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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

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• (1705)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number six of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

I believe at this time it would be appropriate for us to observe a moment of silence for the victims of the military helicopter crash yesterday.

[A moment of silence observed]

Thank you.

Pursuant to the orders of reference of March 24, April 11 and April 20, 2020, the committee is meeting for the purpose of receiving evidence concerning matters related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

First, interpretation in this video conference will work very much as it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either "Floor", "English" or "French". In order to resolve the sound issues from our previous meeting, please ensure you are on the English channel when speaking in English and on the French channel when speaking in French. If you plan to alternate from one language to the other, please also switch the interpretation channel so it aligns with the language you are speaking.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you're ready to speak, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I will just remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the "Raise Hand" function. This will signal to the chair your interest in speaking. In order to do so, you should click on

"Participants" at the bottom of the screen. When the list pops up, you will see next to your name that you can click "Raise Hand".

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

The use of headsets is strongly encouraged. If you have a microphone on your headset that hangs down, please make sure it's not rubbing on your shirt during your questioning time.

Should any technical challenges arise, for example, in relation to interpretation or if you are accidentally disconnected, please advise the clerk or chair immediately, and the technical team will work to resolve them. Please note that we may need to suspend during these times, as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Before we get started, can everyone click on their screen on the top right-hand corner to ensure that they are on gallery view. With this view you should be able to see all the participants in a grid view. It will ensure that all video participants can see one another. That's it for the preliminaries.

I would now like to thank the witnesses for joining us today.

From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Graham Flack, deputy minister; Lori MacDonald, senior associate deputy minister and chief operating officer for Service Canada; and Benoît Robidoux, associate deputy minister.

From Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, we have Evan Siddall, president and chief executive officer; and Romy Bowers, senior vice-president, client solutions.

It's my understanding that only Mr. Siddall has opening remarks.

I see that we have a point of order from Ms. Kusie, so I recognize Ms. Kusie, please.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I have two brief points.

First, we previously discussed the possibility of having the ministers prior to officials, so the official opposition would ask that we continue to pursue this. I recognize that we have three ministers here in quick succession, but we would appreciate it if we could continue to pursue the format of having the ministers before the officials.

Second, it is the hope of the official opposition, and I feel confident that all parties would benefit from this, that if a point of order is made during someone's speaking time, the time taken for the point of order be added back to the interaction time between the questioner and whoever the respondent is at the time. If we could get confirmation on whether this is possible, it would be helpful.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Kusie, I can tell you that at the last meeting all of the points of order pretty well came at the end. A couple were made during, and pretty much everyone went over their time anyway.

We have asked the various departments to have the ministers come first. We will continue to do so.

Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you.

The Chair: I now recognize Mr. Siddall for his opening remarks, please.

Mr. Evan Siddall (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): Thank you for this opportunity to update the committee on how CMHC is supporting Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

My 2,000 colleagues and I have been devoted to doing all we can to help stabilize our financial system and ensure that Canadians continue to have the security of a home. We have mobilized our crisis response plan in order to perform an essential role, and that is to act as a shock absorber to Canadians during unforeseen events.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

In the early days of the crisis, our financial system came under pressure as bank funding markets seized. In coordinated action with the Bank of Canada, along with the Department of Finance and the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions, we re-launched the insured mortgage purchase program, or IMPP, a tool developed by CMHC to support market liquidity during the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009.

Under the current revised program, we stand ready to purchase up to \$150 billion of insured mortgages to ensure that banks have access to reliable funding. In short, the IMPP provides a safety net to ensure that banks can continue their lending activities so that housing markets remain functional.

We are also ready to expand the issuance of conventional Canada mortgage bonds, depending on market conditions and investor demand.

As Canadians do their part to contain the spread of the coronavirus, more than ever, our homes have become a sanctuary—a sacred place of safety and refuge in challenging times. We therefore acted quickly to offer help to Canadians who are having difficulty paying their mortgages or rent.

As the committee knows—

The Chair: My apologies for interrupting, Mr. Siddall. Ms. Kwan has a point of order.

[*English*]

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Chair, I'm really sorry. I don't know if others are having this problem, but I can barely hear the interpretation for Mr. Siddall. I pretty well missed all of what he said, except for the very beginning.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Marie-France Lafleur): I believe the issue is that Mr. Siddall is on the English channel.

When you're speaking in French, could you please switch it to French, and when you're speaking in English, could you switch it to the English channel?

Mr. Evan Siddall: I was told to do that. Okay.

The Clerk: Thank you.

The Chair: I believe it's important that everyone get Mr. Siddall's statement, and I'm sorry to do this, sir, but it's probably appropriate for you to start from the top.

You were probably close to the end. Were you?

Mr. Evan Siddall: Goodness, no. I will rewind a bit and continue.

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Evan Siddall: I'm going to switch languages now.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Evan Siddall: Under the current revised program, we stand ready to purchase up to \$150 billion of insured mortgages to ensure that banks have access to reliable funding.

In short, the insured mortgage purchase program provides a safety net to ensure that banks can continue their lending activities so that housing markets remain functional.

We are also ready to expand the issuance of conventional Canada mortgage bonds, depending on market conditions and investor demand.

As Canadians do their part to contain the spread of the coronavirus, more than ever, our homes have become a sanctuary—a sacred place of safety and refuge in challenging times. We therefore acted quickly to offer help to Canadians who are having difficulty paying their mortgages or rent.

• (1715)

[*English*]

As the committee knows, the mortgages of millions of Canadian homeowners are insured by CMHC, Genworth Canada, or Canada Guaranty. This insurance protects the lender against default should the homeowner not be able to meet their mortgage obligations.

In the face of significant job and income loss due to COVID-19, we provided lenders with the ability to help homeowners who have been financially impacted by the pandemic. In coordination with private insurers, we're offering, first, temporary deferral of mortgage payments for up to six months; second, mortgage reamortization so that homeowners can make lower payments over a longer period; and third, adding missed payments to the mortgage balance and spreading them over the repayment period.

We're urging Canadians who can pay their mortgages to do so, to keep our economy going and reserve financial relief for those who need it most.

The same mortgage deferral relief has been made available to our multi-unit clients. These are people who own apartment buildings, for example. In return, we've insisted on patience from landlords, specifically that they refrain from evictions during this crisis.

Meanwhile, we've accelerated support for non-profit and co-op housing providers to ensure that they continue to receive federal rent subsidies so that low-income tenants are not themselves forced from their homes. Again, we made it clear that evictions will not be tolerated.

For renters affected by COVID-19, the first defence is of course the income support measures announced by the Government of Canada, such as the CERB, the temporary salary top-up for low-income essential workers and the increased Canada child benefit. As is the case with mortgage holders, people who can afford to pay their rent must continue to do so.

Direct affordability support to households in housing need is also available in a number of provinces via the Canada housing benefit, which took effect on April 1. We're continuing discussions right now with other provinces and territories to accelerate the flow of this benefit to Canadians in need of assistance.

Finally, CMHC will administer the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance for small business. This program will lower rent by 75% for small businesses that have been affected by the crisis. While the program is not housing related, we were pleased to be called upon to deploy our real estate expertise to help struggling entrepreneurs.

I want to assure the committee that we stand ready to deliver other pandemic-related initiatives should the need arise. A rapid response in the past few weeks reaffirms CMHC's capacity to develop and launch new financial support programs quickly and effectively.

Looking to the future and our recovery, the pandemic has only underscored the importance of housing and our aspiration that by 2030 everyone in Canada has a home that they can afford and that meets their needs. We must continue our work investing in the supply of new housing and promoting urban densification as an answer to the shortage of affordable housing.

In closing, I will add one further thought for committee members. Please take note that almost everything we've done to respond to the crisis involves more borrowing. Governments need to borrow to finance new programs, just as mortgage deferrals add to already historic levels of household indebtedness. However, as Hyman

Minsky, the economist, said, debt causes fragility. We leave this crisis less well prepared for the next one, and we must think ahead.

CMHC will share housing market forecasts shortly. I expect it to project a decline in prices. Combined with increasing unemployment, this prospect should give us pause. My colleagues and I are preparing ourselves to help Canadian households without offering bailouts, the tempting short fixes that have perverse long-term economic consequences. In my view, we must also confront the powerful incentives for excessive household borrowing that have contributed to the run-up in house prices.

CMHC was founded to help rebuild our post-war economy. We're at our best when we're responding to crises and helping our country get out the other side. We look forward to continuing our work in housing Canada, post crisis.

Thank you, Chair and committee members. I look forward to answering your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Siddall.

Now we'll begin with the Conservatives and Ms. Falk for six minutes.

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

In March, we know the government encouraged those who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 to apply for EI. Then CERB was announced and it was understood that those who applied for EI were going to be rolled over into CERB.

