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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey



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• (1405)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 21 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Pursuant to the orders of reference of April 11 and May 26, 2020, the committee is resuming its study of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference, and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

I would like to remind everyone to please use the language channel of the language they are speaking. If you intend to switch between Canada's official languages, please be sure to switch the channel first so it corresponds with the language you are speaking.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for today. We have Robert Falconer, a research associate from the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary; as well as Syed Hussan, executive director at Migrant Workers Alliance for Change.

Mr. Falconer, please proceed with your seven and a half minute opening remarks.

Mr. Robert Falconer (Research Associate, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary, As an Individual): Dear honourable members of the committee, I want to begin my opening statement by thanking the committee for the opportunity to present on this very important topic of temporary foreign workers in the agricultural sector and the COVID-19 pandemic.

This topic is one which I have investigated as a researcher in immigration and refugee policy, and with which I have also had personal experience. My own father was a refugee from Chile, giving me the opportunity to improve and maintain my own fluency in Spanish, which led to summer jobs during my undergraduate career working in the orchards of B.C. with temporary foreign workers from Mexico.

Previous to my work with the School of Public Policy, I was also a client support worker in the temporary foreign worker program at the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, located in Calgary, Alberta. In that capacity, I made several trips to the Cargill meat packing plant in High River, Alberta, to meet with workers, and to pro-

vide them resources in relation to their immigration status and employment.

It is with that context I hope to provide the members of the committee with an overview of the temporary foreign worker program in relation to Canadian agriculture that combines both data on the topic as well as personal experience.

In addressing this committee, it is important to acknowledge the long history of agricultural-related immigration to Canada since Confederation in 1867. For roughly the first 100 years of our almost 153-year history as a country, one of the primary focuses of our immigration system was to secure and expand our agricultural productivity.

The Immigration Act of 1869 established the basic framework of Canadian immigration policy in relation to labour at the beginning of Confederation, with several provisions that may resonate with committee members today. First, it was designed to attract immigrants that would contribute to Canadian economic productivity, especially in agriculture. Second, it sought to ensure the "safety and protection of immigrants en route and upon arrival in Canada". It sought to regulate abuses commonly perpetrated against new arrivals. Finally, it provided for government agents to assist immigrants in arranging lodging and making connections in their chosen destinations.

Following the Dominion Lands Act of 1872, Canada began to rapidly expand its immigration program and recruit millions of farmers and farm labourers from overseas, leading to a massive 1,000% increase in the population of the Prairies, and the founding of Alberta and Saskatchewan as provinces. This period came to be known as the wheat boom, a time in which Canada was the world's fastest-growing economy. Many Canadians with Ukrainian, Polish, or other Eastern European ancestry can trace their roots to that period in which their grandparents and great-grandparents arrived to farm in Canada.

I will not go into detail with every act or decision in relation to Canadian agriculture and immigration, but for the purposes of this statement, I wish to reiterate that from the foundation of Canada until the signing of the first seasonal worker agreement in 1966, Canada made a concerted effort to expand, secure and protect its agricultural system through the recruitment and settlement of farmers and labourers on farms.

Shifting to today, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions with regard to the safety of workers, the security of our food supply chain and the appropriateness of the temporary foreign worker program when Canadians themselves are experiencing record high levels of unemployment.

In a forthcoming paper by the School of Public Policy, we find that the number of arriving workers in agriculture, food processing and transportation is 14% below the number that arrived last year, equal to a shortfall of approximately 3,800 workers during the onset of the primary agricultural season, including planting, calving and the Atlantic lobster season.

This shortfall, combined with the 14-day quarantine period, represents a significant loss in time, as well as workers, especially in consideration of purchases of seed, livestock and other equipment built around expectations for expanded production, and the necessary increase in workers to support it. It also has a human impact, which I will discuss further on. This loss may be most acutely felt in the primary work on farms, with a 14% reduction in relation to 2019, in meat and poultry plants, with a drop of 20%, and in seafood packing plants, with a loss of 60% of their foreign workers.

Calls to employ more Canadians in relation to the drop in arriving foreign workers may be well understood in current circumstances. I would caution, however, that this presents several difficulties.

First, producers and employers will need time and resources to train new employees during the onset of the full agricultural season. Second, Canadians may not actually respond to increased hiring incentives or initiatives by local farmers and producers in sufficient numbers to fill the labour gap. Data from Statistics Canada show that, adjusting for inflation, farmers actually have been willing to spend more on wages for employees. Work by the Conference Board of Canada, however, suggests that we may need to raise wages by upwards of 66% in order to completely offset an ongoing trend in declining domestic participation in agriculture.

● (1410)

Our own exploratory research into the matter, which I should emphasize is preliminary and subject to a more robust analysis, suggests that Canadians may not be as responsive to wage increases in the agricultural sector as foreign workers are. Therefore, increased hiring may offset the decline in domestic labourers, but may not actually fill the gap.

In the conclusion of my remarks, I wish to put a face to these numbers. Discussions of labour supply and productivity need to be contextualized in the humans they represent. Yesterday, it was reported on CBC News that a third worker has died from the coronavirus, located on a farm near Simcoe, Ontario. The worker joins Bonifacio Eugenio Romero and Rogelio Muñoz Santos, both Mexican workers who died from the virus while working on Canadian farms.

In considering reforms to the temporary foreign worker program, we must keep in mind that improving the conditions for workers on farms and in processing plants is not a zero-sum game where Canadians must lose if workers are to benefit. In fact, both sides can win in this case. To that end, the committee may wish to explore some

of the following ideas in relation to foreign workers and agriculture.

First, reconsider the access that TFWs have to employment insurance, especially in periods of pandemic and job loss, which may encourage them to take time off rather than risk the spread of disease.

Second, consider adapting the Atlantic immigration pilot to an agricultural immigration pilot, and provide workers with the ability to gain permanent residency through the accumulation of hours or with the support of an employer. Upwards of 45% of TFWs return to farms after three years, 39% over five years, and after 10 years, still a quarter remain. This shows that, despite being called temporary foreign workers, many of them come back repeatedly year after year.

Third, consider allowing farmers to immediately deduct the capital costs for constructing new housing for TFWs, including sufficient space for workers, and make ongoing inspections part of the work of both IRCC and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. In fact, we may provide greater security to our food supply chain by addressing working conditions. We may also consider a retrospective, rather than innovative, look when we consider the permanency of foreign workers in agriculture. This means looking back on our history as a country that was built on a robust agricultural immigration program, and it is perhaps time to revisit that history with renewed understanding of the risks to our food supply chain and to workers themselves.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Hussan, please go ahead with your opening remarks.

● (1415)

Mr. Syed Hussan (Executive Director, Migrant Workers Alliance for Change): Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today on behalf of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, a coalition of 27 migrant-led organizations and allies. I am also on the coordinating committee of the Migrant Rights Network, Canada's national migrant justice alliance.

The truth is that a person's ability to access health care, assert their rights at work, be with their families or protect themselves in a pandemic is directly linked to their citizenship. This is true because the law makes it so. Just as one example, migrant agricultural workers know that a single COVID-19 infection on a farm puts them all in immediate danger, but they cannot risk speaking out because doing so means termination, homelessness, loss of income and deportation.

On Saturday night, Juan Lopez Chaparro passed away. He is the third Mexican migrant farm worker to die in Ontario from COVID-19 following Bonifacio Eugenio-Romero and Rogelio Muñoz Santos. Their pictures are right here.

There are at least 1.6 million temporary or undocumented migrants in Canada, or one in every 23 people. Canada has failed to provide equal rights and support during COVID-19 to at least one in every 23 people. This includes over half a million people in the country with no immigration status, most of whom do not have access to Canada emergency response benefits or even health care.

Undocumented migrant women are forced to move in with abusive men. Families choose unassisted home birth over years of indebtedness to medical bills, and thousands have become homeless. Those who did not lose work faced dangerous conditions but without any essential worker wage top-up.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of migrant domestic workers are trapped by their employers who refuse to let them leave their homes even to buy groceries or send remittances home. These migrant care workers are forced to stay in these conditions to complete hours of work requirements toward permanent residency status. In addition, they must fulfill impossible language and educational assessments to have a chance to reunite with their families.

Over 850,000 people on study or postgraduate permits are unable to find work, have lost wages and are struggling. Many are only eating because of food banks, but post-secondary institutions have raised tuition fees, and existing immigration requirements mean that most will not qualify for permanent resident status.

Tens of thousands of migrant farm workers in Canada came here and are choosing to stay, despite fear of getting sick, because they cannot access income support. We released this report with complaints on behalf of over 1,000 migrant workers about increased racism, surveillance, wage theft, exploitation, labour intensification and inhumane housing.

A multi-tiered system of immigration, where some have permanent residency and therefore rights to health care, family unity and freedom from reprisals while others are temporary or without status, engenders exploitation. That inequality and exploitation have been exacerbated during COVID-19. Not only migrants are saying it. Consider an op-ed published on May 5, 2014, in the *Toronto Star* which said that this is a “basic issue of fairness” and “Canada needs to re-commit itself to bringing permanent immigrants here who have a path to citizenship”, authored by then MP, now Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau.

