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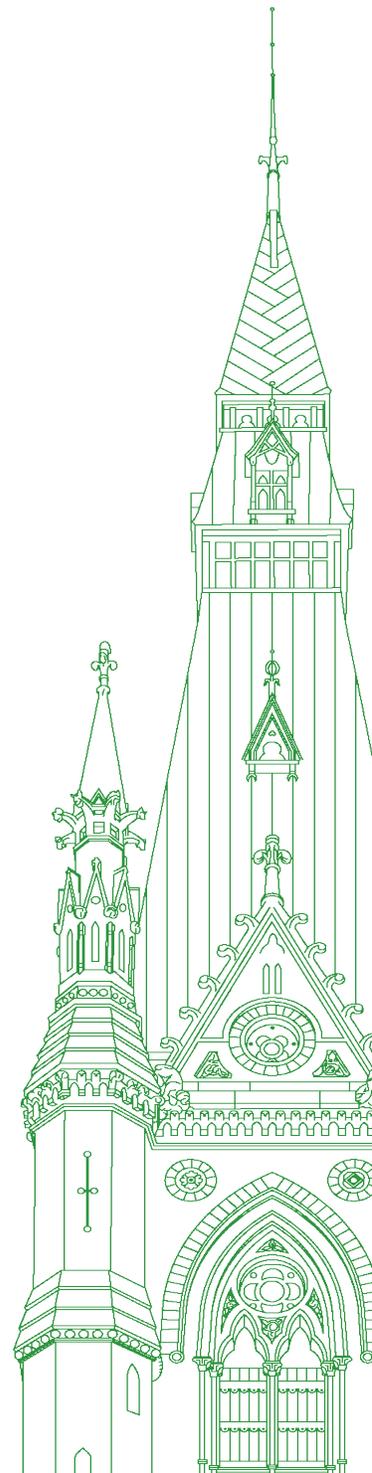
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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number seven of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Pursuant to the orders of reference of 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, and 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.

At the end of yesterday's meeting we had an exchange where I wrongly ruled against a point of order raised by Mr. Albas. I have since consulted with the clerk, and I can now assure the committee members that it will not be repeated. Every member has the right to determine which witness answers their question. Only witnesses get to answer questions, and it's the witness who is identified by the member. That is not what happened yesterday, and that was through my error. I have apologized to Ms. Kwan and Mr. Albas for that, and I now do so publicly.

Should any technical challenges arise, for example, in relation to the interpretation, or if you are accidentally disconnected, please advise the chair or the clerk 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.

Mr. Vaughan, did you have a point of order before I introduce the witnesses?

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): I just want to say that I put the chair in that position. It was my assumption that, as it was in the previous term when parliamentary secretaries could provide input, the same thing was allowed here. I apologize for putting both the chair and the members of the committee in an awkward position. I apologize to Jenny Kwan, as well as to the committee and the chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

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

We have, from the Department of Employment and Social Development, Chantal Maheu, deputy minister, labour; Anthony Giles, assistant deputy minister; and Gary Robertson, assistant deputy minister.

I understand that Ms. Maheu has some opening remarks.

You have 10 minutes. Please proceed.

• (1110)

Ms. Chantal Maheu (Deputy Minister, Labour, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Chair and members, for inviting us.

I won't use the 10 minutes. I just want to say a few words.

I'm the deputy minister for the labour program. I am accompanied by Tony Giles, who is the ADM responsible for policy, dispute resolution and international affairs; and Gary Robertson, who is the ADM responsible for compliance, operations and development.

We're here from the labour program, and as you know, we're part of the ESDC portfolio.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): I have a point of order. I'm really having a hard time hearing Chantal. It keeps cutting out. I'm not sure if it's just for me.

The Chair: It is for me as well, and I see some hands waving on the screen.

Ms. Maheu, I hope I will be able to get some technical assistance in there for you because I think we're all having trouble hearing you.

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Thank you very much.

I will speak more slowly. If there is something, please interrupt me again.

I was just saying that the regulated sector is limited to a few major industries for the Canadian economy. I'm talking about inter-provincial and international transportation, banking systems, telecoms and, in some respects, the federal public service. It's important because it provides an indication of where we actually have an impact and a role to play. For the rest of the economy, the provinces and the territories will exercise their jurisdiction.

The last thing I want to note is that I'm aware that my colleagues Graham Flack, the deputy minister of ESDC; and Lori MacDonald, who is the chief operating officer for Service Canada, were here yesterday and the week before to answer some broader ESDC questions related to their mandate. I'm pleased to be here today with my colleagues to answer questions related to the labour program.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Maheu.

We'll now begin with rounds of questions, starting with the Conservatives, and Tamara Jansen for six minutes.

Ms. Jansen.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): I want to start with how in the early stages of this pandemic your government introduced support for small business owners in the form of a 10% wage subsidy. Then, because of accountability in the House of Commons and the work of the opposition parties and stakeholders across Canada, your government introduced a 75% wage subsidy.

Can you please explain the decision-making process that led your government to posit that a 10% wage subsidy would be enough to support small and medium-sized business enterprises?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: I'm not sure if I'm reflecting the question, but thank you for it.

I will have to say that questions around wage subsidies don't pertain to the labour program mandate. The wage subsidy program is something that the Department of Finance worked on, in the same way that assistance for workers was an ESDC initiative, so I'm not privy to the decision-making process that led to the decision to increase the amount.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Okay.

Over 10 million Canadians have applied for the CERB, and to put this into perspective, Canada's total work force is around 19 million Canadians. The unfortunate reality is that many businesses will not be able to reopen when this is over. Many struggle to retain all their employees.

What's the plan for the recovery of Canada's labour force after this pandemic?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: I'm sorry because I again have to point to my colleagues at ESDC, the Department of Finance, and Innovation, Science and Economic Development for the recovery of the economy and the plan for reopening.

What I can say is that in our responsibility for protecting the occupational health and safety of workers or ensuring that employers and employees avert those risks, we are thinking about the recovery and how to best support employers doing that. Our mandate is very much limited in this case to occupational health and safety in the workplace.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Then I have a question in regard to PPE. I know there's been a tremendous shortage of PPE. It seems that the national stockpile is fairly low and not able to help. How are we going to ensure the safety of employees as we do open if there's no ability to get any PPE to them?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: I will refer this question to Gary Robertson, but let me say a few words on this first.

As you know, the procurement of PPE is something that has been managed, first, for the health care system by our colleagues in the Department [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] Service Canada [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. I hope I'm clear enough.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Could you repeat that? I'm sorry, I couldn't understand.

Ms. Chantal Maheu: The first priority in the procurement of PPE was for the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] system.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm sorry, I still can't quite understand.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Chair, on a point of order, I don't think it's a mike thing; I think it's a connection thing. There's clearly a poor connection there.