We are hearing many instances of expectant mothers not receiving the benefits that they are entitled to. We've heard instances of expectant mothers being told that they are required to start their EI maternity leave immediately, despite qualifying for the CERB benefit, and instances where expectant mothers applied for EI benefits before CERB was available, but unlike non-pregnant applicants, have not been switched over to the CERB program.

As many of us know, myself included, who just had a baby nine months ago, there are financial costs and changes in life, but a baby also brings great joy. I can only imagine the stress of having a baby during a pandemic, and on top of that, fighting for benefits when one is entitled to them.

What actions have been taken within the department to ensure that expectant mothers are receiving the benefits they are entitled to and to ensure that expectant mothers are receiving accurate information?

• (1720)

Mr. Graham Flack (Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, Department of Employment and Social Development): Mr. Chair, I am happy to take that question.

Let me give you three categories of expectant mothers to give you the cases and how we are dealing with them.

The first category would be expectant mothers who have not been let go from their jobs but are going onto the EI special benefit, maternity benefit, during either the pre-March 16 period or after, during the CERB period. That is the part of the EI system that we have continued to have function after March 16, so whether they went on maternity benefits prior to March 16 or after, they will be receiving the benefits through EI maternity. That's 55% of their income, based on their qualifications.

For women who were laid off prior to their going on maternity leave, as a normal function of our EI system, they go on regular benefits first under the EI system and they then are switched over to maternity leave. In both of those cases, they are on EI benefits, so it's 55% of their salary. Any woman you described who is in a situation where she would have been laid off prior to March 15 would be on EI regular benefits, and then she would proceed to EI maternity benefits.

For women who were laid off after March 16, indeed our intention is to put them on the CERB for that period and then transition them to EI. Our system was not built to be able to do this, so the teams have been working very hard to allow that to happen in an automatic way. They have found a solution to be able to do that, but in the interim period, in order to avoid women being without benefits, we put them on EI, even the women who applied after March 16, so that they would be put in pay and getting benefits. For some of those women, that would mean they would be earning more than the CERB, because in EI you can earn up to \$573. For some, it would mean less than the CERB.

As soon as we are able to implement this solution to the system, the 46-year-old EI system that we have, we will be doing two things. Everyone who will be enrolled in EI, who is in the situation you described, will automatically go into the CERB and then automatically be transitioned to the EI benefit. For anyone who has been in the EI system from March 16 until now, we will go back and retroactively top up their pay if they were below \$500.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I just need some clarification, then.

I've been contacted by some constituents who are early on in their pregnancy, who might not have had the full hours, and they're concerned about not being able to get those full hours.

So that these families and these new children don't fall through the cracks, what is the government or the department planning on doing for the men or women who wanted to access maternity or parental leave but missed the hours because they've been laid off

for CERB, but would have had the hours if they hadn't been laid off because of COVID?

Mr. Graham Flack: As Minister Qualtrough indicated at her appearance with you last week, that is an issue we are looking at from both the policy perspective and a solutions perspective in terms of how to address it.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Is there a timeline with that? I know it's very stressful, especially for new parents who are having babies and trying to plan. This could ultimately affect child care options as well. Is there a timeline expected for when we can let our constituents know we can have an answer for them?

• (1725)

Mr. Graham Flack: I can tell you that we've been working very aggressively on it. As you've seen with the other case you raise, there are also system issues in terms of, for example, if one were to lower the number of hours from the current 600 hours to a different level. We don't want to put forward a solution to you if our system will not accommodate that. We're finding ways to be able to do that.

There's both a policy issue that needs to be determined, and Minister Qualtrough committed to be able to do that, and also a systems issue. This is a 46-year-old COBOL-based system that was not designed to accommodate these sorts of changes quickly. What we don't want to do is put changes into that system that could risk other EI beneficiaries in terms of problems that emerge in the system, but I can assure you that we're working aggressively day and night to work through all of these issues, as we have through the other issues we've dealt with today.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

We will go to Ms. Young, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the officials for joining us today.

I think it's pretty apparent from that first question that Service Canada is dealing with some very quick changes in a system that, as you say, is 46 years old.

I think all MPs can attest to the overwhelming number of calls our constituency offices have received over the past five to six weeks about accessing emergency government support through Service Canada. I have a daily Zoom call with my constituency office, and I hear about these challenges every day. Today, we actually received calls from happy constituents, so that was really good to hear.

How has Service Canada adapted through this crisis? What measures are being put in place to safely and efficiently serve Canadians each and every day?

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development, and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): Mr. Chair, I'd be happy to take that question.

In fact, our Service Canada centres continue to deliver services across the country on any given day and, in fact, 24 hours a day. One of the things that we learned very quickly with this crisis is that we needed to pivot and develop a new alternative service delivery model, because we needed to continue to reach Canadians, and we needed to continue to provide access to benefits and capacity to deliver services. We developed a process that is a four-tiered approach to doing that.

We have online services. We also have e-services, meaning that someone can actually email us and ask us to contact them, which we do within 48 hours. We have community outreach services so we're reaching our aboriginal communities and our northern indigenous communities. Also, of course, we have self-service.

Beyond that, we took action very quickly within our department to realign services. We realigned approximately 3,000 staff to ensure that we're continuing to deliver benefits. We actually established a new virtual call centre to support calls coming in for claims on EI, where we've staffed 1,500 staff to answer calls and questions from individual Canadians.

At the same time, we look for electronic and technological solutions to services that could continue to be delivered. As an example, this week we launched a new e-SIN application, ensuring that people who need either urgent or ongoing support from a social insurance security number perspective could apply online to a portal and receive those services and a new SIN number in a very quick manner.

Also, at the same time, we're realigning staff to support a new hub to provide individual services to the most vulnerable populations in our country. As an example, we established a 50-person call centre that reaches out to people in remote areas, and they can access services online and have someone actually assist them in terms of completing their applications.

A number of new services have been put in place, as well as alternate service delivery, that actually continue to meet the needs of Canadians. At the same time, we have 19,000 people teleworking and another 12% of our staff still coming in to our offices to deliver services to Canadians.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much, Ms. MacDonald, for explaining that. I really appreciate your talking about vulnerable Canadians. I am very interested in making sure that people with disabilities are well served by Service Canada. I underscore that this is such an important issue.

The other area that I wanted to talk about is indigenous housing and homelessness. This committee had planned to study indigenous homelessness in urban areas, but we have had to delay the start of the study because of this unprecedented health crisis.

If anything, COVID-19 has made the problem of homelessness even worse and even more concerning because of the need for self-isolation, which is almost impossible for people who are living on the street.

When we look at the \$157 million in additional funding the Government of Canada has provided for reaching our homelessness

strategy, how much of that amount is directed specifically to indigenous people living in the urban communities?

• (1730)

Mr. Graham Flack: There are 30 indigenous communities we are supporting and I will endeavour to get you the number regarding exactly how much of the \$157 million is for urban indigenous. I will get that to you shortly.

Ms. Kate Young: Okay. Thank you very much. I think it is important to know that this is necessary to make sure that our indigenous communities are well served. I would like to get that number.

I don't know how much more time I have, but I was thinking about—

The Chair: You have less than a minute, Ms. Young.

Ms. Kate Young: I have less than a minute.

I was thinking about the magnitude of this crisis and how we'll determine how long the funding needs to flow. How will the government know when these funds are no longer needed? How will that be decided?

Has that been considered at this point?

Mr. Graham Flack: I'll start, but Evan may want to come in because he has measures as well that have potential time limitations associated with the crisis.

We've been working at three levels in the department throughout the crisis. The first is the immediate crisis response. We had an unprecedented historic drop in employment. To give you the latest numbers, we're at 7.33 million Canadians who are recipients of the CERB, well over one-third of the workforce. These are unprecedented conditions. The first phase was emergency supports, which we've continued to work with the committee on enhancing in that phase.

The second phase, though, is the phase where we see the restart of the economy. We don't expect that will temporally happen at either the same time everywhere in the country or in the same industries everywhere in the country. It's not like a normal economic recovery where we're likely to see a "V" or a bounce back that's relatively accelerated. It's likely to be much more unpredictable in terms of how to do that.

We are working through how we deal with a phase where it's neither on nor off. How do we deal with the fact that even in our own work environments as a federal government we need to accommodate physical distancing and work through that? How will the income support measures have to be tailored to deal with where, in some sectors, employment might come back full on and in other sectors there might still be a longer period? What does that mean for the duration of the benefits? As Minister Qualtrough has said, and Minister Hussen will say, the government has indicated that these measures are in place for at least this period, with the opportunity to increase the period if necessary.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack. We're well over time. Feel free to supplement your answers in writing afterwards.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Good afternoon.