Recommendation 16 from this very committee’s report in September 2016 called on Canada to “review the current pathways to permanent residency for all temporary foreign workers, with a view to facilitating access to permanent residency for migrant workers”.

Recommendation 19 from this committee’s study in December 2012, under the previous Conservative government, recommended that Canada should consider “offering better opportunities for temporary foreign workers to eventually become permanent immigrants”.

The reason that permanent immigration has always been a central component of any review on vulnerability and exploitation of non-permanent residents is simple. As Minister Carla Qualtrough said just three days ago, “There’s a power imbalance that exists in this system.” The power imbalance exists wherever there is tempo-

rary migration or people are undocumented. By denying them the rights that come with citizenship, laws and lawmakers are tipping the scale in favour of abuse, exploitation, exclusion and death.

We are going to provide this committee with detailed recommendations, but the solution is very simple. Ensure full immigration status for all migrants immediately without exclusion, without exemption, and ensure everyone arrives with full immigration status in the future. This is a matter of life and death.

I have a few final words. First, a path to citizenship or permanent residency is not the solution. A pathway, like the recently launched agri-food immigration pilot, is a promise of future security for some workers if they can jump through impossible hoops, leaving them more at the mercy of employers.

Second, increased inspections, while also necessary, will not solve the problem. Inspections ensure that employers are not breaking the law, but most of what employers are doing is legal. The law does not mandate social distancing, does not create national housing standards and is not a mechanism through which workers can complain.

Third, this is not just about being good enough to work, good enough to stay or guardian angels. Yes, migrants are in jobs that are essential during a public health pandemic, but whether migrants are disabled, homeless or unable to work, they must have the ability to take care of themselves and their families. Whether it is migrant sex workers or migrants working in warehouses, in construction or delivering food, every person is essential. No one deserves to be exploited. Everyone deserves to live.

● (1420)

We need a single-tier system of immigration. That means full immigration status for all in the country, and full immigration status for everyone who arrives in the future. This is essential. It’s necessary. It must happen now. People are dying.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hussan.

We are going to proceed with questions, beginning with Mrs. Kusie, for six minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Falconer, I really appreciated your testimony. My interest in inviting you to this committee was—earlier during the pandemic—specific to an article you had in one of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute publications on accreditation of physicians. You were concerned that... I believe the title of the article had “brain waste” within it.

It seemed the crux of your article was the concern that the current government was not providing enough oversight, or provisions in the pandemic environment to allow those with much-needed medical designations, skills and experience from other nations to achieve accreditation and to be used completely and effectively for the pandemic response.

I was hoping you might be able to share your findings from that article, as well as some of the information in that article with the group here as we reflect upon the lessons of COVID-19 and prepare for future similar scenarios.

Mr. Robert Falconer: Yes, I can absolutely touch on that as well.

What we found in preparing the research—and this is specific to immigrant physicians working in Canada but can be generalized to many other health care workers, including nurses, lab technologists, other front-line workers and workers involved in testing—is that it is taking an exorbitantly long time for a newcomer to recertify. When I say “newcomer”, it might sound odd. Maybe the more appropriate term I should be using is “international medical graduate”, which would include those who may be Canadian citizens or permanent residents but who studied abroad for their medical degree.

We found that it is taking upwards of five to 10 years for a newcomer or an international medical graduate to recertify within Canada. It is also costing a considerable amount, upwards of 42% of an IMG's or newcomer's median income during the period. This doesn't just involve the costs of recertification itself, which include things like fees and licensing requirements. This also includes the foregone benefits, like the income they could be earning during that time, the costs of buying textbooks to recertify, and the costs of transportation associated with travelling to various interviews. For some, especially those in more vulnerable parts of the population, this might mean that it's simply impossible to practise in Canada.

I will use a real-life example. I was speaking with an immigration lawyer who recently helped a refugee gain protected person status in Canada. The refugee was a very well-regarded heart surgeon from Colombia who was fluent in both official languages, English and French. However, because of the manner in which this refugee came to Canada, the individual came without a lot of assets and income and was working for Uber. This means that even with the knowledge the person has, he or she is very unlikely to recertify due to the financial barriers.

Some of this is due to a limitation on the residency seats available for IMGs, international medical graduates, at the provincial level, but it's not exclusively that. Immigrants often arrive in Canada with the unfounded expectation that because they qualified under the federal immigration streams, they are qualified to work. They are sadly disappointed when they're unable to help.

I noticed that recently the Province of Quebec decided it wanted to increase the number of what it calls essential workers coming to Quebec. However, I noted that many of them would need access to a licence in order to practise. Even if they arrived next month, it's likely that they would not be able to actually help out in the COVID-19 pandemic until much further down the road.

I know there are plenty of questions for the other panellists here, who can provide valuable insight as well, so I'll finish by saying that this pandemic is helping us to consider what barriers to entry are actually necessary. I can understand our concerns about public health and safety with regard to licensure of newcomers, but others, such as Ireland, France, the U.K., New York, New Jersey and several other states in the U.S. have decided to arrange everything to allow immigrants to practise under an associate model, meaning they practise under the supervision of a fully licensed medical professional.

New York, for example, will be completely waiving the requirement that they have a licence in order to practise. I wouldn't necessarily suggest that, but I do think that this pandemic is an opportunity to reassess how exactly we license newcomers and how we can work with the provinces and the federal government to ensure that part of their immigration streams involve a licensing stream as well.

• (1425)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's excellent. I think you've provided a lot of policy suggestions and best practices, and places to look for those best practices.

Based on that testimony and your previous testimony, I think as we go forward after the pandemic, the labour force will need to be completely re-evaluated and maybe even redefined. Can you provide any suggestions to legislators as we go forward into this new labour environment?

The Chair: Please be very brief, Mr. Falconer, as we're out of time.

Mr. Robert Falconer: To go with the example from Mr. Hussan, I think you should reconsider the role of temporary foreign workers and their potential place as permanent residents within Canada. We are worried about our food security. That would be the big one. Finally, again, it's okay to bring newcomers here to Canada and to want them to arrive, but I want them to be able to practise their professions, especially on the front lines.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

Mr. Housefather, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to both witnesses.

Mr. Falconer, I agree very much. As a mayor and now as an MP, I have been working to try to get Quebec to change the requirements with respect to foreign medical personnel and international graduates. Unfortunately, most of this is really provincial and in the college of physicians, but I'd be interested in chatting about that offline at a future date.

I wanted to ask both you guys about language requirements. One of the things that I worked on as chairman of the justice committee in the last Parliament was a study on human trafficking. What we recommended was that temporary foreign workers needed to receive documentation, including health documentation, in their actual language, their own language, not only in English and French.

Given the fact that many documents are still not available in Spanish, for example, with respect to many of the workers who are now in our farms, or in Tagalog or other languages, I think there may be a breakdown in communication, where temporary foreign workers do not know all the rights they have and are then not able to exercise their rights.

I'm wondering if either of you have any recommendations in regard to languages.

Mr. Syed Hussan: I think the simple notion is that migrants know that their housing and working conditions, the way they're being treated, is unjust and unfair. People know when their rights are being broken. This is not about information. It's about power. If you speak up, you'll get deported. You'll get terminated, you'll become homeless and you'll be kicked out of the country. How are you going to assert your rights? This is the entire structure. We need to move away from this notion that people don't know enough or need rights education. What they need is the ability to autonomously take care of themselves, right?

In COVID-19, or at any other point, frankly, you are making decisions every day to take care of yourself. You decide where to go, when to cover your face, and where not to go. Migrants don't have that power. It's not because they don't know it. Similarly, the entire conversation on human trafficking makes it seem as if there are very few bad apples, and it's a question of criminality and illegality and that's what needs to be dealt with. No. The problem is essentially the federal immigration law and the provincial labour laws that are working in tandem to create insecurity.

There are few rare and exceptional moments when people are in cases that could be considered as trafficking, and we work with those people. By and large the vast majority, the one in 23 people in this country who are non-permanent residents, are facing exploitation and abuse as a result of the laws that have been made in Parliament, not because of a trafficker.

• (1430)

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Again, I understand the point. I still think that having access to materials in your own language is pretty invaluable and important in order to know how to exercise those rights.

I now have a question for Mr. Falconer, regarding the recent penalties that the IRPR announced with respect to ensuring that employers have to help their employees follow public health orders, including the Quarantine Act, which gives some pretty hefty penalties to employers. Their penalties range up to a million dollars and permanent bans on hiring foreign workers. Do you think that is going to help in terms of the number of foreign workers who have contracted COVID-19 and help to have the public health requirements be met by these employers?

Mr. Robert Falconer: With respect to that, I think the biggest issue of course will be enforcement and knowing exactly when there are violations going on.

Actually, the best example I can think of with regard to where there could be better potential employment is a suggestion for greater inspections in going around to the farms. They of course [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] involving the CFIA. Actually, in terms of personal experience, when I was working in the orchards in B.C., the Canadian Food Inspection Agency was around regularly, and not necessarily for the purposes of reviewing the conditions of workers. They had to come because they wanted to test the condition of the food and food safety. That was due to exports or even domestic consumption within Canada.