The Chair: I suggest that we suspend for five minutes and perhaps see if the IT folks can connect with Ms. Maheu to try to resolve this.

I don't want to suspend unnecessarily, but if it's going to make the meeting more productive, I do.

We're suspended, then for five minutes. Thank you for your help.

• (1120)

(Pause)

• (1125)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Mrs. Jansen is at the four-minute mark of her six minutes of questions.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm hoping to get an answer in regard to PPE. If we would like to start opening back up again, how are we going to ensure that we have sufficient PPE, because we haven't from the very beginning? I've been on the health committee, and it appears that the stockpile was not stockpiled. I wonder what the plan is to ensure that Canadians across Canada are going to have PPE when they go back to work.

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Thank you, and I hope you can hear me better now.

I'll turn to my colleague Gary Robertson in a second, but what I'll say more generally is that on the demand for PPE, the priority has been assigned to health care workers. The public health agencies are working with their provincial and territorial counterparts to identify the needs in the health care system and working with Procurement Canada to procure for that group. We're very much aware that other employers also need PPE, but they also have ways of mitigating the risks so they don't necessarily need PPE, because not every employee is exposed to the same level of risk.

Maybe what I'll do now is turn to Mr. Robertson to—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Actually, what you mentioned there made me think of the seniors care home down the road from me. They actually disallowed Fraser Health care workers from coming in, because Fraser Health only assigned them two masks and two sets of gloves for a month of working in the facilities.

How on earth are we going to fix a problem like that? What role do you play in that?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Let me turn right now to Mr. Robertson to speak about our role in PPE and overseeing that.

I'll turn to Gary now.

Mr. Gary Robertson (Assistant Deputy Minister, Labour Program, Compliance, Operations and Program Development Directorate, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you.

Maybe I'll just step back a minute to give a broader context and then answer your question very directly.

We're responsible for regulating the federal entities, and that's roughly, in the occupational health and safety domain, 8% of the Canadian workforce. It includes, as Chantal said in her opening remarks, some of the larger employers that you'd be aware of in rail, air, etc. It does not include some of the other activities that are provincially regulated, like long-term care facilities or hospitals, for example.

Having said that, within the federal domain, our occupational health and safety approach is based on a concept called the "internal responsibility system". This is very key and is consistent with the other jurisdictions' approaches as well, where no one knows the workplace better than the folks who work in it, and that includes both the employers, as you would expect, but also the employees—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm not exactly sure how, then, you'd ensure that those workers who are going into a care facility, where we know 80% of the deaths are happening, would have sufficient PPE. What role could you play perhaps in the future?

The Chair: Mrs. Jansen, that's your time.

Over to Mr. Turnbull for six minutes, please.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the officials for joining in today. I really appreciated the opening remarks, and I am sure you are all working as hard as the rest of us to deal with the many concerns that are out there.

I know of the importance of workplace safety and health at this time. I think there are many federally regulated workplaces that the

labour program is responsible for, in normal circumstances, ensuring that Canadian workers' rights are protected through a safe work environment. I know these are not normal times at all. This is a unique moment in history, and one we've never experienced before.

Can you clarify what the labour program has done for us to address the concerns that have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: I'll say a few things to give a context.

In late 2019 and early 2020, we started hearing of cases in China of COVID-19. We were alerted that something might be going on, and we went back to our plans for different epidemics. As you know, we learned from SARS and H1N1 earlier, and so as the risk seemed to grow, and the risk of a pandemic seemed to grow, we started taking steps to prepare for what it could mean for the labour program and what it could mean for the federally regulated industries.

I will turn it over again to Gary to go over what we did at that point.

● (1130)

Mr. Gary Robertson: What I would like to share with the committee is that, while our operational posture should pivot, our procedures remain the same, because we have a very good approach to dealing with all types of risk, including biological risks. Some of the operational posture changes that we made, including suspending in-person proactive activities, do not suggest that we don't do proactive work, but we ourselves could be a biological risk. We're a vector for an organization, so our interest was in restricting movement so that we didn't cause problems for the organizations we were inspecting.

We also, in early March, suspended without special reasons visits to vulnerable communities, including indigenous communities, because we were similarly concerned that we could spread COVID-19 through our interactions with those communities. Having said that, we have focused very significant effort on our posture, specifically as it relates to the complaints and, as you would expect, refusal-to-work complaints.

We work very closely with our colleagues at Transport Canada and the Canada Energy Regulator because they have occupational health and safety responsibilities as well. For Transport Canada, it's for on-board activities in the marine, the aviation and the rail sectors; and for CER, as you would expect, they relate to pipelines. We also then, obviously, worked with stakeholders to make sure that they were reminded of their responsibilities around a hazard prevention program and updating those plans. I think that, with some of the good work that was done, more folks were better prepared than they otherwise would have been.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: That's great.

I'll ask some follow-up questions about federal sector employers. Just how well are they adapting their response to the health and safety concerns of their workers? Do you think that appropriate measures are being put in place? Can you give me an overview of that?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: I think that, like every enterprise, at the beginning people were not totally sure what to do, but what we've found is that our employers have stepped up really quickly to address the risk of COVID-19. As you can imagine, the federally regulated sector involves international transportation. It was one of the vectors of the crisis, so airlines and the ports were some of the places where people started worrying about this the soonest and started taking action. At that time, some of the guidance was still evolving, so we really have seen them step up.

What we see too is that the employees themselves and their unions have raised concerns, and we've seen a lot of very constructive discussion where employees and employers get together and say, "We're not sure what to do in this case; we used to do it that way. I'm very close to my co-worker. Are there different ways of doing it?"

We've seen everyone trying to find solutions that are very practical because each workplace will be different in terms of what it is doing. People have stepped up; people have adapted. We see, in some cases, that teleworking has also been a way of reducing risks.

In a way, the federally regulated sector is one of those that, because it's so critical, has maintained operations throughout the crisis, unlike others, so they will be impacted by some of the reopening, but they have maintained most of their operations.

I don't know, Gary, if you want to add to this.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Yes, I would just add one thing that I think committee members would be reassured by.

In the labour program, we enjoy a tripartite approach to managing issues. That means that, on any given issue, we involve all stakeholders, government stakeholders as well as both employer and employee reps, so folks are generally better informed than they otherwise might be, and folks are better positioned then to identify the risks and to mitigate them. That relationship has been preserved from the junior analyst level right up to meetings that the minister has had with stakeholders. We're monitoring the situation and, as the deputy has indicated, there has been an awful lot of work done to make sure that things are being managed as safely as possible.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Over to Ms. Chabot.

You have six minutes.

• (1135)

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

I thank the witnesses for their presentations.