My first question pertains to Service Canada. As we all know, Service Canada, adapted to the worst part of the crisis, when we were asked to remain in isolation, a tough situation for all of us.

I heard the answer, but now we are talking about emerging from the lockdown and gradually resuming operations. I'd like to know whether Service Canada plans to reopen its service centres, while following the rules in place, as many businesses will be doing.

Mr. Graham Flack: I can go first and Ms. MacDonald can take over.

Naturally, the department has a plan. We had a discussion today with our management team to figure out how we are going to reopen our physical locations when provinces begin lifting restrictions. We are going to have to deliver service in a different way.

It's important to keep two things in mind. If governments continue to ask people to keep their physical distance, some Service Canada offices will be too small to accommodate people. There won't be enough space. The consequences for those locations will be different from those associated with our larger locations, which will have plans in place to make returning easier for both employees—

• (1735)

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Flack, but I think there's a point of order.

[*English*]

There is a point of order from Mr. Turnbull, I believe, and perhaps Mr. Long was waving as well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I think we're probably both indicating the same thing.

I think Mr. Flack might be on the opposite channel. Maybe he's speaking French on the English channel.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Graham Flack: I switched channels now. Is it working?

[*English*]

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. Chair, it is very hard to hear, and I actually couldn't make out what he was saying.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Graham Flack: I'll quickly repeat what I said. Right now, we are providing plans to reopen Service Canada offices.

Some of our offices are too small to allow people to keep six feet apart when inside. We are looking at how we can make that work. For our larger locations, we need to make sure that employees are able to follow the distancing guidelines, that offices are cleaned as well as possible and so forth, so we can welcome people back.

In the medium term, we will continue to rely heavily on digital and telephone solutions for service delivery, because people won't necessarily come into our offices when they reopen. We need to keep those options available.

Ms. MacDonald may be able to comment further.

[*English*]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

In fact, we do have a four-phase plan in place to assist in the reopening of our Service Canada centres. That consists of looking at things, from our physical infrastructure to the current conditions in each of the provinces and territories, the current alternative service delivery model that we've put in place and how we can continue to meet the safety and security needs of our staff and clients coming into our centres. It's something we're working on every day, and we are completely committed to having our offices open in the future as we address these issues.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Chabot, you may go ahead.

Ms. Louise Chabot: We read, or understood, that people receiving special sickness benefits, as well as those receiving regular EI benefits, would move over to the CERB program and could therefore supplement their benefits or stop them if they were done.

We've received a lot of telephone calls from people telling us that it's not working that way. According to them, they are being asked to exhaust their sickness benefits before moving over to the CERB program.

If that's true, can the situation be corrected?

Mr. Graham Flack: It all depends on when the person began receiving benefits. If the person was eligible and received sickness benefits before March 15, they will continue to receive EI sickness benefits as per the applicable rules and conditions.

If you were able to provide us with a specific case, we could answer on the basis of that person's situation.

Nevertheless, nothing has changed for eligible individuals who applied for EI benefits before March 15. They will stay with the EI program.

• (1740)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

We will go to Ms. Kwan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

My first question is about Service Canada's response time to constituents and to MPs' offices. My office continues to have extensive problems in connecting to and getting a response back in a timely fashion from Service Canada as it relates to constituency cases.

In a previous committee meeting, I asked for a contact number to be made available to us. I have yet to receive that. Honest to goodness, right now, as it stands, for our office to connect to someone at Service Canada to help out constituents and answer questions is like winning a lottery. It's just hit and miss. We'd be damn lucky if we could actually get through to someone. Could someone please provide us with that direct contact information so that we can indeed get on with helping our constituents?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Mr. Chair, we've actually identified the contact numbers for each of the MP lines. We'd be happy to provide it again to ensure that people have the appropriate numbers for contact. I will say that staff are working to ensure that we're able to answer all of the questions as they come in, and we will continue to make our best efforts. Certainly, we can reach out to your office to see what we can do to help assist with that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would appreciate that very much.

Yesterday, I got another email from another constituent who has been trying to reach Service Canada for 17 days. Literally, with May 1 coming on, he was extremely stressed about not having money for rent and not having received CERB for this period of time and being unable to contact Service Canada. These are the realities of people who are struggling out there today. I would appreciate it if someone would call my office in that regard.

I'd like to turn my question to housing. Across the country, this is hitting people in a very significant way, as we know. Earlier, I think a question was asked about the resources that have been provided to provinces and cities across the country. Could the committee get from CMHC the breakdown under each program of how much money is being offered to support provinces, and then have that broken down into cities, so that we actually have that information?

In terms of British Columbia, I know for a fact that while it all sounds good that the federal government is at the table, in reality much of the dollars have actually not really flowed. This last weekend, B.C.'s minister of poverty reduction made an announcement about the purchase of hotels and motels to house people who are in homeless encampments in Vancouver and Victoria. Has the federal government offered dollars to provinces and territories across the country to support purchases of empty hotels to house the homeless population during this pandemic?

Mr. Evan Siddall: Mr. Chair, there is no such offer at this point. The programs that have gone through CMHC are national in scope. The only exception to that would be the Canada housing benefit, which is being shared with provinces as agreements are reached.

I can follow up, though, with a response to the member's question with respect to the breakdown of spending by province.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If you could provide it, please, by province and by city, that would make a very big difference. These global numbers don't really mean anything unless we have the details of how this works within the local communities. As well, I would like it program by program, please. Where there is a distinction for indigenous support, could you identify that?

I'm wondering what the plan is from the government side in terms of supporting provinces in the post-COVID period. I'll use B.C. as an example, where we're purchasing hotels to house the

homeless. Of course, after COVID, we would need to continue to house these individuals. Otherwise, they will end up on the street all over again, until the next pandemic.

Will the federal government and CMHC offer capital resources in support of provinces that are taking these kinds of actions so that we can secure these assets as permanent housing?

• (1745)

Mr. Evan Siddall: Mr. Chair, perhaps that's a question that would be better directed to the minister in terms of future plans.

As far as current plans go, we have two funds. We have the national housing co-investment fund in particular. We have another program called the rental construction financing initiative, whereby we are maximizing the distribution of that money throughout the country. It's location agnostic. Both respond to applications that are made to us, and we consult with individual provinces to prioritize that information.

I should tell the member, Mr. Chair, that we may not have the breakdown by city, but we'll certainly get it by province. Through you, I will get that information as soon as I can.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I would ask that if you don't have that breakdown by city at this moment, you continue to endeavour to get that information and provide that information to us so that we can have a clear picture of the lay of the land.

With respect to decisions on policy, has CMHC given any thought to putting in, or recommending to the government to put in, restrictions on predatory purchases of assets during this period?

The Chair: Let's have a short answer, please.

Mr. Evan Siddall: That's not currently on the radar. I think that may be a matter of provincial jurisdiction.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm thinking about a national standard.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We'll now go to Mr. Vis for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Chair, this question is regarding the insured mortgage purchase program.

As I understand it, banks are allowing payment deferrals for people affected by COVID-19, but they are also double-ending on the interest charged, first during the deferral period and then when the deferred amount is added to the back end of the mortgage, where it is then charged interest again. Lenders, as I understood from the testimony, are actually benefiting and profiting from allowing people to defer their mortgages.

Is CMHC looking into putting pressure on the lenders that have loans that are CMHC insured not to double-end them and simply to defer the payment interest-free? If that does not occur, the person putting down the bare minimum, for example, 5%, six months ago, who has lost his or her job to COVID-19 and wishes to defer payments could possibly be in a situation where his or her loan-to-value ratio exceeds 95%, depending on when the purchase was made.

Mr. Evan Siddall: Mr. Chair, there are a couple of things I should say in response to that.

First of all, we, along with the private insurers, are allowing for these loans to actually exceed 100% loan to value, if necessary, to keep the people in their homes. That's a flexibility we've administered together through the system.

The way mortgage deferrals work, as the member correctly says, is that those deferrals are added to the outstanding principal and interest is charged on that amount, in keeping with the contract that people signed when they entered into that mortgage. It's a contractual requirement.

Mr. Brad Vis: I just think that ethically, right now with the CMHC giving our banks \$150 billion in the purchasing of new mortgages, we should re-evaluate that policy.

Let's turn to business continuity planning, which is planning for the continued availability of services and associated assets that are crucial to the health, safety, security and economic well-being of Canadians, and to the effective functioning of government. I'm quite concerned about some of the things that have already been addressed today with Service Canada.

A 2017 audit on business continuity planning for ESDC revealed that the technical testing of recovery strategies is often limited and provides little assurance regarding the viability of information technology components of continuity plans. That same 2017 audit showed that regular testing of the IT technical aspects of ESDC continuity plans were controlled but that they should be strengthened and that currently they provide only medium-risk exposure to the department.