I think that either training for IRPR liaison officers or empowering CFIA officers with the knowledge and ability to inspect working conditions and enforce public health measures would go a far way to actually really knowing how to enforce the restrictions you mentioned previously.

Mr. Syed Hussan: I want to mention that we issued this report in which we have complaints about employers breaking the Quarantine Act, and I have offered personally to ESDC on three occasions to look at them, through the inspectors, and they haven't taken us up on the offer.

Also, for most of the things that are happening outside of the Quarantine Act, this isn't about.... First of all, the inspections are not happening despite us trying to physically force the information to the inspectors, but also, it's not happening in quarantine. It's happening outside it. The problem is that what the employers are doing is legal, and people are falling sick and people are dying. I think we need to be very clear that you can only inspect existing laws, and the laws are broken.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have 35 seconds.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: My colleague, Mr. Kusmierczyk, who is the parliamentary secretary to Minister Qualtrough, has heard your offer to assist. I know that you guys helped the B.C. government recently and did some training in B.C., so I'm sure he'll pass on that message to his colleagues since I don't have any time left.

Thank you to both of you for being here. I really appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the two witnesses.

I'm going to begin with Mr. Hussan.

Mr. Hussan, your civil society group is a staunch advocate of temporary foreign workers. You talked about the challenges they face, which involve housing, health conditions and occupational health and safety. You released a report on those challenges. You are certainly a credible source.

The conditions you're condemning, are they perennial problems that have always existed, or has the COVID-19 crisis made them worse?

[*English*]

Mr. Syed Hussan: These are perennial problems. Our report is called “Unheeded Warnings” because we've been raising these warnings for half a century. Migrant farm workers have been coming to the country for 53 years.

• (1435)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, there was no interpretation when Mr. Hussan began speaking.

[*English*]

Mr. Syed Hussan: I'm sorry. I didn't hear the translation.

The Chair: Continue. You're good to go.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, I just wanted to let you know that there was no interpretation whatsoever when Mr. Hussan began speaking.

It's working now.

[*English*]

Mr. Syed Hussan: I'm sorry. I don't hear the translation anymore. I'm set at English.

Let me try.

Basically, yes, these are ongoing problems. This is why I brought to the committee its own decisions, its own recommendations from 2012 and 2016, and those of the Prime Minister.

I'm going beyond the last 10 years, but these are perennial problems, and they're not just happening on farms. They're happening with domestic workers, with international students, with undocumented people and with migrant sex workers. Wherever citizenship is being denied, people are struggling, and people are suffering.

We need to reverse the tide. That means we need to rethink immigration away from two-tier or multi-tier immigration to a single-tier immigration system, to give individuals the power to protect themselves.

This is not about charity. It's about autonomy. People are ready and willing to take care of themselves. The federal government is tipping the scale in favour of exploitation right now.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: The best way to solve a whole host of problems seems to be through permanent residency. Do I have that right?

Does that apply to all temporary foreign workers who come to Canada to work?

Take the agri-food sector, for example. Do the people working on farms want permanent residency as well?

[*English*]

Mr. Syed Hussan: We are the only national coalition of self-organized groups of migrants, undocumented people and international students. Over the last three months, we have written seven different letters to various cabinet members. I've done hundreds of interviews and reports. We started with minor policy adjustments: please extend CERB; make sure it gets to people without a SIN; change this health care law, and so on.

While we are talking, people are hungry and are dying. I've spent my time talking to people about how much lemon you need to put in a glass of water to kill your hunger properly because they have no income. I've spent my time talking to people about how they haven't left their house in three months because their children are sick and they're afraid of getting it, and there's no money or support for them.

We have spent our time talking to the families of those who have died. In each of these cases, no solution is quick enough, comprehensive enough and just enough other than permanent resident status for all, and it needs to happen immediately. Agri-food, domestic work, international students and undocumented people—we need a single-step solution or a way out of the crisis. This is an irreversible change that we've created in people's lives. There's no normalization—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

I have one last question, Mr. Chair, if I may.

The Chair: Yes, you have a minute left.

Ms. Louise Chabot: We all know how important foreign workers are, especially in the agri-food sector. We know there have been delays. An agreement was just signed with Mexico because the provinces aren't able to overcome the labour shortage.

From the outset, we criticized the fact that the federal government was giving employers \$1,500 for each worker while making them responsible for overseeing the process of getting workers set up on their arrival. I don't think that was adequate.

Mr. Falconer, do you think the federal government should step in to oversee the process and ensure workers are provided with proper conditions on their arrival?

[English]

The Chair: Give a brief response, please, sir.

Mr. Robert Falconer: Absolutely.

I'll go back to my previous point with regard to inspections. The CFIA, which you have acting right now, is on hand every day. With them it is not just the quarantine conditions but also physical distancing. I think that absolutely should be something we consider putting in place immediately on farms and within homes as well, to the extent that we may want to consider the option of housing temporary foreign workers outside of the farm if physical distancing cannot be accomplished in their quarters, even if that might need to be supported by the federal government.

• (1440)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Falconer.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next we have Ms. Kwan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their presentations.

Mr. Hussan, in the report “Unheeded Warnings”, a number of issues—glaring issues, if I may—were identified, including the lack of permanent resident status upon landing in Canada; fear of health, being related to the fear of lost income; wage theft; border closures and delays, resulting in lost income and workers being coerced to travel to Canada because no income supports were available; social distancing; adequate food and health information during quarantine; housing concerns and limitations on worker mobility; intimidation, surveillance, threats and racism; and intensification of work, including longer work hours and weeks without breaks. These are just some of the issues the report highlighted.

First, could you submit your full report to the clerk so that we have it on record, along with the recommendations from the report?

Mr. Syed Hussan: Yes, absolutely. I can do that immediately.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

With respect to the recommendations contained in the report, which I want on the public record as well, are those all the recommendations that you're calling for the government to act on immediately?

Mr. Syed Hussan: Yes. We're calling for the government to implement every recommendation in this report vis-à-vis farm work-

ers, including social distancing, health care access and immigration status for all.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You mentioned that you were in touch, or tried to be in touch, with the government, with the ministry, and you have had no response. Can you elaborate on that for our understanding? Who have you tried to reach and how many times? What is the status of that situation?

Mr. Syed Hussan: This is the first time I'm speaking to elected officials in government since March 15, which is when we started writing our letters. We wrote six letters, plus this report, and made multiple requests for meetings. Not a single.... We are the only organization that represents migrants directly. There are lots of lawyers and academics and experts who speak on behalf of people or who have opinions, but there can be nothing about us without us. Frankly, it's very clear that the government is not able in responding to what is a life-and-death situation.

I mean, these three men who are behind me, who I want you to look at and see and remember, are just one part of the series of injustices that are happening. We could tell you stories for weeks about the intense pain and suffering happening to migrants because they don't have CERB, they don't have health care and they don't have jobs. Lives and livelihoods are at stake.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The letters that you submitted to the ministries calling for action, could you also submit them to this committee for its record?

Mr. Syed Hussan: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You have received no response to your letters from any of the ministers' offices.

Mr. Syed Hussan: No, and we cc'd the federal cabinet committee on all of them. We have received no response. We have requested meetings and have heard nothing back from any elected official in government.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Since the issue has surfaced with respect to the deaths of migrant workers, has nobody from government reached out to your organization to talk to you about how it could work together with you to address these concerns?

Mr. Syed Hussan: No elected officials have. We did speak to people from ESDC right before our report and after. Both times we offered recommendations. We also offered to give them the names of the employers, and we asked for them to put in writing what they would do with the information. I sent them a reminder a week later, and we've heard nothing back. We were told that they would put our conversation in writing. I asked for a written log. Even that has not been produced.

Frankly, no one is paying attention to the fact that one in 23 people in this country are suffering. That's because there's this dehumanization. We keep talking about the food supply and the labour shortage as if.... These are friends, families, people with feelings. There needs to be an understanding of that, rather than the dehumanization that's happening.

I'm sorry. I'm emotional.

• (1445)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

Prior to this time, your organization and others have called for action from the government...ongoing. Where you've highlighted violations and abuses with examples and the experiences of the temporary foreign workers, what follow-up has been done from the government's side with respect to these complaints?

Mr. Syed Hussan: I'm just going to give you one much more recent example. We talked about these deaths and released this report, and Minister Marco Mendicino went on air and said, with regard to the agri-food immigration pilot, that they've heard us and that in fact it was the Liberals' idea and that they've already done it. The minister knows that these men could not apply for the program, yet he chooses to lie.

The Prime Minister and ministers keep issuing media statements rather than actually talking to real people. Who has talked to a single migrant or undocumented person in the last three months? Over the last six years with this government, we have held multiple meetings. Immigration and employment officials invited politicians to come meet directly with migrants, who have always said the same thing. They smile, they nod, they go home and they create these partial programs without any talk.

The entire quarantine was designed to keep Canadians protected, not migrants. That's what happened. The \$1,500 was given to protect Canadians; therefore, as you can see, that's who was protected, not migrants. Migrants are treated as the risk and the threat rather than as people who are at risk.

