.

Mr. Gordie Hogg (South Surrey—White Rock, Lib.): What is your riding?

Mr. Wayne Long: It's Saint John—Rothesay, and we are the home of Canada's largest oil refinery, strong unions and strong trades in the riding. We always hear about—and we've heard certainly on HUMA really for years now—great opportunities for people in skilled trades, but we continue to also hear that there are challenges in attracting certain populations into these skilled trades, including youth, women, recent immigrants and indigenous Canadians. Moreover, recent data indicates that over half of those who begin apprenticeships never finish their training and get their certification.

Just as a sidebar, with respect to women in trades, I know Irving Oil, in conjunction with several unions across Canada, has many initiatives to get women into welding and things like that. The trades offer tremendous opportunities. They're understaffed. I know in the riding alone, Irving's saying they will need 1,500 to 1,800 new tradespeople within the next two or three years.

Am I out of time?

The Chair: Wrap it up quickly, please.

Mr. Wayne Long: The trades offer wonderful opportunities.

Can you tell us about the federal government's initiatives to get more youth, women and recent immigrants into skilled trades? What are you doing to attract them?

The Chair: I'm afraid he has given you no time. Maybe we'll have a chance to come back to that. I'm sorry.

Honourable member of Parliament Leitch, welcome. The next six minutes are all yours

Hon. K. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much for coming to present to the committee. It's great to see all of you again.

I have a few questions with regard to disabilities, particularly the registered disability savings plan. I'm not sure who has ultimate responsibility for that in the department, but one of the issues that I know has come up at committee is the issue with respect to the closing out of the RDSP. I recognize that there are funds allocated here for accessibility, etc., but have you spoken to the government or to the minister with respect to grandfathering the opportunity for those grants and bonds so that individuals are not placed in a position of hardship? Obviously, the government has set an expectation with those Canadians, and then all of a sudden to be renegeing on that and asking for them to repay the funds is really a challenge for organizations and individuals who are already in a position of hardship.

I recognize there may be about \$4 million, maybe \$5 million, here for accessibility infrastructure, but to be quite frank, I think individuals are far more important to deal with. How is the RDSP issue being dealt with? Is the government willing to grandfather those grants and bonds for those families in need?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Maybe let me spend a few minutes on what's in the estimates, and then I'll specifically address your question.

Hon. K. Kellie Leitch: I'll ask you to be brief, though, because I have a second question for you. Okay? Thank you.

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Okay, and I won't speak too quickly.

Just quickly, you are right. The registered disability savings plan is an important program that supports families and Canadians who have severe and prolonged disabilities. In these current estimates, we're asking for an increase of \$5 million that relates to that. As part of normal forecasting, we need to make some adjustments to the amounts that are there for the grants and the bonds. Every year officials make a forecast based on expected demand, and now we're at the point where we realize that we need to make some adjustments.

For the disability grant, we'll increase it by \$44 million, and for the bonds, we're decreasing it by \$49 million. That's what's covered in the estimates.

More specifically, to your question that ties the disability tax credit to the eligibility for the program, that is an eligibility condition that is part of the legislation. As you've mentioned, if someone loses their eligibility for a disability tax credit, then their registered disability savings plan would need to be closed, and there is a requirement for them to start repaying, within a year, the amounts that have been provided by government, not their own contribution, but the grants and the bond.

The individual has the possibility to seek a medical practitioner to certify if there's a likelihood that the person will be eligible in future years for disability. Depending on their condition, that may be the case.

• (1145)

Hon. K. Kellie Leitch: Yes.

Ms. Chantal Maheu: If that's the case, that the medical practitioner certifies it, then there's a possibility of holding the account for five years in the financial institution. The money would remain there, and there would be no need to repay.

Hon. K. Kellie Leitch: In your allocation of funds in the estimates, it is important to educate individuals on that ability. I can be very frank with you, functioning as a physician who deals with both children with disabilities and their parents, in saying that parents do not know that. I might be the only physician in the country who does.

I would say to my colleagues on the government side that I think we have a duty of responsibility to these parents, as well as to individuals with disabilities. I encourage the government to grandfather what has already been granted, so these individuals who have disabilities are not found disadvantaged.

I have a second question, so I'll be quick. With regard to Canada's student loans, yes, the trend has been downwards over, I guess, 15 years now, going into the 16th. I commend the department on that. I have some knowledge of the programs put in place for dealing with that.

My question, again, goes to whether or not the government and minister have been spoken to about the choices as to whether or not that forgiveness should be done earlier and therefore save the expenditure on the back end of actually trying to collect, since we seem to be forgiving literally hundreds of millions of dollars of loans.