We now find ourselves at a time and place where federal workers, many of whom are being asked to work from home, either cannot or do not work, yet they are still getting paid their regular salaries. This question did come from a constituent. Those who do try to work from home are finding themselves unable to log in to government services, or they log in to get whatever they need and then immediately log off.

This question is for ESDC. Who was responsible for server capacity at ESDC? How many employees can ESDC accommodate on its server at any given time? How many employees are not completing their regular duties as a result of technological disruptions due to the technological drawbacks of the department capacity right now?

• (1750)

Mr. Graham Flack: Mr. Chair, what I'm happy to tell you is that, tested in a real emergency, not only have the systems performed magnificently, but the technical team has expanded them in real time.

In a typical day, we would have had 400 people logging in online on our system. During the crisis, we built in additional network capacity, and yesterday we had 19,500 employees working online. That's in addition to the people who are physically still continuing to come into the office. The network capacity has not been a limit on our ability to perform.

Now, in terms of our operations, particularly our processing operations, they had never been designed to be done from home, nor had our call centres. They had assumed that individuals were going to be in at work, and the business continuity planning was done around positioning those workplaces around the country, so that if a flood happened in one place, we could move the work.

In real time, we shipped thousands of devices, headsets and laptops to individuals at home for them to be able to operate from there. In the case of the call centre that Lori described, the CERB call centre that we set up in nine days from when we contracted with a third party provider to provide the platform to be able to do it, we were able to get devices out to the individuals and get the 1,500 volunteers from the department who were willing to be trained and do that, and nine days later we had 1,500 people in the call centre.

As somebody who has worked in business continuity planning for a long time, I would say that you always prepare and try to improve, and you value those odds, because they stress-test what works, but what I can say is that the performance of our system has exceeded all expectations during the crisis in terms of its ability to respond to things it was never built for.

To give you the example of EI, we have received—

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you. Mr. Chair, that's sufficient. I want to thank Mr. Flack for that reassuring information.

The reason I ask those questions is that in my lifetime we're going to have another pandemic, and in my lifetime we're going to have another natural disaster, and Canadians need to be reassured that the Government of Canada can fulfill its functions. If it has exceeded expectations, that's great.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis. That's your time.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

The Chair: This will be the last questioner before the minister comes. We're back to the Liberals.

I believe it's Mr. Long, for five minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon to all of my colleagues.

I thank both departments for answering our questions today.

Certainly, on my behalf and on behalf of my riding, Saint John—Rothesay, I want to thank you and congratulate you for the efforts that your whole departments have given to come to Canadians' aid in a time of extraordinary challenges for our country.

My first question is for ESDC with respect to the reaching home program. Saint John obviously has an issue with homelessness, like most municipalities and regions across the country, and I deal almost daily if not weekly with the two shelters here. One is the Coverdale Centre for Women, and the other one is the Outflow shelter for men.

Recognizing that the reaching home program was rolled out, my first question is for ESDC. How did ESDC make the decision regarding the allocation of funding under the reaching home program? How did you come up with that decision as to how it was allocated?

Mr. Graham Flack: It was an evidence-based process that made the allocation to the community-based organizations, the 64 community-based organizations that were in. There's a formula that's used to determine need and the volume of individuals involved. The minister ultimately makes those decisions, but it's based on the evidence we have to be able to compare those communities.

If I could just slip in on the original question I got on the reaching home program, 10% of the reaching home allocation is for urban indigenous, so that's \$15.7 million.

• (1755)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you for that.

My understanding is that the \$157 million has been given across the country to help organizations protect homeless people from COVID-19. In my riding, money was allocated to the Human Development Council, with Randy Hatfield and his team, to allocate that money to the shelters and organizations in the riding that certainly need it.

I know that an earlier question was asked about the what, but how did you determine the regional breakdown of funding? How did you come up with that?

Mr. Graham Flack: For the additional \$157 million that was provided during the crisis, we followed the exact model we had for the reaching home proposal. We didn't shift from that. We distributed according to the same proportions we use with the main reaching home program. Then we have left, as the program does, considerable flexibility for community entities to determine how to spend the money. It could have been spent on personal protective equipment or on renting hotel space to allow distancing. It was up to them to determine what was most appropriate. We basically piggy-backed on the reaching home proposal, and the \$157 million was allocated in the same proportions.

Mr. Wayne Long: To go further along that line, how does the money actually get to front-line organizations? The Human Development Council, which is in my riding, received that money, but how are the decisions made? Are they in the hands of the local organizations? Do they have a lot of flexibility to think outside the box, to go in different directions with that money? How are those decisions made?

Mr. Graham Flack: You're right that the program is designed to give maximum flexibility to individuals on the ground, and that's allowed them to tailor it to the needs they have. In some cases, organizations may have had physical spaces or extra spaces where they could have allowed physical distancing to take place. In other community organizations, where there is no such possibility with the shelters they're dealing with, they've had to rent hotel space, for example, to accommodate that. Some have had protective equipment shortages. We really leave it to them to do that.

It has been assisted by the fact that Health Canada, through PHAC, issued guidance on March 23 on measures to take in homeless shelters, so I think there's an evidence base on which to guide that. However, we really have left it to the community-based organizations to determine the greatest need on the ground and adjust as they need to. There is very little intervention from us and maximum flexibility for those on the ground.

Mr. Wayne Long: Have you had much feedback yet from the organizations on the ground with respect to the extra money, the allocations? Have there been any red flags or have any major concerns been flagged?

Mr. Graham Flack: That's something the minister and Mr. Vaughan on the committee might want to address, because they've had considerable contact with folks on the ground to get feedback and allow us to adjust.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Flack. That's an excellent note to end on, because the minister is up next.

That ends your time, Mr. Long.

We're going to suspend just long enough to do a mike check for the minister, maybe three minutes, and then we'll come right back.

• (1755)

(Pause)

• (1800)

The Chair: We're now back in session and very pleased to have the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development joining us.

Welcome, Minister Hussen. It's nice to have you here. You have 10 minutes for your opening statement.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair and committee members.

Before I begin, I'd like to take a moment to express my sincere condolences to the families and loved ones as well as the crew members of HMCS *Fredericton* who were affected by yesterday's tragic accident involving the crash of a Royal Canadian Navy helicopter, carrying six members of the Canadian Armed Forces, off the coast of Greece. As our Prime Minister said today, all of them are heroes. Our Canadian Armed Forces members serve our country with amazing dignity and courage.

Mr. Chair, I am pleased to be here with you today as we continue our important work to support Canadians and protect them from the COVID-19 virus and its inevitable consequences. There is no question that we have to continue working together, and quickly, to ensure that Canadians have the supports they need. That is why our government implemented an emergency response plan to protect Canadians' health and shelter them from the financial hardships that are resulting from this pandemic.

As the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and as the minister responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, I'm proud to present the government's COVID-19 plan and related measures under my portfolio.

To help families with the cost of caring for their children during this challenging time, the Government of Canada is providing a one-time enhancement to the Canada child benefit. This means that families who are currently eligible for the Canada child benefit will receive an extra \$300 per child as part of their May 2020 payment. There is no need to apply for this additional amount.

Committee members, as the COVID-19 situation evolves, Canadians are becoming more and more concerned about their ability to pay their rent and their mortgages.

• (1805)

[*Translation*]

This situation underscores how crucial it is to make sure that everyone has a safe place to call home.

[*English*]

That is why we have put measures in place to help Canadians stay in their homes and find appropriate shelter to protect themselves and their families. Our first and foremost defence measure for all Canadians who are financially impacted by COVID-19, whether they are homeowners, landlords or renters, is the Canada emergency response benefit. This being said, it is important to note that housing providers have a most important role to play in safeguarding public health and protecting our economy. We are all in this together.

[*Translation*]

This is how the government is taking concrete action to help Canadians find a place to call home.

[*English*]

There is help available for homeowners who are having difficulty paying their mortgage due to the COVID-19 outbreak. If their mortgage is insured through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Genworth Canada or Canada Guaranty, the government has put the following options in place: temporary short-term deferral of mortgage payments for up to six months; loan re-amortization, making lower mortgage payments over a longer period of time; adding missed payments to the mortgage balance and spreading them over the repayment period; or a combination of the above options. Canada's six major banks and mortgage lenders have announced measures to support all homeowners in the eventualities where mortgages would not be insured by CMHC.

Landlords who are having financial difficulties also have access to the same relief measures as homeowners, such as mortgage payment deferral. These measures will allow landlords to show compassion and patience to their tenants in these extraordinary times.