There is a central component of racism and dehumanization that's built into the entire temporary immigration system, and it appears at every turn.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hussan.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Hussan, the parliamentarians on the committee are not allowed to use a word that you used in your response. I would ask you to be judicious in your choice of words, please.

Mr. Syed Hussan: Sorry, Mr. Chair. I don't—

The Chair: You accused Minister Mendicino of lying.

Mr. Albas, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank both our witnesses for sharing their concerns and expertise with us today.

I am from the Okanagan, so we have a fair number of temporary foreign workers, seasonal agricultural workers, in my riding. In the last election, one issue I heard about at one of our immigration debates was specifically that seasonal agricultural workers pay various payroll taxes, like employment insurance and the Canada pension plan, but are obviously not eligible to access those services.

The issue was that simply just exempting them from the requirement would create an uneven playing field for employers to hire seasonal agricultural workers over Canadians, as it would be cheap-

er without the employer portion of these taxes. I've been trying to get some facts as to why this policy exists and then also how to deal with it.

Do any of you have any comments with regard to the policy of having seasonal agricultural workers pay these taxes or payroll taxes, and how can we best address the situation?

Mr. Syed Hussan: There are two major issues. One is that EI is not available, including paternal and maternal benefits, which used to be available and then the government took it away from migrant farm workers.

The other issue is that the way it's situated, basically when you're on a work permit and you finish your work, you are unemployed for four months, but benefits don't travel across borders, essentially. That is why so many migrant farm workers came here, if CERB was accessible to them.

They knew they were going to die. We received hundreds of calls saying, "If we come, we know we'll die." They were right because three are dead, but they came because CERB was not accessible to them. Therefore, EI, CPP and all benefits need to be portable and need to be accessible to migrants.

The reason that's not happening is the way the system is created, but also bank accounts. You deposit CPP in Canadian bank accounts. How do you access it in Mexico? There are some very simple technical issues, but there are these overall issues around portability.

• (1450)

The Chair: Mr. Falconer, go ahead, please.

Mr. Robert Falconer: Yes, as the other panellist mentioned, previously we used to have access to paternity and maternity benefits for temporary foreign workers in Canada. A restoration of those benefits and just a simple extension of EI to all workers in Canada would go greatly to reducing the stress that many of them may feel, especially if they have to go off work for a while. Using specifically the example of this pandemic, but even in my own experience, workers are often hesitant to call in sick. They're hesitant to report injuries, because they are afraid of losing time with relation to work. Being able to allow them to get EI would greatly reduce the likelihood that they are subjected to a pandemic such as COVID-19.

We might also wish to consider allowing them to receive EI if they are abroad before they come back. Many of these workers are often repeat workers, meaning they come back again year after year.

Those would be the two points I have with regard to employment insurance.

Mr. Dan Albas: If the current policy is maintained, that means people are putting into CPP or into EI without having the eligibility for those benefits. Obviously there's a question of fairness. Would it be as simple as giving the money back, if it's something that they can't claim? Is that something you think it would be, or as you both said, perhaps re-evaluating whether someone can be qualified for those?

Mr. Robert Falconer: I'm not sure about the exact nuances of such a program. I'll give you an example of something you can do.

Temporary foreign workers do file taxes in Canada. Allowing them to receive an EI deduction or EI rebate through taxation might be one possibility. However, again, I just provide that as an idea, not a specific recommendation.

Mr. Dan Albas: Sure. Okay.

We had some discussion earlier about the \$1,500 that was given to farmers to be able to isolate workers. Obviously anyone who is coming into the country right now, whether a resident of Canada or not, is receiving these isolation orders. However, the question in my mind regarding all farmers who are receiving this \$1,500 is whether there are checks to make sure that the workers are self-isolating, and as Mr. Falconer said, that they are safe.

Do either of you think the government is following through to make sure that the health and safety of both Canadians and the workers themselves are being followed up in the use of this \$1,500 grant?

Mr. Syed Hussan: Let's get the numbers right. The federal government has given \$900 million. That's nearly \$1 billion to agri-food businesses since March 15. Most of these employers make a profit of over \$500,000, and the vast majority of them hire migrant workers. Therefore, it's not just \$1,500 per worker for the quarantine period.

In that \$1,500 there was no guarantee, for example, that food would be provided to migrant farm workers. That wasn't written into the rules. What has happened as a result is that we work with people where 13 workers got one bag of potatoes to eat for a week. Six workers got one carton of eggs and a loaf of bread, and that's legal. Therefore, the employers are using it to change quarantine conditions for people to social distance for two weeks, but then right after that, they ram them in at 40 people to a dorm, with access to one shower, or 35 people to four toilets. Also, the quarantine period isn't covered in the \$1,500; it is not about it.

Actually, that \$1,500 was just for the first 14 days. Those rules were not followed. However, the rules were bad and all of the problems have arisen right after the quarantine period. I think \$1 billion has been given to big businesses. Most of these cases were in quarantine where workers weren't given food. The employers charged them for food. Thus, they're taking money from the government and they're taking money from the workers. We've documented 500 cases of that in the report that was released three weeks ago.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hussan.

Thank you, Mr. Albas. We're well past time.

Mr. Vaughan, you have five minutes.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): Thanks very much.

To Mr. Hussan, many of the standards you're talking about are provincially enforced standards in terms of the work conditions. Which province is doing it the best?

• (1455)

Mr. Syed Hussan: Yes, labour conditions are under the provincial law, but the federal government, by creating tied work permits, indentures workers to those laws.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I understand that. I'm just asking about the best regime, if we were to model improvements.

Mr. Syed Hussan: For the federal government, the best proposal is permanent resident status for all. The labour regime in B.C., at least in quarantine specifically just for those 14 days, made things a little bit better by taking over housing, but what happens after those 14 days? Are these debts happening afterwards? Labour intensification is happening afterwards.

There is a recruiter law that's good in Manitoba that I think should be created across the country. There's access to health care laws without the three-month wait period after entering the country.

There are different provincial laws and different issues. WSIB workers' compensation, minimum wage laws, recruiter laws, health care, each of them are different. We've already provided a comparison to this committee. I can resend that to look at best practices.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of those best practices, if we levelled the playing field up, that would be one of the ways in which to improve day-to-day conditions, but is your fundamental position that all temporary foreign workers should have access to permanent residency status immediately upon taking a job or over time?

Mr. Syed Hussan: For all temporary foreign workers, all international students and all refugees, basically a single-tier immigration system.... Any multi-tier system where you are in a system of temporariness for a few years means there's exploitation in those years, and if there are exceptions.... For example, in provincial nominee programs, you need to get a letter from your boss to say that it is a full-time job offer. We have seen employers say to a group of six workers that they will pick one of them. Now, none of them are complaining. Actually, the employer was taking money back from their paycheques in return for this promise of a letter.

Any time you have a temporary system, and you set up rules for anything after, there's exploitation. There's just no way around it, and there's no way to stop it because you don't complain, because complaining means you face deportation.

That's why single-tier immigration, permanent status for all, a documented migrant, student, single system....

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The minute you land in the country you're a permanent resident.

Mr. Syed Hussan: The minute you land in the country, but first let's talk about the people who are already here. A regularization program—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I appreciate that. If it's single tier, it's single tier. It means you apply, you get recruited, you land, and regardless how you work out on the farm, you have permanent resident status—

Mr. Syed Hussan: Like any other permanent resident in the country who comes from across the country. Three hundred thousand people get permanent residency each year. They land without a job offer. They get PR. We do that even with refugees, some refugees, not others.

There is a permanent system of immigration. Historically, that was the only system. This two-tier system is an aberration. It's recent, and it's particularly developed to ensure that certain people profit more. That's it. There is no benefit to Canada. There is benefit to employers or universities. There is no benefit to the health care system, to public health or to laws. If you just had a single system, you wouldn't have to have this conversation. Things would be simpler. We have to ask, "Who does it benefit?"

Mr. Adam Vaughan: To Mr. Falconer, on the change that is being scoped out here, differently, by the two of you as witnesses, has it been costed in terms of the impact on what it would cost to accommodate these sorts of changes, and what that impact would be to the food agriculture business? This is not to suggest that there should be a price on human rights, but just so we understand what we're talking about as an impact.

Mr. Robert Falconer: To clarify, I can certainly provide to the committee afterwards a brief including several recommendations that range across everything from housing to EI. With regard to permanent residency, I've never seen any Parliamentary Budget Officer's report on what it would cost and what the benefits would be in financial terms of immediately granting everybody permanent residency.

If I can raise one point with regard to that, in a forthcoming paper from the school we will actually address the.... We did an analysis of the transportation logistics as they relate to the agricultural sector. When you look at the total agricultural system, including on farms and in processing, transportation is the one area where you actually have what you might want to call a transition rate. For every year, let's say about 1,000 temporary foreign workers come to work in the transportation business and about 96% become permanent residents, yet there has been an increasing number of temporary foreign workers coming to work in that sector every year. If everybody were angels, we wouldn't have to make these arguments, but there are those who remain concerned that offering permanent residency to farm workers might somehow reduce the supply of farm workers.