Today is International Workers' Day, and we are hearing from Department of Employment and Social Development officials. This provides an opportunity to acknowledge that we understand everything that had to be done and that is yet to do in response to this unprecedented crisis. We must never forget that 8 million Canadian workers have found themselves in a very difficult situation. I do not think you have forgotten, but I still wanted to mention it.

You touched on the topics of health and safety, which are federal jurisdictions, as is the topic of psychological health in the workplace. Here, in Quebec, the economic recovery will happen slowly. The Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail has produced some guides and is providing support for businesses. We saw what happened at health care facilities.

My question is one that you, or the Minister of Employment and Social Development, get often. Service Canada has completely shut down its offices, and many people have been critical of that. There are federal employees, and people need services. Now that there are clear health and safety rules, can we hope to see the offices open back up in the short term, with the necessary workplace health and safety measures in place?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Thank you very much for your question. I'll answer it in two parts.

First, Lori MacDonald, the chief operating officer for Service Canada is responsible for the management of Service Canada offices.

I will, however, answer the question by talking about the resources available to businesses. We are in the midst of a crisis that has an impact on health and safety. Although our operations are now virtual, we have maintained a 24/7 phone line. We are in contact virtually with the businesses that need our services, and we are able to meet demand—

[*English*]

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. We had this same issue in our COVI meeting. The translation and the original audio are both going at the same time. Is it possible to bring the volume of the original audio down and the interpretation up a bit?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Doherty.

Madame Maheu, it's possible the problem is that when you are switching languages you aren't switching the toggle to indicate that. It's something we have encountered in the past.

Is that a reasonable guess?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Is this better? I chose the French stream.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is that working for everyone?

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): On a point of order, Chair, I don't get the English interpretation. I checked my language bar and it is switched to English. I don't know if it's just me. Is the rest of the committee hearing the English interpretation fine?

The Chair: It could be because you're not using a headset, but I'm not sure about that.

Can we hear from the IT folks as to what the nature of that might be, or is that the interpretation department?

• (1140)

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I have a point of order as well. I noticed especially on my time, although it's going to happen here again, that all these technical difficulties make it quite ineffective to ask questions.

I was given exactly six minutes, but most of that time was spent repeating things, dealing with challenges of connectivity and so forth. I think it's really important, if we want to take this seriously, to ensure that people get six minutes of productive time. That's what I'm hoping you can do somehow, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jansen. In fact, you got seven minutes, not including the interruptions, to make up for what happened to you. I'm trying to exercise my discretion to achieve the precise goal you've mentioned.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Just to reiterate, it was very unproductive time when most of it was spent with a lot of connectivity issues. It is a challenge. I get that we're trying to work with the technology that we have at hand, but it would be great to have a better discussion that actually gets something done.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot on a point of order.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, I had been recognized. I was waiting for answers and started to get some, and then there was a point of order. I want to make sure that I'll have a chance to finish my speaking time, which should be six minutes.

The Chair: Yes, you will.

[*English*]

Mr. Dong, you're back in business.

Mr. Han Dong: No, Mr. Chair, I'm still not getting the translation. I got a little bit and then it got cut off. If it continues to be problem, I'll raise my hand again.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Chabot, you have three minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I would now like to talk about a particular problem facing thousands of workers regarding pension funds [*technical difficulties*]. As reported in the media, they're affected by the current crisis, and this issue comes on top of other difficulties.

Can you assure us that you're working to ensure that workers [*technical difficulties*]

[*English*]

Mr. Adam Vaughan: On a point of order, as nice as it is to see each other's faces, it seems that the problem is the computer line that's connecting. We wouldn't be able to see the official's face, but maybe a land line might provide a more stable audio feed and help the meeting move faster.

Mr. Todd Doherty: The other thing I would recommend is that for anybody who is online, turn off all the Wi-Fi on your additional devices so that it's not drawing down the bandwidth around you.

The Chair: Perhaps we could bring in the IT ambassador on this point.

A voice: Mr. Doherty does have a very good point about bringing down any use of the bandwidth if you're on a wireless device. We've suggested at all times that a wired connection will always be better—from the computer to the Internet, as well as from the headset to the computer. Another thing that will bring down the bandwidth consumption is turning off your video; that way, your entire signal is going to the audio only.

The Chair: That's some advice for everyone to try keep this moving.

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you still have three minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I was asking a question about the pension funds and pension plans of workers across the country and the economic crisis we will find ourselves in.

Do you plan on protecting workers' pension plans? I hope so. If so, how?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Thank you for your question.

The Labour Program is not responsible for pension plans. They fall under the jurisdiction of the provinces, and federal plans are the responsibility of the Department of Finance. Sometimes, in the case of bankruptcy, the Department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development will be responsible.

I'm sorry, but that does not fall under our mandate.

Ms. Louise Chabot: It falls under your mandate in the event of bankruptcy, does it not?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: In the event of bankruptcy, the Labour Program compensates employees who did not receive the wages or severance pay owed. We administer this program, but it does not protect pension funds. It protects workers.

Mr. Robertson would be able to give you more information on that program if you'd like.

Ms. Louise Chabot: In the event of bankruptcy, pension funds must be the priority before a company shuts down. A bill to that effect has been introduced. Pension funds always end up coming last, and workers may end up with nothing. In light of what is going on now, this is urgent.

Are you working on these issues?

Ms. Chantal Maheu: The Department of Employment and Social Development is not responsible for protecting pension funds. If pension funds are in need of protections, this would be done by other departments.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I respect your answer, Ms. Maheu, but we cannot work in a vacuum on these issues because they affect workers. There may be other departments looking into this issue, but the Department of Employment and Social Development should be responsible for ensuring that workers are protected. That cannot be compartmentalized.

Ms. Chantal Maheu: I understand. That's why I'll try to redirect the discussion to the program that we administer, which provides financial support to employees who did not receive their wages or their severance pay after a business declares bankruptcy.

If you want more information on that, Mr. Robertson would be happy to help.

Mr. Gary Robertson: As Ms. Maheu said, we are not responsible for what happens after the period of employment. Our mandate is limited to the period of employment.

A number of other departments have responsibilities in this arena. Employment and Social Development Canada is responsible for CPP, and other departments, such as the Department of Finance, are responsible for other pensions. Some organizations do offer an additional pension, but that's not part of our responsibilities.

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

[English]

Next we have the NDP for six minutes.

Ms. Kwan.

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

I want to first raise this point. When the officials say that it is the employer who knows best in terms of workplace safety, I would argue that it is the employees who know best, because they are the people who are going to be put at risk in this situation.

From that perspective, when people ask for personal protective equipment, I think they should be provided that equipment.