Tenants who cannot pay their rent because of financial difficulties related to COVID-19 should contact their landlord. All provinces and most territories, representing nearly all of Canada's population, have issued full or partial eviction bans. The government expects housing providers to act compassionately and refrain from evicting their fellow Canadians, especially housing providers who have received funding support or mortgage insurance from CMHC.

It is also important that renters, homeowners and tenants who are still able to pay their rent do so on a regular basis. Canadians must continue to remember that financial relief measures are for those who need it the most.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Canada is also having real and tangible public health, economic and safety impacts on all Canadians. Those experiencing homelessness are at a heightened risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19. The government has to ensure that the sector serving the homeless has the support it needs to prepare for, prevent and manage any COVID-19 outbreaks.

In addition to the \$157.5-million investment announced to support people experiencing homelessness through the existing federal program called reaching home, the government has provided \$15 million to help the large urban centres that faced immediate and urgent needs at the start of the pandemic. This includes funding to purchase beds and physical barriers for social distancing and to secure additional accommodation space to reduce overcrowding in shelters. The government is investing this money quickly through our existing community partners. In addition, we also moved \$50 million directly to women's shelters to enable them to deal with the consequences of COVID-19. This funding will enable communities to quickly invest in services that have the most impact based on their circumstances and needs.

Last, we acted quickly to support charities and non-profit organizations. These organizations have always been at the forefront in helping the most vulnerable in our communities. At a time when they're being called on to do more by more Canadians, they're finding that they're facing unprecedented challenges as there is a drop in donations and a drop in the number of volunteers available to deliver their services. That is why we made sure these organizations were eligible for the wage subsidy. We also announced a \$350-million emergency support fund that will help the sector respond to COVID-19.

Committee members, we are all in this together. By addressing the financial needs of Canadians, the government is doing its part to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus and protect Canadians during this pandemic.

Thank you, and I will be very happy to answer any questions you may have.

• (1810)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We're going to start off with Ms. Kusie for six minutes.

Ms. Kusie, you have the floor.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Minister, it's a pleasure to finally see you. I'm so sorry that we haven't had the opportunity to meet. I was very happy to have a meeting with your colleague the parliamentary secretary; it's just unfortunate it was not with you. I hope we will be able to do that sometime in the future, after we return from this.

I want to thank you very much for your response to two of the letters I wrote. I received the responses today. I thought it was a bit unfortunate that I received them today, on the day of the committee meeting, but thank you nonetheless. I still look forward to receiving responses to the additional letters, one regarding maternity benefits, as discussed previously by my colleague Rosemarie, and one regarding the registered disability plan, which I'll talk about a little more later.

I want to talk first about Service Canada. We've heard a lot about it today, and I am also hearing about it from my constituents and constituents across the country. In particular, some of the most vulnerable communities, including seniors and Canadians in rural communities, have had trouble accessing Service Canada through telephone lines, given the closure of the service centres. I'm hearing really unfortunate things, such as individuals attempting to contact Service Canada 100 times in a day and individuals who wait for two hours on the phone only to hear a dial tone or busy signal and then the call hangs up. I've also heard of one client who phoned Service Canada every day for 30 days consecutively and was not able to get hold of anyone.

Despite our letter and despite your reply.... I will point out that in your letter, Minister, your reply admits that there can be delays of up to two hours. This is still not being addressed.

Within our letter, we did make suggestions, the first one about local numbers. Perhaps using local and regional numbers would assist. Perhaps you could implement a callback system whereby if a constituent was able to leave a message, they could receive a call back.

Minister, I would like to know, please, if you have considered these options, either implementing regional numbers for better service or a callback service.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, we are, as a government, really committed to ensuring that Canadians have access to the benefits that are provided by Service Canada which they rely on.

After reviewing our operations, we closed in-person Service Canada offices to limit the risk of COVID-19 exposure for our clients. Then we redeployed our focus to online and telephone services, which continue to remain open to better serve Canadians. We quickly implemented solutions to ensure that Canadians without access to reliable Internet connections would continue to be served. We also made sure that we have continuing direct community outreach to rural communities and vulnerable communities. We have created special phone lines for vulnerable Canadians to speak with Service Canada agents.

Our top priority remains ensuring that Canadians can get the benefits they need while protecting their health and safety.

I want to also invite my officials to provide a bit more detail on the regional aspect of the questions that you asked.

• (1815)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Minister. Perhaps we can move to that at another time and get the response offline.

Another concern I'm hearing about is that individuals who have previously contacted a member of Parliament's office and then contacted Service Canada are being told that they cannot be serviced by Service Canada as a result of previously having contacted a member of Parliament's office. I want to get assurance from you, Minister, that this is not the case and that any individual, even if they have previously contacted a member of Parliament, can receive service from Service Canada.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Obviously members of Parliament have a role in advocating on behalf of their constituents, but at the same time the services of Service Canada are available to all Canadians regardless of who they have consulted first. In fact, on that point, not only do we have an MP line but we now have added an email service that can be used by members of Parliament, and the service standard there is actually pretty good. We commit to getting back to all members of Parliament within two business days.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I appreciate that, Minister. However, as I said within the letter, we are still hearing there is still a two-hour delay and we are not seeing improvement despite the weeks that have been given to Service Canada to improve these services specifically for the vulnerable such as seniors and those in rural areas. We also heard about individuals, Service Canada employees, being sent home with not enough equipment to do their work, and EI employees taking too long to train or leaving their newly found positions as a result of just finding it too difficult to assume the training. I hope that you will work with Service Canada in an attempt to better serve Canadians, Minister.

Thank you.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have to answer that question?

The Chair: You have almost none, so be very quick.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I would just say that we've had unprecedented volumes. I know that our officials and our team are doing everything they can to make sure we are serving Canadians promptly, but we are dealing in a context of really unprecedented demand in terms of the volume of calls.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Kusie.

[Translation]

Mrs. Gill and Ms. Chabot will be sharing the speaking time.

Mrs. Gill, you may go ahead.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Good evening, Minister.

Good evening everyone.

I have a question about a vulnerable population. The COVID-19 virus spreads quickly in environments where vulnerable people live together in many cases. I'd like to paraphrase what Ghislain Picard, the chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, said yesterday. He called on all levels of government, including the federal government, to support first nations in light of risk factors that make them the most vulnerable to the pandemic.

As you are well aware, they are a vulnerable population for health reasons, on the one hand, and because of overcrowding, on the other. They have large families, with several generations living together in conditions that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation described as unsafe and substandard in a 2019 briefing note. Not to mention the fact that a third of the indigenous population does not have access to housing.

I'd like to know, then, whether you consulted first nations regarding their housing needs during the crisis, because they aren't able to house the people in their communities or quarantine those who contract COVID-19. If you did consult them and you did consider their requests to the government, what changes has your department made to help them, given that they are a vulnerable population?

• (1820)

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, we recognize that many indigenous communities are facing unique and unprecedented challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We're closely monitoring the situation. Our priority is to protect the health, safety and well-being of indigenous communities during this really challenging time.

Across the federal government, various relief measures are under way and new funding is available to support indigenous communities and housing providers in managing this pandemic. We continue to explore other solutions and flexibilities that will alleviate some of the financial impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. Through CMHC, we've introduced loan payment deferrals, reporting and agreement flexibilities, workarounds for on-site progress inspections and have stopped subsidy suspensions to support indigenous communities, housing providers and homeowners during this difficult time.

CMHC is also working hard to ensure funding continues to flow for on-reserve programs that help build new housing and repair existing housing while being sensitive to the working environments of many indigenous communities right now that have needed to close or restrict access to their communities.

Funding for capacity development and skill training is also available to indigenous communities. Most of all, we're trying to ensure that indigenous communities know that we're here for them. We will continue to work with them, and deal with any difficulties or financial hardship they encounter.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mrs. Gill, you have less than three minutes left.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: All right.

Thank you, Minister, but I'm going to repeat my question. I asked whether indigenous communities had been consulted regarding their housing needs in light of the pandemic. That was my first question.

I had asked a second question. I understand that we are talking about regular programs, in terms of the funding available for the 27,000 or so indigenous families or households. Was there any consultation on their specific housing needs related to the pandemic? How have you tailored your support to address their requests?

I didn't get an answer to my first two questions, so I just rephrased them.

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The consultation process is ongoing.

I also want to emphasize that despite the pandemic, the national housing strategy programs continue uninterrupted. Through the national housing strategy, we co-developed distinctions-based housing strategies with our partners in first nations, Métis and Inuit communities that are founded on the principles of self-determination, reconciliation, respect and co-operation and backed by more than \$1.5 billion in investments. We also invested nearly \$650 million to support indigenous households in community housing and for indigenous housing projects through the national housing co-investment fund.