The presence of temporary foreign workers in other sectors, such as transportation, proves evidence to the contrary. People will continue to want to come and work in Canada. I understand the other

council might disagree with me on this, but the Atlantic immigration program, with the accumulation of hours, could be adapted to an agriculture immigration pilot, but it needs to be accompanied with other reforms that concentrate on the safety of workers. Permanent residency does produce good health care and income outcomes. Immediately, we can also do much more in relation to housing, employment insurance, and to Ms. Kusie's point, licence shares so that workers can actually practice in the field they trained in as well.

• (1500)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Falconer and Mr. Vaughan. That takes us to the top of the hour.

Mr. Hussan and Mr. Falconer, the connection that you have to your work, the passion that you show for your work, is very evident in your presentations. We thank you for your service to the communities involved. We have greatly benefited from your presentations today. It will aid our work going forward. Thank you very much for being with us.

Colleagues, we are going to suspend for a couple minutes.

• (1500)

(Pause)

• (1510)

The Chair: We are back in session.

I would like to welcome Ms. Debbie Douglas, executive director for the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.

[*Translation*]

We also have Fernand Thibodeau, the vice-president and spokesperson of Seasonal Workers Help and Support.

[*English*]

Ms. Douglas, you have seven and a half minutes.

Ms. Debbie Douglas (Executive Director, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am joining you from Toronto, the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. It's now home to many diverse first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

I will speak to you about three priorities that must be considered by the government in its COVID response: regularization of immigration status, access to benefits and supports for all, and immigration selection.

First is regularization of immigration status, and I know that you heard from Mr. Hassan before me.

Canada has a large and growing population with precarious immigration status living and working here. That includes refused refugee claimants from Haiti working in long-term care and other essential services in the greater Montreal area, and undocumented people working in the food supply chain, in personal care work, cleaning and more. They pay taxes and fees, and some even pay personal income tax, but they cannot access government benefits or programs.

Because of their precarious immigration status, undocumented workers are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Given the nature of our temporary worker programs, the majority of such workers are racialized. In these COVID times, many are working in unsafe conditions, feeling they cannot say or do anything for fear they would lose their jobs. Clearly, they're needed because employers continue to employ them, and most likely also pay them lower wages.

Undocumented women are among those most vulnerable to exploitation, including domestic and intimate-partner violence. These women are also predominantly racialized.

We think these unprecedented times present Canada with an opportunity to seriously consider a broad immigration status regularization program to allow people with precarious immigration status to gain permanent residence. Canada already has at least two pilot programs of this kind: one in the GTA that is focused on workers in the construction sector, and another more recent program for certain agricultural workers.

While there are only estimates of how many people are here with precarious immigration status, we know those numbers have grown over time, particularly when there are changes to various immigration programs and people have fallen through the gaps. A number of such residents have been living and working in Canada, sometimes for many years. They are already established. They have networks and likely even family members who may be permanent residents or Canadian citizens.

There are families with mixed citizenship, and Canadian children with undocumented parents. This is not unusual in Canada. These Canadian children are often denied benefits.

Refugee claimants, migrant workers, international students and people who are undocumented or have otherwise precarious status present a good pool of candidates to draw from to meet the immigration targets already set by government, which we know we will not meet this year and most likely will not meet next year either because of the pandemic.

People with less than full residency status or citizenship are members of our communities and contribute to our economy. We gain far more from their presence here than they get back. Let's do the right thing, and let them gain full permanent resident status.

The other issue, which is related, is access to benefits for everyone. Building on my earlier point, people with precarious immigration status pay taxes and fees, and some even pay personal income tax, but they cannot access government benefits or programs. Research shows that they put far more into our economy than they use in publicly funded services.

During the COVID crisis, many have lost their jobs in the informal economy, and thus their incomes. They have no financial support or access to any benefits. Recently, OCASI, my organization, collaborated with some of our member agencies and others across the province, Toronto and southern Ontario in particular. Working with two private foundations, we were able to secure some dollars to provide some support to those without any income. It wasn't a lot of money, so you can imagine it went very quickly.

Agencies have also privately fundraised to address the urgent need they are seeing for financial support and basic resources, but these efforts are small and highly localized. They don't reach all those who need help, and of course, they're not sufficient.

● (1515)

We appreciate the fact that the government has given a boost to the Canada child benefit. This is welcome for many low-income families with minor children, but it is a benefit that is not available to people with precarious immigration status, even if they have Canadian-born children, as I mentioned earlier.

We also welcome the one-time top-up to the old age security and guaranteed income supplement. These benefits, however, are not available to permanent residents who have lived here for less than 10 years, even if they have lived and worked here for, say, nine and a half years. At this time, when even their own family members may have suffered a loss of income, there may be literally no one they can rely on for income support.

These are very difficult times for so many residents, but especially for people with precarious immigration status. I urge you to call for an extension of government benefits and programs to all residents, regardless of immigration status, until we can weather this crisis. Government can do this by issuing a temporary social insurance number that people can use to apply. We will come out stronger as a society and be in a better place to start rebuilding the economy, working safely and together.

My final point is to urge you to open up economic immigration selection. If there is one thing we have learned during this pandemic, it is how much of what we consider essential work is unseen. We notice it only when it is missing, when there is no food on our tables, when there is no one taking care of elderly Canadians in long-term care homes—cooking for them and cleaning up after them—when there is no one to package and deliver the food, medicine, toilet paper and other essential supplies that we need.

However, these are not the jobs in our immigration selection program, which is skewed to highly skilled workers and highly educated students in certain sectors. Don't get me wrong. Yes, we need those people with those skills. We also need those who grow and harvest our food; work in our meat and fish plants; build our homes; work as caregivers, cleaners and general labourers; and work in our call centres. Let us learn from the experience and open up immigration selection to match the reality of what we are seeing on the ground in labour markets across Canada.

In the interim, we should start giving people who are already here an opportunity to become permanent residents if that is what they're interested in doing. Some may not be interested. They may prefer to return to their home countries, but there are many others who want to stay and have already started taking the steps towards that by working and building a life here.

Mr. Chair, in the time that I have left, I want to acknowledge the positive work relationship that has been happening in the sector in collaboration with the federal government. This, I believe, underlines the importance of consistent relationship building and joint work, as happens through our sector's national settlement and integration council, NSIC.

As you know, OCASI, my organization, is the umbrella for over 230 agencies across Ontario that provide services and programs to newcomers to Canada. The sector—and I know I can speak for my sister umbrella organizations across the country—was relieved and encouraged that the federal government declared it an essential service. We have two primary reasons for absolutely seeing this as good policy. The primary role of immigrant and refugee-serving agencies is to support newcomers in the process of building a new life in Canada.

• (1520)

The Chair: Ms. Douglas, I'll ask you to wrap up as you're well over time.

Ms. Debbie Douglas: I'm sorry.

During the pandemic, during the whole COVID situation, our agencies have been the places that newcomers have been turning to for support, for information about income supports, for support in filing income taxes, for interpretation and translation of information about income supports.

We want to say a special thank you to IRCC for keeping the sector going by having workers stay on the job and by being flexible in allowing organizations to be responsive to the needs that they're seeing in their local communities.

Thank you. I look forward to our discussion.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Douglas.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thibodeau, you may go ahead.

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau (Vice-President and Spokesperson, Seasonal Workers Help and Support): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members of the committee, good afternoon.

I appear before you today to talk about the situation facing workers in seasonal industries who live in regions that revolve around those industries.

Seasonal industries have always played an important role in Canada's economy. In certain regions of the country, those industries are paramount, generating the bulk of available jobs. Unfortunately, because of this dependence on seasonal industries in a growing number of regions, workers can no longer live on the combination of seasonal work and employment insurance, or EI.

Even if workers take every available job during the busy season, they can't get through the off-season. In a good year, a seasonal worker will work for 14 weeks, or the equivalent of 525 hours. Even in regions where the unemployment rate is over 16%, workers are eligible for only 33 weeks of benefits, leaving them with no income for five weeks. The problem is that few jobs are available in the off-season. The lack of economic diversity means that workers have to rely on EI.

The black hole or spring gap, in other words, the weeks without income, exacerbates regional decline. People are fed up with always having to live on the brink, so they move to urban centres. The government's response—a pilot project to provide five additional weeks of benefits—was certainly a welcome boost, but it's not enough. As I've just shown, even in regions with the highest unemployment rates, the spring gap persists. It's always existed, but for many of us, it's gotten worse in recent years. It has to do with the fact that a number of affected communities are in EI economic regions with lower unemployment rates that do not reflect the local economies.

For instance, in the Restigouche-Albert region, where I'm from, our small communities depend on the seasonal industry, but they are lumped together with the Moncton suburban area, and that brings down the unemployment rate. Let's look at another example. On the upper north shore, the local unemployment rate is 9% higher than the rate of the EI economic region it belongs to. In order to qualify for benefits, workers have to accumulate nearly 700 hours, which is very hard to do. What's more, even if they do qualify, all they are entitled to is 18 weeks of benefits.

I'd like to draw your attention to another problem. The unemployment rate is dropping in a number of affected communities, but the reason isn't that there are more jobs. It's that the population is getting older, so fewer people are applying for the same number of jobs—hence, why the pilot project needs to be enhanced. We suggested that to the minister, but to no avail, unfortunately.