As a case in point, I received an email from a worker in Quebec. The worker works in a different sector, and because Quebec has a mandatory redeployment policy, all these workers are being redeployed to another area, which has been deemed mandatory. They are not trained and are ill-equipped.

People are very stressed in that situation. They feel that if they do not abide by that mandatory redeployment requirement, they will lose their jobs; they will be fired.

The email I received is very lengthy. It is from someone who is in that situation right now. The individual also further explained by way of copies of emails that have been exchanged between the worker and the employer, and on the issue around personal protective equipment, and so on, not being available, the response was basically saying, "Good luck; this is what you have to do."

I'd like to get a response from the officials on that. How do people deal with those kinds of situations? If they're put in an environment that they feel is not safe, they're ill-equipped to do that work and they are forced to quit because they are made to do it otherwise, what will happen to them?

If you voluntarily leave your job, you would not qualify for CERB or for government assistance.

• (1150)

Ms. Chantal Maheu: Thank you very much for the question. It raises a lot of very important issues.

The first one I'll tackle is regarding who knows best. I will agree with you, partly, that the employer and the employees together know best. What I will say is that the employer has more tools to address the issue, but the employees or employee representatives have key roles in identifying the risks and defining the solutions. A fundamental aspect of occupational health and safety is that both sides have to work together to find solutions.

I do want to come back to the PPE, and I'll turn to Gary again, but I want to say something. In a workplace, people have to work through the risks and identify how to mitigate the risks. It may be that in some cases people do need PPE and that PPE is required, but there are often other measures that are also essential to have in place. We know a lot about social distancing, and we see these plexiglass barriers that protect, so depending on the workplace, it's a combination of changing the work process, some equipment and potentially some PPE. All of that leads to a solution.

The final thing we should address to answer your question is the fear of reprisal, and the fact that people may feel that they could lose their job or that they have to work in dangerous situations. There are provisions in the code to prevent that.

I'll turn to Gary to give more details. Our answer will pertain to the federally regulated sector—that's our scope—but most provinces have very similar legislation.

Gary.

Mr. Gary Robertson: Thank you.

I'd like to reinforce that the internal responsibility system that our code is based on requires the involvement both of the employers and the employees. The objective is for them to collaboratively identify all the risks—in this case, the biological risks—to eliminate the risk if it's possible to do so, and if it's not, to minimize the risk to the degree possible.

To Chantal's point on PPE, and this may go to an earlier question received in the committee, certainly if PPE is a requirement to help minimize the risk, which it may or may not be, the employer is to provide it, and the employees are to receive training and in many cases fit testing, to make sure that it works for them in their circumstances.

In the event that it is required and is not provided, employees have every right in the federal jurisdiction to refuse to work, to try to resolve it internally within their organization, and if it's not possible to do so, to escalate the concern to us, and we would investigate.

I hope that's helpful.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I will endeavour to pass that information on to the individual, and perhaps they can be directly in contact with your ministry to resolve the situation.

It sounds to me to be quite a serious situation, and it's not just one worker; it's a group of workers. As well, in their situation, their collective agreement has been suspended, so that means their protection per the collective agreement would not apply. This is very concerning on many levels, and I hope this can be resolved.

I also want to emphasize the importance of this and perhaps this could be passed on to the other departments. I think it's really important for people to have the assurance that if they feel they have to voluntarily leave their work for these reasons, they would qualify for CERB.

On a different note—and I wonder whether or not this is the right place to bring the concern—I have received yet another email from another constituent, and in that situation, the individual is being asked to collude with the employer to misrepresent the situation for the purpose—

• (1155)

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, I'm sorry. That's your time. I hope you'll get a chance to pose that question directly to the minister in the next round.

Folks, we are ready now for Minister Tassi. We'd like to do a microphone check. I would like to suspend, and then we'll bring the minister back and restart the questions.

We'll suspend for a few minutes.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1155)

The Chair: We are now back in session.

We are pleased to welcome the Honourable Filomena Tassi, Minister of Labour.

Minister, you have 10 minutes for your opening remarks.

Hon. Filomena Tassi (Minister of Labour): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, it's a pleasure to be with you today virtually to talk about an update on the measures taken by the government to address the COVID-19 pandemic as they pertain to my portfolio.

I'd like to highlight that today is International Workers' Day. Today, we recognize the millions of workers who go to work every day, and we're reminded of their health and safety at work and how important their health and safety is. This is true now more than ever in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I'd like to thank the committee for its study on the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Your work is essential to our democratic process. I know the value of the work that you do. In fact, HUMA was the committee that I sat on.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

I'll start by summarizing the support measures the government has taken for workers, and in particular essential workers. Some exceptional, but necessary, measures have been taken to protect and support Canadian businesses and workers during this crisis.

[*English*]

Businesses across Canada have had to dramatically alter or shut down their operations in an effort to help flatten the curve, and this has had an enormous impact on employers and workers alike. To help Canadian workers impacted by COVID-19 put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads, the government introduced the Canada emergency response benefit. I am aware of the fact that my colleague, the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, has already appeared in front of the committee to discuss this benefit.

To ensure that workers can take time off work to deal with situations related to COVID-19, such as school closures and self-quarantine, we've also created a new leave under the Canada Labour Code, and we are waiving the medical certificate requirements to make it easier for federally regulated workers to access existing leave benefits. While the new leave is unpaid, workers taking it may be eligible to access the Canada emergency response benefit.

My colleague, the Honourable Bill Morneau, Minister of Finance, has been leading the work being done to provide extra income support to our essential workers during this very critical time, if they're earning less than \$2,500 a month. These are people on the front line in hospitals and nursing homes, those ensuring the integrity of the food supply, or those providing essential retail services to Canadians. They all play a vital role in providing essential services to Canadians. Their work is essential to our country's well-being, and on behalf of all Canadians, I'd like to thank them for the very important work they do.

Now, I'd like to say a few words about what we've done with leaders in government, labour and industry regarding the support for workers and employers during the COVID-19 crisis.

[*Translation*]

I am in constant contact with labour and employer organizations in all sectors so that the government can be abreast of concerns on the front lines.

[English]

I led a conference of the federal, provincial and territorial labour ministers to coordinate efforts across government to make sure that workplaces for essential workers remain safe during the COVID-19 crisis. We also recently met via teleconference with employers and representatives from labour to discuss the steps we've taken so far to ensure that workplaces are safe, workers are protected and businesses and the Canadian economy are as strong as they can be. This meeting resulted in a joint statement underlining the need for collaboration on the part of labour, industry and government to make sure that workplaces remain safe for Canadians, for Canada's essential workers.

We agreed that the situation continues to evolve, and we must remain flexible and adaptable in how we respond. Above all, we must continue to work together. Working together will yield better results because we can share common goals to protect the health, safety and well-being of Canadian workers. We are also collaborating so that Canadian businesses are able to come back and ensure the economy can recover by getting people back to work safely after the crisis ends. We're going to continue to work together to achieve these goals today and down the road.