We will proceed to work with our indigenous partners to—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

My understanding, then, is that no supports were adapted and no consultation was carried out with respect to housing.

I hope that is going to change because these are very vulnerable communities that were already in need. We are talking about a third of the indigenous population. Indigenous people make up 15% of the population in my riding, and that number is going up every year. I think they are entitled to live in safe and healthy conditions, so I hope they can count on that.

I have a quick question about seasonal workers in such sectors as tourism and fisheries. They are incredibly worried right now about the end of CERB and the fact that there may not be a tourist or fishing season so they could end up with no eligible hours at the end of the summer.

What will happen to them? Will they receive assistance? Will they receive support through a specific program, or will they fall by the wayside with nothing to help them support themselves?

• (1825)

[*English*]

The Chair: Make a very short response, please.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The seasonal workers now have access to the Canada emergency response benefit. We made that change in response to the advocacy to be included in the CERB.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: They won't qualify for EI next year.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

The Chair: That was all the time you had.

[*English*]

Folks, it wouldn't be a human resources meeting unless the chair made an error for which he had to apologize. This is that point in the meeting.

Mr. Dong, I am terribly sorry to have missed your turn. It is now your turn, and after you will be Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Dong you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair. I was patiently waiting for my turn. Thank you for recognizing me and giving me this opportunity to say hello to our wonderful minister.

Thank you very much, Minister, for all the great work you've done on behalf of all Canadians in providing those key supports to every riding across the country.

In Toronto, as you know, COVID-19 is affecting homeless Canadians. Earlier I heard that my colleague, MP Long, also brought up this issue. I want to ask you a question around support for homeless Canadians. They are facing an incredible number of challenges during COVID-19.

I know that in Toronto the organizations and their front-line workers are providing a great service. They are finding ways to adjust so that they can continue to deliver those key services to support our homeless population. Can you give us some information on how the government is supporting organizations and municipalities such as Toronto?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: This is an area that I was very sensitive to right at the very beginning of the pandemic. We moved very quickly to get some initial money out the door to the five major urban centres that have the majority of Canada's homeless individuals.

On top of that, we flowed money to the community entities, including those in Toronto, to the tune of \$157.5 million. We got that money out very fast, and it's important to note that this money is additional to the regular Reaching Home money that we fund every year to the community entities. The City of Toronto got over \$22 million when you include the additional Reaching Home money plus the additional money that we got out the door quickly.

The second key point about the money that we got out as part of the COVID-19-related Reaching Home money is that we made the decision to make the use of that money by the community entities and the front-line organizations as flexible as possible, so that as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, they can use that money for whatever purposes that they need to, either to prevent an outbreak of COVID-19 among the homeless population and/or to contain any potential outbreak.

We've given them the flexibility to acquire hotel rooms and motel rooms and to acquire personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies and so on. We've really freed their hands for them to be able to respond as they see fit in terms of what the local circumstances demand.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Minister.

It's another sober reminder that we are all equal in facing COVID-19 and also of the importance of looking after each other. It doesn't matter what your social status is or your wealth or what-not. We are all equal. Thank you very much for continuing to provide support to help our homeless population.

In Don Valley North, my riding, housing affordability and affordable housing have always been at the top of people's minds. Rent is a big issue. That's what I've been hearing in my constituency. In a lot of cases right now during COVID-19, it has gone up very much, in some cases by double digits, which is appalling. Also, there's the fact that COVID-19 has effectively stopped the building of new housing inventory or slowed down the construction.

With so many people out of work, what is the government doing to ensure that everyone can keep a roof over their heads? Are you considering residential rent support programs?

• (1830)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Our government's priority is making sure that Canadians are able to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads at this difficult time, so our first focus was making sure that we got money out the door and into the pockets and hands of Canadian workers and Canadian families. That is why we introduced the Canada emergency response benefit, which has already provided income support to millions of Canadians, and the Canada emergency wage subsidy, which launched on April 27. We also gave families a top-up to the Canada child benefit and gave Canadian individuals and couples an increase in the GST tax credit.

Before COVID-19, as you know, in Ontario we had signed the Canada-Ontario housing benefit, which is also meant to help people from vulnerable populations with rent affordability. All 10 provinces have implemented a form of eviction freeze, and we commend them for taking this action.

We will continue to look at all options possible to boost funding for Canadians and to provide help in this area. It's essentially a provincial jurisdiction, but we have also made sure that we've put money into the pockets of Canadians so that they can pay their rent and pay for their other necessary expenses.

Mr. Han Dong: Yes, I understand quite well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Dong, for your patience and for your questions. That's your time.

Next is Ms. Kwan for six minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for coming to our committee.

In terms of the federal government's support for provinces and municipalities across the country, as we are dealing with the homelessness crisis, provinces are struggling to ensure that people get into a safe environment. In British Columbia, our provincial government has undertaken to lease some empty hotels and motels to put the homeless population in those rooms. The long-term plan, of course, would be that we need to house these individuals permanently. Will the federal government contribute to the capital cost of these purchases with the provincial government?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I want to begin by saying that there are additional Reaching Home dollars on top of the regular Reaching Home funding. With those two additional amounts, with the money that has been freed in their regular approaches to homelessness, municipalities have extra fiscal room to be able to actually purchase these properties. We are providing—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With all due respect, Minister, it is deficient. I can tell you that right now. The contribution from the federal government is somewhere between 10% and 12%, 15% at best, in terms of support to the provinces. That number is deficient.

We're talking about a significant number of people who are homeless. We need to get them out of the environment they're in. Right now, as it stands, the measures that have been put in place will address some of the homeless population, but not all of it. Even then, what we need now is for the federal government to come to the table, to continue to support the provinces and municipalities and to get the homeless population out of harm's way during this pandemic and then, into the future, into permanent housing.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I can answer that. I didn't really get to finish my response.

Basically, I believe that we have provided a lot of support to communities. We've given them not only the flexibility to respond to COVID-19 but also the flexibility to determine how to approach the acquisition of properties and so on. However, if we are serious about finding long-term solutions to homelessness, we can, of course, through the national housing strategy, and we have been providing capital dollars to house people permanently.

The fact of the matter is that this is a whole-of-society approach. The provinces also have to step up to provide supportive services, supportive housing—

• (1835)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister. I can assure you that in British Columbia we're doing exactly that. I hope I can continue a conversation with you—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Oh, absolutely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —to talk about how you can support British Columbia in that effort.

By way of example, you say that a lot of money has been given to local communities and organizations. To take my riding as an example, we have the third-largest urban indigenous community in this country. In terms of the allocation of funding that we got out of that \$15 million—which is deficient, by the way, in terms of supporting urban indigenous peoples in this country—your contribution, the federal government's contribution, to Vancouver East is 0.019% of the \$15 million.

That is a quick calculation on the numbers that I have. Maybe those numbers are incorrect.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I don't agree with your numbers.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would love to get the correct numbers, because I've been asking for them on a riding-by-riding basis so we can understand what resources have actually been provided to communities as they are faced with this COVID-19 pandemic.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I think we have a philosophical difference, because many of your positions are related to giving the money outright to the municipality of Vancouver. What we believe federally is that—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. With all due respect, no, you're wrong in that, Minister. I'm talking about the actual value and the amount that's being provided.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: If I could just finish my answer—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, you've misrepresented what I said, Minister, so I want to correct the record to say that what I'm arguing and what I'm saying is that the dollar amounts provided by the federal government to organizations in the community, to the provinces or to the municipalities, are deficient in terms of helping them address the homelessness crisis during the COVID-19 crisis and after COVID as well.

In the federal government's \$15-million allocation, the total amount to Vancouver East for the urban indigenous community is 0.019% of the \$15 million, and yet Vancouver East is the third-largest urban indigenous community in this country. I just simply want to say that the dollar amounts are insufficient, and I hope there is a way in which the federal government can find a path forward in providing additional resources to the communities for them to get through this pandemic.

Minister...?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I thought you were making a statement. I didn't hear the question. Sorry.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, that's really helpful.

My question is this: Will your government be providing additional resources and investments to the communities, the organizations and the provinces so that they can get through this pandemic?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely, and \$207.5 million, when you add the \$50 million to the \$157.5 million, is a significant investment for COVID-19-related homelessness, but the national housing strategy of \$55 billion hasn't stopped. We are continuing and we're welcoming projects. I welcome any project from any non-profit organization, in your constituency and beyond, through the national housing strategy co-investment fund.

We haven't stopped. As long as an organization can convince the province to get the supportive services, we will provide the capital dollars through the national housing strategy. I give you that commitment, and I will continue to work with you to make sure that we get people off the streets.