Alternatively, has there been thought to increasing enforcement, as there has been in the past, in an effort to not just create flexibility in programming, but also to increase the enforcement, so that we can actually try to close out this program and get it down to a more reasonable number? It could be similar to what we see at a bank, at about 5% to 6% as opposed to.... I know it was at 19%, and then 10%, and as I say, I commend the department for getting it to the halfway point.

What can be done in order to make sure that we're recouping those funds? I'd rather see those funds in the hands of other students, or, quite frankly, individuals who may have disabilities or other needs as Canadians, as opposed to our expending a lot of funds with respect to trying to collect.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds.

Mr. Graham Flack: First, the student grant is one mechanism. When a higher portion of what is provided is a grant, you don't put the financial pressure on the student in terms of what they have to pay back.

The flexibility mechanisms we put in place—no payment until you hit the \$25,000 income threshold—have helped by not putting pressure on individuals who may have a bridge period. Also, the flexibilities in how we allow them to repay have meant that people who would otherwise have gone into default and we wouldn't have been able to collect from, we are ultimately able to collect from.

However, we agree that there is also a collection side of this, in terms of ensuring we are being responsible with tax dollars. It's the mix of those things that we're hoping will keep the downward trend moving. At the rate we're going, *si la tendance se maintient*, we would be at 0% in nine years. I'm sure that won't happen, but it has been a steady 1% decline on this three-year default rate over a decade.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I understand we're splitting time.

First of all, welcome, Emmanuella.

MP Lambropoulos has the first half of the six minutes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): I'll be sharing my time with Mr. Hogg.

I'd like to go off of what my colleague, Mr. Long, was saying as well. I know money was put into the skilled trades, and I'd like to know what we're doing in order to entice or attract women to the field, as well as the indigenous communities and other people who are less likely to gravitate naturally towards that field, or who think it might not be as available to them as to anyone else.

• (1150)

Mr. Graham Flack: Maybe I could talk about the indigenous piece for a bit. I talked earlier about one of the programs we have that is designed to entice more women into the skilled trades. On the indigenous side, there's been a revamp of the departmental program, previously the ASETS program, which has now been revamped with a funding increase.

The difference between this and other programs I've seen in government is it really focuses its efforts based on the assessment of indigenous communities themselves in terms of what the needs are. Rather than those needs being assessed by people in the national capital region, the funding is provided to indigenous organizations who have expertise in this area and can determine locally on the ground what the most appropriate approaches are.

Saskatchewan is one of the best examples we have, with an excellent organization that's been doing this for years. They are very familiar with the local labour market needs and have had real success on the skilled trades side in being able to stream funds into approaches where they have success rates. As was indicated earlier, one of the challenges has been the dropout rate in terms of people who start but don't finish. When you add the pre-apprenticeship piece to help people get ready, you have a very local focus on what the needs are and what works. The results on the indigenous side have been improving in those communities that have had success. That's one of the reasons we think the additional funding that's gone into this will continue to ensure success going forward.

Benoît, I don't know if there's anything else you wanted to add on the other piece.

Mr. Benoît Robidoux (Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): Yes, we could maybe add to that. I will repeat a bit, but as you said, we have the apprenticeship incentive grant for women that has been put in place, which is \$20 million over five years to provide incentives for women to participate in the trades. We have the women in construction fund that has been announced, too, through the national infrastructure program, for \$10 million over three years, again to support women in the construction trades.

We mentioned the pre-apprenticeship program, which is accessible to everybody but where we pay attention to groups that have less access to trade, such as indigenous people, newcomers and women. It's not only a general program. We pay attention that, and we try to target those people more.

There are other programs that have been created, too. The list is long. There is the union training and innovation program. Again, this is with unions, to make sure that they get more training. We try to pay attention to the under-represented groups. Finally, we have the foreign credential recognition program for newcomers, where we are trying to have their credentials recognized in Canada, including in the trades.

I think that's the list of programs that we have to support these under-represented groups participating in the trades.

Mr. Graham Flack: For Mr. Long, I think we have a need to add the Atlantic apprenticeship piece, which is designed to attempt to harmonize apprenticeship standards across the Atlantic provinces to reduce friction and barriers between the two.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Hogg.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: I hope you'll geographically mention British Columbia along the way somewhere as well. Thank you.

Following up on the question that was just asked with respect to the groups that are under-represented, you've called them "targeted". I understand targeting, but after you target them, what are the incentives that actually engage them?

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: In the case of women, it's really the grants. There's a national grant to incentivize them to participate. In the case of the pre-apprenticeship program, again, many of these groups are not able to get into the trades and be accepted right away, so this program tries to give them more wrap-around services to integrate the trades. Basically, the program is set up so that the call for proposals tries to make sure that we target these people and get more of their participation. It's the same for the foreign credential recognition program. It's only targeted to newcomers. This is how we try to make sure....