[Translation]

I'd now like to talk about the measures the government is taking to protect the health and safety of all Canadians. Pursuant to the Canada Labour Code, employers have a duty to protect the health and safety of their employees in the workplace.

[English]

Working with employees and health and safety committees, employers are required to update and create their own hazard prevention programs, including measures to ensure employees are not exposed to conditions that would be harmful to their health and safety while working.

We know that exposure to COVID-19 is a new phenomenon. We also know that we must take this matter very seriously. We encourage employers to seek guidance from appropriate authorities, including the Public Health Agency of Canada and the World Health Organization, for information on preventative measures that should be taken.

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, under the direction of its CEO Anne Tennier, has been doing excellent work in response to the COVID-19 crisis. They have very rapidly developed a series of pandemic guidance tip sheets and made them available for free on their website. These pandemic tip sheets offer guidance and good practices for specific occupations, industries and services for both employees and employers. The CCOHS has also provided an online space called Pandemic Info Share. This enables businesses and organizations to share their pandemic-related good practices and resources.

We know that employers are following guidance and measures from the appropriate authorities, including the Public Health Agency of Canada, to make sure their employees are safe during this critical time. We also know that most employers are doing their best to accommodate reasonable requests from employees who are grappling with the wide-ranging disruptions caused by COVID-19,

and I want to thank them for their efforts. For example, there are many workers who have to stay at home to care for their children who are out of school. In some cases they are able to complete some or all of their work from home.

That being said, I know there are many employees who are nervous every day about heading back to work or restarting work. That is why we've reached out to employers and their representatives to remind them of the employers' responsibility under the code. If there is a risk of exposure to COVID-19, employers have an obligation to identify and assess the risk and implement proper controls through their hazard prevention programs. Employees subject to part II of the code have the right to refuse work if they have a reasonable basis to believe their duties present a danger to health and safety. Every workplace and every situation is unique and when a refusal to work cannot be resolved internally, the labour program will investigate.

We are committed to supporting and protecting workers and businesses. As I mentioned, the government has taken a number of unprecedented but necessary steps to support Canadian workers and businesses during this COVID-19 outbreak.

As we continue to monitor the ongoing and continuously evolving situation, we will remain open to exploring additional measures that could further help workers during this time. That means continuing to work with leaders from labour and industry and with other stakeholders to ensure that what we have in place right now is working and, of course, is corrected if need be. We are committed to ensuring that workers and businesses have the protections and support they need, while keeping essential goods and services flowing to Canadians.

With that, Mr. Chair, I conclude my preliminary remarks. Thank you very much for your attention.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now begin our questions, starting with the Conservatives.

Mr. Doherty, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thanks, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the minister.

Minister, it's been fairly frustrating. I'm not sure if you've been on this call for the last two hours, but it's been fairly frustrating that your own employees on your own team have had incredible challenges with connectivity. I would ask that perhaps your office pay some attention to this to ensure your own employees have the tools to provide these updates and provide all parliamentarians with the appropriate information. I can see the frustration on your employees' faces.

Minister, are you aware of the letter written by CUPE to you and Minister Garneau on April 6, 2020, yes or no?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: MP Doherty, first, with respect to the workers, everybody is working very hard in this very challenging time—

Mr. Todd Doherty: I understand that.

Hon. Filomena Tassi:—and they are going above and beyond. I think what has been accomplished has been excellent, but I will take your note with respect to the importance of ensuring that we have the systems in place to have these meetings.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Right. Yes or no, are you aware of the letter?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I believe I am aware of the correspondence that was written. Let me say that we are getting correspondence on a regular basis, and my team is—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, it's not out of a lack of respect, but my time is very short. Are you aware of the substance and the contents of that letter, yes or no?

• (1210)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: We're getting correspondence every day. Volumes of correspondence are coming in. I'm not specifically sure with respect to which letter. We've received a number of letters—

Mr. Todd Doherty: The letter came from CUPE. It asked you to step in, do your job and provide flight attendants with PPE so that they could do their jobs safely. Does that remind you now about the contents of the letter?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: There are different letters. I will say that most of the letters that we have received in my portfolio relate specifically to the PPE, yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Did you respond to that letter from CUPE?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That is in process. We are now working through responding to the various pieces of correspondence that we have received. My team is working very hard to respond to the volumes of correspondence that are coming in.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, since March 15, over 300 flights in Canada have had confirmed cases of COVID, resulting in at least 60 confirmed cases with our flight attendants. On March 11, the government asked airlines and airports to become the front line of the COVID battle, asking our airport employees as well as our airline employees to be the front line of defence. Did your office at any time provide any training or PPE to any of those organizations?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: What I would say in response to that is that our government is very much aware of the PPE that is needed. We are working very hard with procurement in order to secure as much PPE as we possibly can.

Mr. Todd Doherty: So that would be a no.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: In regard to working with the various sectors, I'm working with Minister Garneau on this particular file. I want to add that we are working collaboratively with each of the sectors—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay, I get that, Minister.

Hon. Filomena Tassi:—in order that the materials be provided.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, I'm going to be very blunt and very clear.

Your mandate letter states that you will work with and “require federally regulated employers to take preventative steps to address workplace stress and injury”. Would you not say that we're in some unprecedented times and that every measure should be taken to provide employees, when they raise an issue, and employers, when they raise an issue—

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Absolutely, MP Doherty, and I know that Minister Garneau has been working closely with the airline sector.

The other issue that I would raise—

Mr. Todd Doherty: But this is your issue.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: No, actually, he's the lead minister with respect to transport. He has in fact implemented a number of measures to help keep those workers safe, such as the recent guideline with respect to ensuring that those who are travelling by air wear masks.

The other issue I would raise is that in the Canada Labour Code—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, do you take responsibility for any of our flight attendants and our flight crews that have become sick? They've asked for help, and you've failed to provide any help and even failed to answer the letters of correspondence.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I wouldn't agree with that.

I would say, first and foremost, we're responding to letters. Second, with respect to the PPE with air transit, I know that Minister Garneau and I have been working very closely with respect to identifying what PPE is needed.

Under the Canada Labour Code, there is a provision that any federally regulated worker who feels that they are in a dangerous work environment has the right to make that claim, and there have been some claims. Processes have been put in place—

Mr. Todd Doherty: But your office has refused to answer their concerns. You just stated earlier that you still haven't responded to their labour organization. One of your deputy ministers said earlier that you have a tripartite approach with the employer, the employee reps and yourself, and you try to find solutions, but you've just stated that you have yet to respond to an April 6 letter.