I have seen those projects in Vancouver, through modular housing and other options, but we have to ensure that this is a whole-of-society approach. If we are going to exceed our targets under the national housing strategy, the provinces also have to step up to provide the supportive services so that through our capital dollars, we enable people to get off the streets.

Third, municipalities also have to do their part to speed up the planning process and enable organizations to acquire land.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Everybody has to do their part, and we're doing our part.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Ms. Kwan. We're well over time, but I wanted to give the minister the courtesy of an opportunity to respond.

Next we have Ms. Kusie for five minutes.

One minute, please, Ms. Kusie. I think Mr. Vaughan has his hand raised.

Do you have a point of order, Mr. Vaughan?

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): It's not a point of order, so I'll pass.

• (1840)

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kusie, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, my question is in regard to a letter that I and my colleague, the member of Parliament for Calgary Shepard, Tom Kmiec, recently sent you. It's about the registered disability savings plan.

Unfortunately, it seems as though this service desk, this 1-866 number, has been disabled completely during this time. That's leaving a lot of families who rely upon this benefit in very vulnerable positions, since they are without a desk to service their inquiries. I

am asking you if you will please commit to restoring this phone line, Minister, for the sake of these families.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's a very important question, and I completely understand the urgency of the situation.

Unfortunately, this is actually not a service that falls within my portfolio. It is completely under the Canada Revenue Agency, and I would invite my officials to comment further.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister.

My next question is in regard to a news story that came out today, which said that government cheques amounting to \$33,000 were found on a routine patrol by the RCMP in Surrey, British Columbia. Many were indicated to be CERB cheques. We know, given the benefit amounts available, that \$33,000 means that 15 or 16 families who were looking forward to these cheques arriving in the mail could be missing their CERB at this time. I'm asking, Minister, if you will inquire with Service Canada as to how this discrepancy came to be, how these cheques were somehow stolen or taken away, and ensure that a failure in the delivery of this service never happens again.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you very much. That's a very important question. I'll ask my officials to respond, please.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll add that we're working closely with the police on this issue. We would also very much encourage people who are applying for the CERB to use direct deposit. It's quick, it's fast, it goes into the bank account within a few short days and it avoids any other issues we have in service delivery.

Of course, in any of these circumstances, we look at our processes to ensure it does not happen again.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much for that; I'm very happy to hear that.

We've heard a lot of discussion to this point with regard to maternity benefits. We received some good information from the officials in the previous round. Of course, there's been incredible confusion around pregnant mothers across the country who attempted to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] not have the opportunity to apply for the CERB and then were told they had to go on maternity leave immediately, resulting in more panic and more disappointment and more confusion, and then, most recently, in receiving the benefit, not getting the same amount of the benefit that they would have received on EI.

In particular, we've seen in the news today the story of Kristen Aldridge, from Airdrie, Alberta, who is filing a human rights complaint against non-delivery of the CERB for pregnant mothers attempting to go on maternity leave or going on maternity leave. I

Minister, what will you do to ensure that the miscommunications and the service gaps for maternity benefits will be cleared up? Clearly many pregnant mothers across the country feel that they have not received proper benefits during this time, to the point that they are filing human rights complaints. What will you please commit to ensuring that these gaps are filled and that they feel taken care of during this difficult time, which should be a time of joy as they look forward to welcoming their children?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We are aware that some expectant mothers are being moved to regular EI claims, but we are working to ensure that persons who are expecting a child and are eligible for the CERB can receive the benefit, even if they expect to start an EI maternity or parental claim soon.

The CERB does not affect the weeks of entitlement for EI maternity and parental benefits, and these EI benefit claims will continue to be processed as usual, whether they were established before or after March 15, 2020.

In addition, workers receiving the CERB can switch to EI maternity and parental benefits when appropriate to their situation, as long as they meet the eligibility criteria for those benefits.

• (1845)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mrs. Kusie.

Now we have Mr. Turnbull for five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister for joining us today. It's always a pleasure to have an opportunity to ask you a few questions.

I'm really proud of Canada's strong non-profit and charitable sector. We estimate there are over 170,000 non-profits in this country, with about 85,000 having charitable status. I know these organizations are essential to the strong social safety net we have in this country, which I think we're all very grateful for at a time like this. These organizations are definitely experiencing unprecedented instability. We talk about supports for small business and many other segments of our economy, but I think the non-profit charitable sector deserves support as well.

Minister, could you tell us a little about how we're ensuring that this sector can weather this financial crisis and whether you see that in phases? What does our support for that sector look like?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm really glad you asked that question. The non-profit sector and charitable organizations do amazing work every single day. Many Canadians from coast to coast to coast rely on their services.

At a time when more and more Canadians are relying on their services, these non-profit organizations and charities are facing unprecedented challenges. They're seeing their donations drop rapidly. They're seeing, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, that they're incurring additional costs that they didn't have to incur. They're seeing a drop in the number of volunteers that they can rely on to fulfill their mandate and mission of serving the most vulnerable.

That is why we have been engaged with them. I have been talking to this sector for a very long time, very regularly. I have been listening to them and seeing what we can do to help them. I am

very proud of the fact that we moved quickly to include the non-profit sector and charities in the Canada emergency wage subsidy. We included them in other measures by, for example, providing \$350 million to enable them not only to continue the work that they're doing to help the most vulnerable in our society, but also to maybe expand their capacity to help even more people. That should go a long way toward helping them.

We are giving \$100 million to food banks and community food programs, \$7.5 million to Kids Help Phone and \$9 million to senior organizations serving seniors. We are doing what we can to make sure that those organizations that are there for Canadians at this difficult time are able to continue that work. We know that they're reaching some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you, Minister.

I also appreciate the fact that our charitable sectors are our partners. They are often struggling with capacity at this time to serve our most vulnerable segments of the population, in many cases, the most marginalized segments of our society. Like my colleague, Mr. Dong, I really appreciate our being able to take care of the most marginalized.

What else are we doing in terms of equipping them to serve the most vulnerable or most marginalized populations?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: One of the key things that we're doing is through the \$350 million fund. One of the three national intermediaries that we are using is the Canadian Red Cross, precisely because of their long experience and expertise in dealing with emergencies and their ability and capacity to help organizations equip and transform their services to the COVID-19 pandemic environment. This means training, being able to increase the capacity of organizations to train volunteers properly to deal with the effects of COVID-19. It also means helping organizations train volunteers on the use of personal protective equipment and other supplies.

That is another way we're helping charities and non-profits deal with COVID-19 impacts.

On top of that, the non-profit sector and charities have submitted a proposal to the government for further supports to keep them resilient, survive COVID-19 and emerge stronger from this challenge. That is something that the government is looking at, and we are having a conversation with the sector.

• (1850)

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Kusie, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much. I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Vis.

Going back to the charities and non-profits, the \$350 million was announced on April 21, 2020. As my colleague from the NDP and my colleague Karen Vecchio in the virtual Parliament two days ago have said, it has been difficult in many cases to track the distribution of this funding. In fact, when I asked the parliamentary secretary for specifics as to the distribution of funding across the nation on a riding-by-riding basis, I was unable to receive that direct breakdown of funding. I have the same concerns about the distribution of the \$350 million for charities and non-profits.

Could the minister please provide more details as to how these funds will be distributed? Also, how will the government ensure that small organizations in smaller communities have access to these resources?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's precisely why we have made sure that we're using three trusted and long-experienced intermediaries who have a national presence in the territories, in rural Canada and in urban Canada, right across the country—the Canadian Red Cross, United Way Centraide Canada and Community Foundations of Canada—but make no mistake, the money does not belong to those organizations. They are a dispersing mechanism.

We felt that the organizations helping those vulnerable people needed the help now and not in three months. That's how long it would take if we just had a regular open call for proposals through the government. We decided to go with intermediaries to get the money out faster, in weeks rather than months. We are negotiating with them to make sure that there is national reach, that rural Canada is served, that we cover small as well as large organizations and that we make sure there is space in there for faith communities that are doing COVID-19-related work. A lot of them are charities and non-profits as well.

The funds will be open to everyone as long as they are a non-profit or charitable organization that is engaged in serving the most vulnerable Canadians in the context of COVID-19, helping them by providing services such as counselling or by providing food or medication or other kinds of help. That's the restriction, but the funds will be open to any organization as long as they're engaged in COVID-19-related work for vulnerable Canadians and serving vulnerable Canadians, as long as they are a non-profit or charitable organization.

Mr. Brad Vis: I have a question about CEBA eligibility that I'm hearing a lot from my constituents. I'm wondering if the minister could let us know whether the government is considering maintaining the payroll threshold that clearly discriminates against many sole proprietors in my neck of the woods. There has been a lot of frustration from my constituents, many of whom operate a small business or a social enterprise and don't qualify for this benefit because of the payroll calculation.