Here's what we are recommending. First, the government should raise the number of additional weeks of benefits in the designated regions to 10. Those additional weeks would be subject to the current maximum number of benefit weeks, 45 and more. Next, the government should expand access to the pilot project by changing the eligibility criteria for seasonal workers. Right now, the rules are complicated and arbitrary, so much so that genuine seasonal workers don't qualify for benefits. We recommend making employers indicate on the record of employment whether the layoff was seasonal, so workers are judged less harshly. In addition, we recommend that the government revisit the EI economic regions map to bring it more in line with labour market conditions. The map hasn't changed in 20 years. Can you believe that? It's time to brush off the dust and bring it up to date.

I'd like to take this opportunity to recognize the people who work at the Canada Employment Insurance Commission and all the committees who have worked so hard on employment insurance issues. I'd also like to thank the Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses, because the EI offices are closed and we are the ones having to help those workers.

Lastly, there is another option: redesigning the parameters of the EI program for all Canadians. That means making 420 the number of hours required to qualify, providing 35 or even 40 additional weeks of benefits, and using the best 12 weeks to determine the benefit rate. That formula has a dual advantage: simplicity and fairness.

To those who worry that such changes could lead to abuse of the system, I have two things to say. First, even full EI benefits do not provide the equivalent of minimum wage, which, in and of itself, is not enough to meet the government's low-income cut-off.

• (1525)

Second, according to the Employment Insurance Monitoring and Assessment Report, on average, claimants access benefits for just 20 of the 35 weeks they are entitled to. That means the vast majority of Canadians use the EI program reasonably. Conversely, 33% of claimants exhaust their benefits before they are able to find work. Those are the people we worry about, and I hope you do too.

In closing, I hope you take two things away from my presentation. Number one, regions need revitalization support. Number two, EI will not fix every problem, to be sure, but it's an essential part of the solution. The government needs to make changes to EI to better support seasonal workers in affected regions. As I see it, there's a serious problem. EI failed people during the COVID-19 crisis, so the government had to invent a whole new program, the Canada emergency response benefit.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thibodeau.

[English]

We'll begin now with questions, starting with Mr. Albas for six minutes, please.

Mr. Dan Albas: Thank you.

I'd like to thank both of our witnesses for your testimonies here today and for sharing your expertise with our committee.

In the last hour, I asked two of our witnesses to talk a little bit about the payroll taxes that people who come on a temporary foreign worker program or a seasonal agriculture worker program pay into the system, particularly the Canada Pension Plan and EI, knowing that they won't be able to benefit from those programs down the road. Obviously there are concerns that if those payroll taxes were not paid, there would be an inequality between a Canadian worker and someone on a temporary foreign worker seasonal agriculture worker program.

Do you have any idea why this policy exists, and why it is set up in such a way that currently someone who is in this country and is contributing into the system has no expectation of getting something out of it?

Do you have any suggestions on how best to address this without creating an inequality between Canadian workers and those who are here on a temporary basis?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: Mr. Chair, my sense is that temporary foreign workers do not mind paying payroll taxes. What they want is access to those benefits when they need them. If they get sick or there's a shortage of jobs, they want to be able to access the benefits, including if they have to return to their country and there will be some time before they are able to become gainfully employed.

One of the reasons temporary foreign workers come to Canada to work in such extreme situations and come back year after year is often that there's a lack of opportunity in their home country. I think we should be looking at how we can ensure that they have access when they need it to the social benefit programs that they've paid into, particularly CPP once they reach retirement age, but also EI when there's a downturn or if, as sometimes happens, they speak up for their rights or they speak up for the rights of others, and then they're not brought back the following year. They should be able to tap into the EI system while they resolve that situation.

• (1530)

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Thibodeau, do you want to comment? No?

Okay, maybe I'll move on to the next question.

I also asked about this in the first hour and want to get your opinions. The government is giving \$1,500 per worker to employers for support during mandatory quarantine. Do you feel employers are using this money effectively to support workers while they have to be in lockdown?

Ms. Douglas, we'll start with you, but Mr. Thibodeau, we'd also like to hear from you.

Ms. Debbie Douglas: What we've heard from our colleagues who are working more closely and more directly with migrant workers is that there's been very little monitoring of that situation. Even in those workplaces where folks were able to quarantine safely, relatively speaking, they then often went back into congregated living arrangements, and hence the rapid rise in number of infections in southern Ontario, as an example.

Without monitoring, without farmers and other employers needing to demonstrate that the dollars really are being used to keep workers safe, I'm not sure how we can address the situation. The money has been sent out, and we need to hold those folks accountable to ensure that workers are able to carry out social distancing, not only within their living arrangements but also when they're out in the workplace.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Thibodeau, do you have any feedback on this question?

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: Plants that employ seasonal workers received money to protect those workers, and provide them with face shields and, in some cases, install barriers to separate them.

We've also seen major discrepancies in the bonuses those workers have been receiving during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them got an hourly pay increase of \$0.50, and others got two dollars or four dollars. I've heard from many workers about that, but I can't help them because it's up to the employer. Still, I think it's terrible that the same pay increase isn't available to everyone. These people are out in the hot sun working hard and having to wear protective glasses, masks or face shields. What they're dealing with is awful.

[English]

Mr. Dan Albas: I'm being more specific because those do sound like they are on site, and most of those would probably be provincial, but I'm talking more about the requirement to isolate for two weeks before going in to regular work. It does sound like there is some question of value for money and proper monitoring.

The federal government has also stopped audits of employers and is only doing virtual spot checks. Is this failure to do audits exacerbating the problems that we are seeing?

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: Are you asking me?

[English]

Mr. Dan Albas: I'm speaking to either one.

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: As I said, seasonal workers are back at work in the plants. Those in the tourism sector are as well. Only those who work in peat production and forestry are not back yet, but I don't know whether they went into isolation to receive the money.

There's no doubt that those working right now haven't been earning their full income, and they've had even fewer pay increases. I also don't know whether they've already received the \$1,500.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Thibodeau. Thank you, Mr. Albas.

Ms. Douglas, do you have a very brief response?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: No, I'm fine, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dong is next, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

First of all I want to thank the witnesses for coming to today's committee and giving us their very good suggestions and their observations on both fronts.

Ms. Douglas, first of all I want to thank OCASI for all you've done. I've dealt with OCASI quite a bit in the past in terms of supporting refugees and newcomers. I want to thank you for your advocacy.

Back in March, OCASI posted six recommendations about how to protect all workers, including newcomers and permanent residents, during COVID-19. With the introduction of CERB—and we know that CERB does include international students and foreign workers—there were some changes made to post-graduate work permits and immigration programs. We made quite a number of changes for international students, including allowing them to work full time if they're in an essential service.

In my riding, I've heard that hundreds of new graduates from Seneca are now stepping forward and joining the health care front. Many of those were international students who recently graduated.

How would you assess the early response by the federal government to COVID-19?

• (1535)

Ms. Debbie Douglas: We were very pleased when CERB was announced, especially with how flexible and easy it was for those who qualified. We were also glad that the government listened and then brought more and more international students into it.

The concern that we have is that there are a significant numbers of folks—we were talking about folks with precarious immigration status and those who are undocumented—who have not been able to access CERB.

As you know, OCASI has been having this conversation with every minister we can find, to talk about that and talk about the folks who have been here for many years, folks who have fallen through the gaps for whatever reason and are now undocumented. They've been working in the informal economy, have lost their jobs and have no access to provincial benefits or to income supports like CERB.

As I said in my presentation, there are very many community-based organizations that are trying to raise funds. OCASI itself worked with two foundations—the Atkinson Foundation and the new Mariam Assefa Fund, through World Education Services—to provide some relief to a number of families, particularly in southern Ontario and here in Toronto. Those folks continue to need support.

In terms of the rapid response to CERB, the expansion to ensure that international students were able to get in, the flow of information, although at the front end we had some concerns about the lack of translated information, agencies really stepped up to ensure that the message was being pushed out to communities in whichever way, through various first-language media and those kinds of things, so the uptake for those who qualified was very positive. The folks we're concerned about are those who are continuing, even now, to fall through the cracks because they're not eligible for provincial social assistance and not eligible for federal income supports. Something has to happen there.

Mr. Han Dong: We also see that recently there were a lot of racist incidents in Canada and the United States, whether it was anti-Black racism, anti-indigenous racism, or anti-Asian racism. Today Angus Reid released a study with some shocking statistics: 61% of the people surveyed have adjusted their routines in order to avoid run-ins or otherwise unpleasant encounters since the COVID-19 outbreak began. The company interviewed quite a few Asian Canadians or Chinese Canadians. Over half are worried that Asian children are going to be bullied when they return to school due to COVID-19 outbreaks.

I know your agency works with a large number of newcomers and immigrants from racialized communities. What kinds of challenges do you think you will face as we slowly recover or reopen the economy, and of course in September, as we hope schools will be reopened for all kids to return? Actually, I worry. I ask this question on behalf of my kids, who are in the public system.