Our airline and airport staff have been on the front lines fighting COVID since early in March, yet they still have not had any training, and they still have not had any PPE.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Sorry, Todd, but I disagree with that statement.

I have been in regular engagement with union leaders, labour and businesses, in order to come to a point where we can work collaboratively. I'm happy to say that employers know that they have the responsibility to provide that equipment.

Mr. Todd Doherty: But you have the responsibility—

• (1215)

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

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, I just want to ask one last thing.

Minister, would you table—

The Chair: No, Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty: —with this committee any of the documents to those organizations?

The Chair: Mr. Doherty, that is your time. Thank you.

Next we have Ms. Young, for six minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

An hon. member: I have a point of order as well, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Turnbull.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I believe that ministers are supposed to be allowed to answer questions when they're asked them. I found, with all due respect to Mr. Doherty, that he kept interrupting the minister as she was trying to answer the question that he asked. I don't think that's how committee business should be conducted. I would ask for you to rule on that, please.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

On this point of order, I can say it is a challenge for us to ensure fairness to the witness and to the person asking the question. The person asking the question has limited time and it's fair for them to hold the minister to an answer, but there is a fine line between badgering and ensuring that the time is adequately used. I'm doing my best to find that balance.

We have another point of order.

Mr. Vaughan, go ahead.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In the first round, we're supposed to try to figure out how to make the time for questions move equally among all committee members, as this is a parliamentary committee, not question period. With all of these points of order, the distribution of questions has not been fair to parliamentarians, and I'm contributing to it with this point of order. We all have to represent our constituencies and the organizations in our ridings, and these points of order have effectively cut off several questions for opposition members. I know the Green Party, which is asking for time, will never get time under these circumstances.

Quite often, I don't think it's a point of order that is being raised. I think it's a filibuster tactic, quite frankly, and I find it very offensive to the privileges of members of the committee. We know we only have two hours, and I think this is a delay tactic. It's used to run the clock. I would like that to be considered when points of order

are raised, because it's becoming quite obvious what's happening here.

In addition, as a point of privilege, we know that interpretation is difficult, so when people talk over each other and try to interrupt each other, it is impossible to listen in this format and makes the situation even worse. We have a responsibility to listen to each other as much as we have a responsibility to talk, and I think when talking over one another happens, the time should be taken away from the next opposition member on the same side down the line, because it's an offence to all of us.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Doherty, go ahead.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I will bring our colleague back to the previous round, when the points of order were not frivolous. They were due to connectivity issues, and members on the committee could not hear the witnesses speak.

As to our line of questioning with the minister, the chair was absolutely correct that once the floor is ceded to a member, it is their time. The minister and other guests should be asked to keep their answers as succinct as possible. We know from the past that answers can be very long-winded. As I did at the outset of my questioning, we ask that when a simple yes or no answer can be given, please give it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Doherty.

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

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister Tassi, thank you for joining us today. This is such an important issue.

This past Tuesday was the national day of mourning for workers who have been injured or lost their job. During this pandemic, so many Canadians are working on the front lines. Whether they're health care workers, grocery store clerks or truck drivers, they are all putting themselves in harm's way so that Canadians can survive this crisis.

Minister, protecting Canadian workers is of paramount importance to everyone, and that's obvious today. A number of concerns have been raised about how workers can protect themselves and what the government should be doing to ensure their safety.

As you mentioned in your opening remarks, you are taking additional measures as we start to reopen our economy. I would like to hear about those additional measures. What do you think we'll have to navigate over the next few weeks and months?

• (1220)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thanks, MP Young.

I'm very happy you made reference to the day of mourning. The Speaker began the first day, when we had our first session, with that acknowledgement. It was really important and very good to see, as it was for us as members of Parliament to take the time to acknowledge those who have suffered injuries or loss as a result of workplace situations.

With respect to protecting workers, there's no question; first and foremost, it's really important to talk about the collaborative piece. Collaboration on this file is extremely important. Right from the beginning, I reached out to all my provincial and territorial partners. I had individual calls with those partners, and subsequent to that convened an FPT meeting, where we gathered together to talk about issues. In that meeting, I brought to the table the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. That was really important, because from across the provinces and territories there was this issue about wanting evidence and standards or tips in order to provide workers with what they need to keep them safe on the front lines.

That meeting was very helpful. As a result of that, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety has now created sector-specific tips. The evidence-based approach on the PPE is critical, because we want to ensure that we're using the PPE the best way we can. These sector-specific tips, which are based as well on the Public Health Agency of Canada's guidelines, are giving employees the recommended protection they need in order to carry on safely. That was very important.

In addition to that, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement has committed \$2 billion to purchase PPE so that PPE can get to the places it needs to be distributed. We're working with the provinces and territories on that.

In addition to this, the Minister of Innovation has started this plan to mobilize industry launch. Here it's about companies stepping up who have expertise and are able to assist in this regard. I think this is so important. In my own riding, I have had companies come forward who were making, for example, sports apparel and who now want to make gowns. That's happening across the country, which is fantastic. There have been 2,900 conversations instituted as a result of that. With the option of trying to get Canadian products, 22,000 companies have come forward and submissions have been made with respect to getting that product available.

In addition to that, as I said in my introductory remarks, we instituted an unpaid leave. That was about ensuring that federally regulated workers who take time off because of COVID-19 do not lose their jobs. We also waived the medical certificate requirement, making it easier in these very challenging times.

Those are some of the initiatives.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much. That is very important.

I know that you're a vocal advocate for mental health in the workplace. In the current climate, Canadians are facing unimaginable pressure, be it personally, professionally or financially. These stresses are going to linger long after a recovery has begun and the new normal has begun.

What work has the government and your department undertaken, or plan to take, in order to address the mental health concerns of workers in all sectors?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I'm really happy you raised this question, because as I engage with both labour and industry, mental health is something that comes up repeatedly. We know that workers are facing great anxiety and pressure, and we want to be able to respond.

In terms of my own work, with 20 years as a high school chaplain, I came to recognize the difference that a little bit of mental health support can provide. It's critical that we move forward on this and provide these extra supports. There are resources out there that are excellent. The Mental Health Commission of Canada has a resource that you can go online and access.

Recently, Health Canada launched a Wellness Together portal. This is a fantastic portal. I would encourage everyone on this call to spread the information about this portal. It's a fantastic source, going from your being able to do a self-assessment right to the point of your being able to speak to somebody. This is something that I heard there was a great need for. I know the labour program is sharing this. It is a real step forward in responding to a legitimate need that exists among our workers.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Ms. Young.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Sorry. I didn't have the translation.

The Chair: Okay.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

Minister, I thank you for the work you are doing.

I know that since you took on this role, you've made it a priority to speak with your workplace health and safety counterparts, including your Quebec counterpart.