In fact, I would say that in most of our programs we do that, not just in apprenticeships. We are always trying to pay attention to these groups so that there are always greater incentives, either through cultural proposals or through our service delivery, to try to support these people and often to provide them with more wrap-around services than for other clients that we have.

•(1155)

Mr. Gordie Hogg: Are we building any longer-term metrics out of the Canada summer jobs program that are going to be able to influence other programs that we look at, other services, other ministries? Are there any experiences or metrics that are helpful to convey the way we approach it more broadly?

The Chair: Very briefly, please.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: The Canada summer jobs program does fall under the umbrella of the youth employment strategy, and there are a number of program components in that. Absolutely, as we continue to evaluate the success of our Canada summer jobs program, we'll be cross-pollinating the other elements under the youth employment strategy with our sense of what's working and what's not.

I would note, in response to the member's question, that there are programs, indeed, where many federal departments offer internships and other summer work experience to youth. So we will be making it fit together.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: Even in British Columbia, I understand.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Especially in British Columbia.

Mr. Gordie Hogg: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next is MP Diotte for five minutes, please.

Mr. Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): Hi folks.

First, I was looking at the brief where it states, "The Department is requesting \$5 million to administer the Accessibility Canada Act to establish...an Accessibility Secretariat and to increase support for the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities." What exactly is being done to remove the physical barriers for those with disabilities?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

Specifically, in the estimates, at this point there's no funding that is targeted to remove barriers to accessibility. However, if I may speak more generally, as you know, this committee has spent a number of weeks studying Bill C-81. The whole purpose of Bill C-81 is to remove barriers to accessibility throughout the federally regulated system, including in the public service.

Bill C-81 will create a system where we will develop, manage and enforce standards of accessibility for Canadians across a number of priorities, including in transportation, communication and employment. It will also create an infrastructure where, for the first time, Canadians won't have to fight for their rights. The obligation will actually be on the organization to be accessible and to meet the standards. I think that legislation, which is now being discussed and reviewed in the Senate, will actually be historic in terms of advancing accessibility for Canadians.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: We certainly heard around this table from witnesses that the sooner the better.

Turning to affordable housing, we all know there's a housing crisis on many first nations reserves with families living in overcrowded, unsafe, unsuitable conditions. We've seen the headlines very recently. Why were \$10.4 million in funds re-profiled when it

seems there's such a desperate need? How will those funds be used now?

The Chair: We were supposed to have someone from CMHC here. I'm just wondering if anybody here is comfortable answering this. If not, maybe we can ask for a written response.

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: We'd ask for precision. Is it the one we have in our supplementary (B), or are you talking about something else in affordable housing?

Mr. Kerry Diotte: I'm looking under Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, supplementary (B).

Mr. Benoît Robidoux: That's not for us.

The Chair: I'm afraid, Mr. Diotte, that CMHC is not present, but maybe we can ask for a written response to that question.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Sure. While I'm on it then, also in that written response I'd like to know specifically what the government is doing to address the housing crisis on first nations reserves as part of that and what metrics are in place to ensure that the housing investments on reserve result in improved conditions. Again, we certainly know the headlines about Cat Lake and many other headlines. That's quite an important issue, I believe.

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half, sir.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Getting back to the Canada student loans program, I know in my riding I make a point to visit every program in the summer, and it's a very well thought out program. It gives youth their first job in a lot of cases. A lot of people were very disappointed with the attestation, which meant that a lot of people could not get the programs and could not hire people, and a lot of people were missing jobs. More to that point, the one thing that I'm hearing now is that it is too short a time, and a lot of university students who want to work three months, and have to because university is expensive, are not getting enough weeks.

This question is for anybody. What's your response to that?

•(1200)

Ms. Leslie MacLean: I will speak to that, Mr. Chair.

When we look at the program year over year, we've been recommending for MP input about eight to 12 weeks. For example, for last summer and, as noted in my earlier testimony, with the 2018 program, our average number of recommended weeks would have been eight, and after MP input, it came out at 8.1, so slightly higher.

Your point is very important around the length of time of the work experience for the student. Again, that's why we were very heartened with the reply from employers this year that as many as 30% had chosen to extend the student term beyond what we were able to provide.

There is absolutely no question that we receive extraordinary demand in terms of number of requesters and the number of potential jobs and funds. That's been consistently rising, so we appreciate very much the local input to help us try to get as many jobs supported for as many people as possible.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm afraid that's time.

I would like to thank all of you for being here today and answering our questions on the estimates.

We are going to suspend to go in camera for committee business. [*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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