Could the minister please provide some comment on that?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you. That's a very important question. Unfortunately, this is something that's within the portfolio of the minister responsible for small businesses.

I will invite my officials to comment on this question, if they're able to.

• (1855)

Mr. Brad Vis: That's all I have. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Housefather, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I really appreciate the opportunity. I have a few things I want to say, and then I have a couple of questions.

First, Minister, I want to say how impressed I have been over how quickly these programs have been rolled out and how adaptations have been made to these programs in response to comments from Liberal MPs and in response to comments from opposition MPs. It has truly been, I think, a team Canada approach, and I really appreciate it.

I also wanted to mention that in terms of the comments that have been made about Service Canada, while indeed we sometimes have had, in my riding and in adjacent ridings, somebody who's had difficulty receiving a response, in general, in over 90% of the cases, I think my office and constituents have actually received very good responses. I want to thank Service Canada for what they're doing.

I also wanted to mention that in response to the questions about maternity benefits, Minister Qualtrough, who was here last week, committed to ensuring that the issues that expectant mothers are having under the CERB will be rectified. We've already had assurances from the minister responsible for that program.

I would like to turn to you now, Minister Hussen. Thank you for being here.

A lot of comments have been made about renters who are very concerned. We're all getting that in our ridings. As I understand it, the Canada housing benefit funds have already been transferred to provinces, to B.C., Ontario, Alberta and Manitoba, among others. Would those provinces not have those funds right now and be able to roll them out to help renters?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, absolutely. The beautiful thing about the Canada housing benefit is that when we sign agreements with provinces to help renters, the provinces determine their priority populations.

Ontario was the first province to sign an agreement with us and signed at the beginning of this year. It's called the Canada-Ontario housing benefit. The Province of Ontario said it wants to target folks who are most in need of housing: vulnerable Ontarians, women fleeing domestic violence, those who have suffered human trafficking, Ontarians with disabilities, indigenous Ontarians and seniors. Because they have kept the benefit to those populations, they have managed to make it much deeper, between \$6,000 to \$7,000 a year, which enables people to get out of temporary housing and into permanent housing. Someone may need it just one time in their lifetime to get into housing. Another person may end up using it for a year. Other people may end up using it for longer. The Canada housing benefit is our response to the issue of rental affordability.

We are also making sure that we build more affordable housing. We enable developers to build more affordable rental housing through the RCFI, the rental construction financing initiative. I and Adam Vaughan, my parliamentary secretary, have made many announcements, and we have ensured that a number of projects have either been started or completed. We will ensure that renters will have affordable rent in places where they have simply been priced out.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Minister, do I understand that you're also taking steps to help the homeless as we come out of COVID by building them additional units and trying to find them emergency shelter?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes. There is the additional amount of money, the \$157.5 million plus the \$50 million directly to women's shelters, and when you add those amounts, it's \$207.5 million in additional money. It's additional to the regular Reaching Home funds, which continue to flow.

Because we've freed up that fiscal space for municipalities, they are now able to use some of their capacity to buy property, to acquire it outright. The money we have provided is to enable them to acquire more space, acquire more cleaning supplies and acquire more physical barriers to enable them to allow the homeless population to practise social distancing and enable them to get hotel rooms for social isolation.

We've made that money very flexible. The majority of the communities that are supposed to get that money have received it already. The money has flowed at record speed. We've been able to really be proactive. It was one of the first things we did in response to COVID-19.

• (1900)

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

The Chair: No, you do not.

Thank you very much, Mr. Housefather and Minister.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you may go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Good evening, Minister.

I would hope that you've had a chance to speak with your Quebec counterpart since you took office. I'd like to talk about social housing.

You will recall that, long before the crisis, we had spoken in the House about the housing crisis and the challenges that exist throughout the provinces, including Quebec. We talked about the importance of the agreement, which you will tell us hasn't been reached with Quebec but clearly deprives Quebec of \$1.4 billion so that it can fully exercise its jurisdiction.

The crisis is making the housing situation worse, particularly when it comes to homelessness and low-income housing. The health and safety conditions in low-income housing units are worrisome, especially in a time of crisis.

Minister, I trust you can assure us that Quebec will not be denied funding it should be getting under the national strategy. I'd also like to hear your take on the discussions you had with your Quebec counterpart.

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a very good question. I confirm for the member that of the Reaching Home COVID-19 money we are flowing to different communities across the country to respond to the homeless population, the money allocated to Quebec has flowed to Quebec, and we have reached agreement with the Government of Quebec to flow that money to the communities that need it.

In terms of the Canada housing accord,

[*Translation*]

we want to make sure that Quebecers get their fair share of this government's historic investment in housing. We hope to reach a bilateral agreement with the Quebec government, as with the other provinces and territories. We made a commitment to reach a bilateral agreement with the province of Quebec based on partnership, co-operation, consensus and accountability.

It's not about imposing an agreement; rather, it's about working with the Quebec government to make a real difference in the lives of Quebecers who want an affordable place to call home.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, are the Liberals looking at policies with respect to purchase of distressed assets that currently potentially would be on the market, and would the government consider putting restrictions on the purchase of those assets from predatory purchasers?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: To use the example of the City of Montreal, the municipal government passed a bylaw to empower the city to have the right of first refusal for properties that are abandoned, and then obviously once it does that, we can then use the national housing strategy to fund any housing project proposal brought forward by the municipal government or by an NGO. I think that would be the way to go about it.

• (1905)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps off-line, Minister, I'd like to follow up with you a bit further, because I think there are a number of other options that perhaps the government can consider in this regard. I think it would be very important for us to try to secure those assets to build up the housing stock.

I have another issue I want to raise very quickly. Earlier I said that the urban indigenous support for Vancouver East was 0.019%. It's 1.69%, so I stand corrected. It's slightly more. It's less than 2%, albeit we're only the third-largest urban indigenous community across the country, so suffice it to say it is deficient funding.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm not going to argue. I am just going to record that I disagree with your number. The community—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In that case, Minister, it would be very helpful for me to get the actual numbers from the government, program by program, in terms of its contribution in support of communities and organizations through the COVID-19 pandemic, not just for Vancouver East but across the country as well, because I think that—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: If I may, as the parliamentary secretary—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry—Mr. Chair? Mr. Chair?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As someone who's involved, I'll ask the minister if I can share some time in his answer.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, go ahead, Adam.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In the design of Reaching Home, first of all, we don't fund ridings, we fund districts, so when we do outreach programs in Vancouver, between Vancouver East and Vancouver Kingsway we don't make outreach workers log which riding they're in when they're doing their work. We fund the service across the city.

Second, in Vancouver in particular, recognizing the strength and the capacity of the indigenous housing providers, the entire Vancouver community entity is indigenous-led.

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Marcel Swain leads the process there, and they are not forbidden. They—

The Chair: We have a point of order, Mr. Vaughan.

Go ahead, Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, this is becoming a debate. The minister is our witness, and so are the officials. I don't understand how we are allowing a witness to pass the floor to a committee member to answer a question. This will end up being a debate. I would like you to resolve this situation.

The Chair: I have resolved it by recognizing Mr. Vaughan.

Please finish your answer. We're just about out of time, Mr. Vaughan. Please keep it short.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: This is just to say that the community entity that handles the main Vancouver transfer is not forbidden or prevented from funding indigenous services. In fact, they're led by indigenous organizations, and they do in fact do that, so—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, my—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: —to narrow it just to one part of the program would be wrong, and it's impossible to do a riding-by-riding breakdown. We've explained this to you several times.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan. That is your time, and—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Oh, of course.

The Chair: —we are past the appointed hour.

Minister, I want to thank you very much for attending. We were able to get through two full rounds of questions.

We will see everyone back here tomorrow.

Mr. Dan Albas: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Vis.

Mr. Dan Albas: No, this is Dan Albas here.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas: I really want us as a committee to get a handle on this.

We should not have a witness, whether it be a minister or an official, passing their time to respond to a member of this committee. That creates a debate. I would like you to make sure that this does not happen again.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Albas. You've made your point of order, and I've ruled on it. Now you're repeating it. I don't think there's any purpose to be served by prolonging the meeting by repeating points of order—

Mr. Dan Albas: It creates a debate. You know what you can rule on, Mr. Chair, but I've never seen that in a committee in my time since I've been here.

I would like to ask you to please check with the clerk to see if it's suitable, because this will create debates in the committee. We're supposed to be inquiring of and directing our questions to our witnesses, and not towards each other. If someone wants—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Albas. I'll do that in advance of the next meeting.

• (1910)

Mr. Dan Albas: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We've reached the appointed time. Thanks, everyone. We'll see you tomorrow. The meeting is adjourned.

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