This situation is worrisome. There is a lot of talk about how we've had to adjust and implement programs in response to the crisis that hit us all on March 13. I'd like to talk to you about the concerns of two categories of workers. There may be more, but I'd like to discuss two categories in particular.

I'll start with the tourism industry. This industry will be hit hard during and after the crisis. In Quebec, we're talking about 400,000 jobs. I imagine that number is much higher when you add in the rest of Canada.

I've spoken to stakeholders in this industry, and as you know, their revenues are earned within a short period, but their expenses go on all year. They are worried that the recovery will be slow. The tourism industry has some specific demands. One demand is that it wants the government to consider expanding the 75% wage subsidy over a longer period.

Could workers in this seasonal industry be considered permanent workers for an entire year?

These are issues of concern. I'd like to know how you're working with the other departments. I know that the Minister of Labour works with the Department of Employment and Social Development and, as I was told earlier, the Department of Finance.

How are you working together on these issues?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thank you for your question, Ms. Chabot.
[English]

Thanks also for your kind words and for the level of collaboration you have demonstrated. I know we have had a meeting and you have been very gracious with your time in terms of providing me with input as we move forward, and I deeply appreciate that. This is another example of that.

I take your points with respect to tourism. You know that in my portfolio the focus is on health and safety of workers. That said, I work across my departments and ministries in order to ensure that, when we recover from this, the best recovery is possible.

The measures the government has put in place have been all about, first, protecting those who are most vulnerable, who need help immediately, and second, trying to continue the collaborative relationship, or the relationship that exists between employer and employee, so that after COVID-19, when we're in the recovery stage, those relationships can continue. That means providing supports such as the wage subsidy, CERB and rental relief. All these measures are about when we hit that recovery stage, to ensure that workers and employers can continue and recover quickly, because we want a strong recovery from this.

I want you to know that I've heard your concerns in regard to the tourism industry. In my conversations, I've heard those concerns and appreciate that input.

• (1230)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

The topic of tourism workers comes up often. We know that they had access to the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB, but these workers found themselves in a black hole with EI. They're very worried and are wondering how they will be able to become eligible for another period of EI.

We'd like to know whether this issue will be addressed and resolved. Will they be eligible for EI benefits in the future?

I'll conclude by asking a question about pension funds, which I asked to the officials who were with us this morning.

We know that some businesses will make it through and others will struggle. Unfortunately, some will go bankrupt. Workers could see their pension plans affected. La Presse had an article this morning on this topic regarding Resolute Forest Products.

We want the federal government to make sure that if a company goes bankrupt, the pension plans will be protected and will consid-

ered priorities. How are you working with the Department of Finance on this matter?

[English]

The Chair: Please provide a quick response, Minister.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thank you for that question.

In terms of a follow-up on whether there's going to be requalification, I will say that this is an evolving situation. You've seen the measures that our government has implemented. We continue to respond to the situation as it evolves in order to protect workers. We want to, of course, give a restart to all those companies. Tourism is a big sector. We will continue to look at the situation.

I appreciate your concern with respect to the pension funds. You know that in my previous ministry as minister of seniors, this is something that was very important to me. I will say that we will continue to work across ministries in order to do the best we can to protect seniors.

Some of the initiatives that we implemented as a government were very important, for example, rolling back the age of eligibility for the OAS and the GIS. That gave seniors two years of extra funds. There was also the \$100 million for the new horizons for seniors program. These are all programs that support seniors.

I hear very clearly what you are saying, and I want to let you know that we absolutely want to protect seniors.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Next, we have the New Democrats.

Mr. Duvall, you have six minutes.

Mr. Scott Duvall (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your being here, and I hope that you and your family are safe.

One of the issues you mentioned that I want to touch on is the Canada emergency wage subsidy. Some employers want to apply and have gone to their workforces, but they're threatening the unions that if they do not allow them to open up their contracts, abusing their seniority rights and work schedules, then they will not apply.

Are you aware of this, and is this one of the criteria that is being allowed, or is any action being taken?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Scott, thanks for your good wishes at the beginning. I should say, "MP Duvall". In Hamilton, we have a relationship here.

I'm not fully understanding your question. Are you saying that they're applying for CERB but are not getting CERB, or are you talking about the subagreements?

• (1235)

Mr. Scott Duvall: I'm referring to the wage supplement.

Companies are saying that they want to apply, but the condition for the unions is, "If you don't allow us to open up your basic agreement, we will not apply." Are you aware of that?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: No, that matter has not been brought to my attention. Having said that, it may have been brought to the attention of the finance or the employment minister. For me, as you know, the focus is health and safety. With respect to the Minister of Employment, it's CERB, and with respect to the wage subsidy, it would be finance and business.

Mr. Scott Duvall: I'm just bringing that to your attention, Minister.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Very good. I'll follow up with you on that.

Mr. Scott Duvall: Yes, because it is a labour problem. Collective agreements should be abided by.

The next one I want to touch on is what our last speaker from the Bloc touched on.

Many financial advisers have given out warnings and have said that after this recovery stage, if we ever get out of it, many companies will go bankrupt. In the media, we've already had some financial advisers warning people and companies that the easiest way to stay afloat is to file for bankruptcy.

Knowing that there could be a spike in all these bankruptcies coming forward to get out of that debt, are we taking any action to protect workers? As the legislation is written, these would leave workers behind, not only on pensions but also on severance payments, termination payments and vacation pay. Most of the people who are on EI now will have had it run out.

If these companies do go bankrupt and they claim bankruptcy—we know this is going to happen—what are we doing to support the workers? Are we looking to change the legislation on bankruptcy protection and put workers first?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thanks, MP Duvall, for that important question.

I would say this is a situation that is evolving continuously. What we have done as a government is we've put in place targeted measures. For example, CERB was for those individuals and families who went from a paycheque to nothing; they needed to put food on the table and they needed to pay rent, so that's what we have done.

As we move through the process, in terms of protecting, we are continuously looking at anyone who falls through the cracks, at those individuals who need more assistance.

On the point you're raising, I would say that the measures we have implemented have been very specific, with the intention of trying to help companies survive this, so that when recovery comes, they can recover. That's why we have the implementation of the wage subsidy. We want companies to get through this. The federal government is providing 75% of wages to employees. The reason

we're doing this is that we want that company to get through this difficult time.

The other measures we've taken are with respect to rental supports, liquidity and loans for small businesses. They can borrow up to \$40,000 and have 25% of that—\$10,000—forgiven. All of these initiatives are about tackling the very thing you're talking about, which is trying to keep businesses going so that those workers will have work and so those people who have dedicated so much of their effort to creating a business are going to be supported in the recovery stage to get that business to come back.