Ms. Debbie Douglas: With the onset of COVID, we saw sharp increases. Not that anti-Asian racism didn't always exist, but we remember the nipper-tipping nonsense, and hatred that was happening here in Ontario not too long ago. We saw a significant increase in anti-Asian racism, whether people were being physically attacked or called names. Some of our political world leaders have absolutely encouraged those kinds of things, and Canada is not immune to it.

We've also seen a rise in anti-Black racism, and just very blatantly, both in terms of individuals who threaten Black lives all the time, including our security forces, like the police, and in terms of unarmed folks being killed, especially those at the intersection of race and mental health.

As a country, we really need to take this seriously. As the pandemic continues and we begin to slowly reopen and begin to look at some of the economic numbers, especially employment numbers, we know historically that racialized folks, and particularly those who are immigrants and refugees, will begin to be blamed. That's why it is so important for governments at all levels to be proactive in terms of putting out public messages around issues of anti-racism and what that really looks like.

Even more important, what this pandemic has shown is the huge gap that exists because of race and systemic racism. This is a time for governments to be bold, to look at policies that will shift, and move how racialized folks are participating economically and socially. I'm here talking about regularization of status. When we talk about those who are undocumented, the vast majority are racialized folks. When we respond in terms of a regularization program, it is also an anti-racism response.

• (1540)

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you may go ahead. You have six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Douglas and Mr. Thibodeau.

My questions are for you, Mr. Thibodeau. Thank you for your presentation. As you said at the outset, seasonal workers are an important part of Canada's economy. Before we talk about pilot projects and ways to make things better, I have a question for you.

Clearly, COVID-19 gave rise to uncertainty. Seasonal workers, who were in the spring gap, had no hope of earning enough income to qualify for another benefit period. Consequently, they were given access to the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB. It took a lot of work to make that happen, but in the end, they were allowed to apply.

What do you think the solution is? Normally, at this time of the year, workers are filling up on hours, so to speak, leading up to next year. We think the time during which workers didn't go back to work and were receiving the CERB should count towards their EI eligibility. After all, they weren't able to return to their jobs.

Do you think that's a good idea? Are there other things you would recommend?

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: That's a very good solution.

Certainly the seasonal workers were in a black hole. A provincial government pilot project ended in late March. At that point, I received many calls, over 300 in one week. People were calling me because many of them were in a black hole and had no income. These people had to turn to the Canada emergency response benefit for help. They were then able to return to work.

I think that it's necessary to look at the employment insurance system as a whole to be able to meet the needs of seasonal workers. Can we fish in the winter? Can we make a living from tourism in the winter? Can we pick blueberries in the winter? Can we harvest peat in the winter? Can we cut wood in the winter? The answer to each of these questions is no.

We must avoid judging seasonal workers. These people work 70 to 80 hours a week on cement, in the heat and with sweat running down their foreheads. The reason is not that they don't want to work, but that it's all they have.

We mustn't forget the economic importance of seasonal workers, who constitute the backbone of 60% of Canada's economy. Today, stores are open. Who's running them? Retired people and seasonal workers.

Full-time workers—I have nothing against them—work in offices until 5 p.m. or later. From 9 a. m. to 5 p. m., who keeps the businesses running? Seasonal workers. They're very important to the economy.

It's important, if not essential, to study the employment insurance system and the current situation as a whole. The COVID-19 pandemic has given us momentum and the opportunity to change things. I think that it's necessary to change the areas and hours and to look at the employment insurance needs of all workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic is sending us a message. We need change. We need to dust off the furniture.

Ms. Louise Chabot: We'll try to do this with an environmentally friendly product.

You referred to the pilot project, which ended in May 2020. The mandate of the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion was to improve the pilot project by establishing a permanent program that provides consistent and reliable benefits. However, regulations have just been passed that simply extend this pilot project in its current form by one year. The regulations provide an additional five weeks of benefits.

I gather that the improvement issue is significant. Basically, the industry is seasonal, not the workers. Is that what you mean?

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: That's exactly what I mean.

• (1545)

Ms. Louise Chabot: The goal must be to eliminate the risk of black holes as much as possible by improving the regular employment insurance benefit system.

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: Exactly. We're disappointed that the pilot project isn't permanent yet. We held meetings with all the Atlantic regions, which is significant. We then had meetings in Rimouski with all the people from Quebec. We prepared a report, which we submitted to the minister. However, I don't think that the report was taken into consideration. It should be.

We heard that the one-year extension was the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I don't think that this is the reason for the extension.

We need a permanent system. Employment insurance must be re-considered from A to Z. It must be changed, especially for seasonal workers.

Ms. Louise Chabot: The short-term goal is to review the number of hours required to qualify for employment insurance. We also know that some people don't qualify for it, particularly women, as a result of the atypical nature of their work.

Could you suggest three main ways to resolve the issues with the current system?

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: At this time, the hours issue must be resolved. The divisor must be reviewed and the calculations must be adjusted.

It's also necessary to change the areas, which don't meet needs. For example, Restigouche—Albert is quite close to the Moncton suburbs. When we talk about “changing,” we aren't talking about changing a small part of the area. We really need protected areas for seasonal workers to meet their needs.

It's necessary to review the areas and hours.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thibodeau and Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next we have Ms. Kwan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is it my turn now, Mr. Chair?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the witnesses for their presentations.

I'm going to come to you, Ms. Douglas, if I may. First off, thank you for the work of OCASI in our community. It's much appreciated.

In terms of rights for migrant workers, we heard in our previous panel the situation that has prevailed for years and years. The most recent report that was made public was “Unheeded Warnings”. Have you had a chance to look at that report?

The Chair: It is.

Ms. Debbie Douglas: No, I haven't had a chance to look at the report in any detail, though I think I'm familiar with some of the issues that may have been raised in there.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, maybe I can go to this.

On the critical issue of addressing the abuses and the problems that exist in the system, there is to call for landed status on arrival—that is, to recognize the workers on arrival and to give them status. Is that something OCASI supports?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: Absolutely. It is one of our policy priorities. We believe that workers should be landed on arrival.

We need to look at two things. We need to provide a system to land those who are already here and to then open up. That's why I talked about looking at our economic selection process as a way of addressing some of that. Those who are coming in to work temporarily should not be coming in temporarily but as permanent residents.

I know that Syed Hussan makes fun of people like me who say things like, “Good enough to work, good enough to stay.” I absolutely agree with him, but it goes back to the earlier questioner about folks paying into our EI and CPP and not being able to have those benefits.

Yes, workers should be landed on arrival, and those who are already here should be given some regularization program so that they can become permanent residents on their way to citizenship.

• (1550)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

There's a difference, then, between landed status on arrival versus being given a program towards citizenship. A pathway to citizenship is a two-step program, right? If you land here without status, then you're not getting the rights you're afforded, so there's a major difference.

Ms. Debbie Douglas: Absolutely.

We took a turn to temporariness in Canada's immigration program decades ago, and we are seeing that it's led to dire exploitation of workers. If you look at the seasonal agricultural program, you see that folks who have been coming here have been coming for decades. They have been working and they've been paying into our system, yet we send them home when they're sick. They have no access to the benefits they have paid into. We have taken their labour, and then we send them back when we have no more use for them. That is wrong.

If folks are going to come to Canada to work, they should be landed and they should have all of the responsibilities and privileges of having permanent resident status here in Canada. It will certainly take away the first point, the exploitation by employers and being afraid to complain about working conditions because of fear of being fired and/or fear of not being called back the following year.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much for that clarification.

On the issue with our immigration system, there was a point in time when we brought in people with a whole range of skills—not just high skills and not just economic immigrants, if you will, but the whole range of skills. To boot, we actually also had a more extensive family reunification process that included sponsorship of siblings, as an example. Could you comment on whether the Canadian government should be changing our immigration system to incorporate the full range of skills, such as high-, medium- and low-skilled workers, as part of the permanent residence immigration stream?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: Absolutely. If the pandemic has shown us one thing, it is who our essential workers are. They are the ones our immigration program should be targeting as well.

Yes, we need, as I said, those who are highly skilled, and yes, we need folks with post-graduate degrees, but on the ground, for our day-to-day living, we need the people who keep our communities going. These are folks who are building our homes. These are folks who are packing our meats. They're picking our vegetables and they're planting them. These are the folks who are driving the trucks that get those to the grocery store. There are folks who are

working as cashiers. Those are the folks who drive our daily lives. The fact that they do not have access to permanent residence through a transparent immigration process is just wrong.

If nothing else, I think this is the time for the federal government to respond, to take a look at our points system to see how we can enhance—for lack of a better word—the express entry program. I think this can be done through an economic class program.

I also think you're correct that families are a net benefit to immigrants and refugees who are here. Expanding the family reunification class makes absolute sense. Expanding it to siblings but also to children over age 22 is what I would suggest.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

One of the issues that is before us is Bill C-17. The government has tabled legislation to penalize people for “fraud” in accessing CERB. As we know, there was a lot of confusion about the program itself. People were encouraged, even by parliamentary secretaries who were encouraging people to apply and to interpret the government's rules liberally.

To that end, what are your thoughts on the sections in part 4 of the bill that deal with the penalties with respect to CERB? Do you think that they should be withdrawn?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: I think we need to be very careful that we don't demonize and stigmatize folks who needed to access the CERB program, especially those who are immigrants, refugees or other migrants, and especially those who are racialized.

Bill C-17 sounds very punitive. Our concern is that it will end up punishing those who may have in very good faith thought they were eligible, applied, got the funds, realized they weren't eligible, and never went back. Others went to CERB when they should have been on EI.

Especially when the government talked about putting this very flexible program in place to support Canadians and not wanting Canadians to fall through the cracks, in the end to turn around and penalize what may very well have been good-faith mistakes is a dangerous slope to start going down.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Douglas. Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Albas, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, would you mind passing my time to Rosemarie Falk?

The Chair: Ms. Falk, you have the floor.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

I want to thank both of our witnesses for your contributions to the work of this committee today.

We know many sectors in Canada lean heavily on the temporary foreign worker program. In a riding like mine in rural Saskatchewan, I know how important it is to those in the agriculture sector specifically. It's a sector where the needs are absolutely time-sensitive. We know too that the recent deaths of migrant farm workers are truly heartbreaking, and the reports around their work conditions are cause of great concern.

The success of the program is obviously in the interests of workers, employers and the government. I would suggest that the success of the program has to be measured against not only having timely access to employees but also against health and safety in the work environment.

My question is for Ms. Douglas. With those measures in mind, in your view, do employers of temporary foreign workers have the appropriate resources to comply with provincial and federal governments' COVID-19 requirements?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: We certainly hope so. They are employers and they're responsible for their employees' safety. Millions were sent their way in support, certainly in our food sector, so I would expect employers who are bringing in workers—even those who didn't have access to government funds—to have the proper accommodations in terms of isolation and also in terms of their ongoing living conditions. I would expect them to pay attention to ensuring safety in the workplace, including things like social distancing, access to sanitizers, access to masks, folks being able to not work overtime and folks having access to medical support when required. I think all of those things should be the responsibility of the employer.

Once again, if we're not being consistent with inspections and if we're not showing up in the workplace without first announcing that inspectors are going to show up, these issues will continue to be exacerbated. It is the migrant workers who are getting the short stick. We've all watched what's happened in Alberta in the meat packing plant. We are very concerned about what's happening on our farms here in southern and southwestern Ontario.

Yes, it's the employer's responsibility, but it's also the government's responsibility to ensure that the inspections that are necessary are consistent and are happening, and that employers who are not following the rules are being penalized.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Are you aware of any specific barriers in meeting any of those requirements?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: What we've been hearing from migrant workers is that they are living in congregated spaces where there are a number of folks in one room. Even those who came in to quarantine get put back into congregate. As I said, we are not surprised at the infections, but we're angry about it and we're concerned about it. We're concerned about, as one of the members said, the deaths of migrant workers that have happened.

Yes, I believe that if employers are going to be given permission to bring in workers from overseas, they must demonstrate that they have the ability to keep them safe, and government is responsible for ensuring that this is happening.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

Additionally, could either of you please comment on practical steps the provincial or federal governments could take to better ensure the effective implementation of these types of requirements?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: My colleague, would you like to speak? No.

It's as I've said. Provincial governments are responsible for enforcing labour laws. Again, it's about ensuring that the workplaces are following guidelines put in place for COVID, but even before COVID, we had those concerns of unsafe workplaces and ensuring that employees had their rights protected and were not being penalized when they tried to stand up for themselves to assert their rights.

For me, there isn't a difference between a notice of provincial or federal jurisdiction. The issue is that employees need to be kept safe. Employers have a responsibility to ensure that safety, and the governments have a responsibility to assure Canadians and Ontarians, in my case, that the workers we're bringing in are being kept safe within the workplace and in the living space for those who are living with their employer.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk and Ms. Douglas.

Finally, we're going to Mr. Turnbull, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Hi, Ms. Douglas. It's great to have you here and good to see you again.

Mr. Thibodeau, it's great to hear your testimony as well.

Obviously I think we're all concerned about the outbreaks in southwestern Ontario on some farms, mostly in Essex County, I believe. I know our government's working to address these issues.

Ms. Douglas, you said a moment ago, in response to Ms. Falk's question, that we need to make sure inspections are consistent and that they're happening. Do you think Service Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada and local health units working together to ensure those inspections happen would address and improve the non-compliance we might be seeing?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: I'm not sure of the capacity of local health organizations in the middle of a pandemic when they're paying attention to the larger issue of safety and they're putting out policies. I think, however, that the provinces must beef up their inspections. We were a bit alarmed when we found out that inspectors in Ontario were told they can call in to do their inspections at the height of COVID at the same time that we were having conversations about opening the borders and allowing migrant workers to come in, and the federal government had announced a significant amount of money for employers. The fact that we didn't make those links to ensure that the funds were being spent on what they should be spent on, to ensure that public health guidelines about social distancing were put in place, to ensure that once folks came out of self-isolation they had living spaces that did not then expose them to the virus, and all the things I said to the other questioner—

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I think what I'm hearing essentially is that we need physical inspection.

Ms. Debbie Douglas: Oh, absolutely, and consistently and without warning at times.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

Mr. Thibodeau, did you want to comment on that?

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: I found it difficult that seasonal workers were told that COVID-19 was very dangerous. People weren't really informed. They came back to work feeling very afraid and worried. People were very worried about returning to the plants, because 300 people work in the plants, crammed together.

At first, we heard that walls would be put up. However, there were no walls. No walls were put up in the plants.

I'm wondering a great deal about worker protection. People returned to work feeling worried. They were afraid. That's what happened.

[English]

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. Thibodeau, I'm short on time and I want to get in another question.

I understand there are some pretty severe penalties in enforcement. I think employers can be fined \$1 million and be banned from participating and hiring temporary foreign workers in the future. It seems particularly punitive, and to me it would serve as a good deterrent. Would you agree that those fines and penalties are enough to ensure that employers are following the rules?

[Translation]

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: I think so. As I said, people are returning to work feeling very worried and afraid. Many of these people have called to tell me that they weren't really protected and that they had only a visor and a small mask. Some of them have passed out while breathing with this protection, and ambulances have come to get them. Is that human? No.

I think that occupational health and safety officials, both in New Brunswick and across Canada, must look at this issue, visit the sites and really see whether employers are keeping their employees safe. If not, it's necessary to meet with these employers.

[English]

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: What level of government enforces those labour conditions, enforces regulation? Is it the provincial government?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: The provincial government is responsible for our labour laws. The federal government is responsible for the migrant workers program. Hence, they both have some responsibility.

• (1605)

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: They both have a hand in it.

This is the other thing I wanted to ask, really quickly. Minister Mendicino testified before this committee and talked about temporary foreign workers being given implied status and about a significant amount of flexibility being added to their work permits. Do you think that's sufficient?

You were talking, Ms. Douglas, about the regularization of the whole process being a broader opportunity. Do you think implied status is a good step forward during the pandemic?

Ms. Debbie Douglas: Implied status was necessary so that we didn't have a disruption in the workforce. Things shut down. Folks' work permits were running out. They needed to have them renewed and couldn't renew them. It makes sense to give implied status, but that implied status has nothing to do with regularization. As we've been saying, for folks who are here to work and to contribute, folks who have been working and have become sick, folks who are here undocumented and have established themselves, this is the moment for us to do both steps and put in place a regularization program for those who are here.

Second, it's time to take a look at our immigration program, including our economic class and our family reunification class, to see what changes we can make there so that when we're bringing in workers, they are coming in as permanent residents. It's similar to when we bring in convention refugees, for example. They are permanent residents on arrival. Those are the conversations we need to be looking at right now.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Douglas. Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

Before we sign off, I'm going to take this rare occasion to exercise the chair's prerogative.

[Translation]

Mr. Thibodeau, I want to ask you a question that's very relevant to Prince Edward Island.

In your presentation, you spoke about the areas used to determine benefit levels. This issue is very significant in Prince Edward Island. What do you think about the area review process? The government's decision in 2014 has created a situation in Prince Edward Island that encourages dishonesty.

Mr. Fernand Thibodeau: I believe that you have two areas in Prince Edward Island. In my opinion, on a small island such as yours, only one area would be necessary.

Take the example of my area, Restigouche—Albert. Albert is close to Moncton, so close to urban centres. In terms of work, from an economic standpoint, we're located in the Acadian peninsula, where people work in seasonal industries. People drive two hours or more to get to Moncton or to where the area ends, or even to Restigouche, which is two hours from there.

I think that this is unreasonable. We want this to be a protected area, where the work done by seasonal workers could be properly recognized. In my opinion, the area should be changed, completely overhauled, because this hasn't been done in several years. This review should be carried out from an economic point of view. This would really meet the needs of seasonal workers.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Thank you very much, Ms. Douglas and Monsieur Thibodeau, for your testimony and the thorough manner in which you answered the questions. Also, thank you for your patience with the technical difficulties that we encountered. Be assured that what you had to say today was of great value to us in our work.

To my colleagues, we do not have another meeting scheduled until the third week of July. If that's the way this plays out, I wish you an excellent break from your headsets, if you're able to arrange it and get outside. Thank you for all the courtesies you have extended to me, to the witnesses and to one another.

With that, my friends, we are adjourned.

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