Mr. Scott Duvall: Minister, what I'm saying, though, is that we know there's going to be a spike for business. Does the government have any plans to start protecting workers and not so much the businesses to keep them afloat? If the government is not keeping them afloat and they can't be afloat, what is the government doing to protect the workers from going into a second stage of harmful hurt? This is very serious. Will you advocate for putting workers on top in a bankruptcy protection?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Scott, I know this is something you have advocated for a long time. You and I have had many conversations about this. I appreciate those conversations.

This is what I would say. You and I are on the same page in terms of protecting the worker. We want to ensure, at the end of the day, that workers who have committed years of service are protected. Having said that, with respect to the superpriority, which is something you've advocated for, I have concerns about that particular approach.

However, there has been a commitment that I have made to you that we are going to continue to work on this. In fact, in the last budget, there was money set aside so we could continue to work on this. This is in addition to this pandemic that we've hit now, and I look forward to continuing to work with you on this matter. It's not specifically my portfolio, but as you know, it's a matter that's very important to me.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Duvall.

Next we have the second round, with Ms. Jansen for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Thank you, Ms. Tassi. I appreciate your being here. I have a question in regard to seniors homes and health care workers.

Reports have shown that around 79% of deaths from COVID-19 have been in seniors homes for those living in long-term care facilities. Here in B.C., health care workers regularly move between facilities. Just down the road from me is a senior care facility that felt compelled to ban those health care workers who were being sent to their location, in part because the local health authority had assigned only two face masks and two sets of gloves for the month.

Clearly, this sort of PPE rationing is dangerous not only for patients, but also for care workers. Do you feel that this rationing of PPE for caregivers is an acceptable practice, yes or no?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: As you can appreciate, long-term care facilities and how they are managed is a provincial jurisdiction.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I'm talking about the PPE, sorry.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Yes. The federal government has committed \$2 billion to purchase and distribute PPE among the provinces and territories to provide those workers in health care and long-term care with the supports they need.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: So it's not acceptable to ration PPE?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: At this stage we are amassing as much personal protective equipment as we possibly can to reach the needs that are there. I know that the Minister of Public Services and Procurement—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I understand that Ms. Thornton, who is in charge of the PPE stockpile, was not even sure of how much PPE was in the stockpile at the beginning of this pandemic. Considering the shortages we've been having across Canada for health care workers, which obviously puts them in serious danger, what grade would you give PHAC on pandemic preparedness?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: In response to the issues that have been raised with me, there are a couple of things.

First, we need to know what PPE is needed. I think PHAC has been very good with that, giving guidance as to what is needed for protection. Second, our government understands this. We want those front-line workers protected, absolutely, which is why not only did we invest \$2 billion to get that PPE to protect those workers, but we've also introduced a mobilization fund whereby companies are coming forward and providing PPE—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Yes, I was noticing that here in my riding. They are asking businesses to come forward with their PPE because there was nothing in the stockpile.

I'm wondering about the labour standards in regard to this. Do you think the federal government needs to adjust its labour standards and requirements for those working in long-term care facilities during the pandemic to ensure the protection of both their workers and those living in long-term care facilities, yes or no?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: In long-term care, work refusals and workplace safety are governed by provincial laws. On the federal level, we have the Canada Labour Code, and that applies to all federally regulated workers. If a worker goes into a situation and says the workplace isn't safe, they can undertake a process to ensure they are never forced to work in a dangerous work site.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Considering the fact that most of the deaths are happening in seniors' care facilities, you're putting that only on the province. Have you no role to play in the safety PPE of those workers?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: No, I wouldn't say that. The Public Health Agency of Canada has issued guidelines on standards, and the premiers of each of the provinces and territories have, in my mind, accepted them. I think that's a fantastic start federally where they're showing leadership and saying what they need to do. In addition to that, we have provided \$2 billion as a federal government.

On the point you made, I can appreciate that because we have the same thing happening in my community where people who have PPE and are able to offer it do so. More than that, it's asking companies that if they can retool, if they can do something a little differently, then do that.

● (1245)

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I know Medicom was mentioned in one of the committee meetings. They're going to be retooling, and I don't know at what cost to Canadian taxpayers. They upped their production of masks in their U.S. and French facilities back on February 7 without any extra dollars. We hear a lot of talk about Canadian companies retooling, but we're giving them money and they won't even be able to start making those masks until, I think, June. That was the information we had.

I'm really worried about that stockpile not having been properly cared for. What grade would you give PHAC on its pandemic preparedness?

The Chair: Minister, we're out of time, so could you make the answer very short.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: The stockpile is a different issue. We have to go way above and beyond in this pandemic. We need to work together in innovative ways, and I think our government is showing strong leadership in this regard.

The Minister of Innovation has taken unprecedented steps, and I want to thank Canadians—I've seen it in my own riding—who are stepping forward, who are making changes to their companies on their own dime and then retooling to provide the PPE. Yes, the government will buy that PPE from them if they satisfy Health Canada's standards, but Canadians are responding to this in an absolutely stellar way.

I want to assure you that this is all hands on deck. We are doing everything we possibly can to ensure that every worker has the PPE they need.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Ms. Jansen.

Next we have Mr. Long for five minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon from Saint John to all of my friends and colleagues.

Minister Tassi, it's certainly great to see you. As you alluded to earlier, we did a lot of great work on HUMA in our first term as MPs. We did the poverty reduction study. We did the temporary foreign workers study. We did a lot of significant studies that certainly had a strong and meaningful impact on Canadians' lives.

I want to ask you a question, Minister, about essential workers.

Certainly, what we've seen over the last couple of months has opened my eyes, raised my awareness and certainly raised my appreciation of front-line essential workers and the serious, essential role they play in our economy. They're not just health care workers. They're grocery store clerks, security people in the mall that my office is in, taxi drivers, pharmacists, take-out workers, hardware store workers and truck drivers. These workers are out there every day, putting themselves in danger at times to ensure that Canadians are fed, get supplies and are taken care of.

I believe it's important to acknowledge the important work that these essential workers, these great Canadians, are doing, and how they're contributing to our society and our country. Minister, can you please elaborate on the federal government's plan to recognize these amazing workers for their work on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: MP Long, thanks for that question.

I think it's very important that we take a moment to recognize the times we're in and the dedication and commitment of workers across this country. There are workers who have gone into this and assumed roles where there might be some level of risk. I think of health care workers. The pandemic has raised this to a whole other level. Then we have other workers who now have this risk, some of whom you've mentioned, whether they're driving trucks, stocking shelves at the local grocery store or working at the checkout counter so that we can put food on our table.

We want to show them that we appreciate what they're doing and that we want to support them. These are absolutely unprecedented times. We wanted to, as a federal government, demonstrate the support and the gratitude and appreciation that we have.

The federal government has announced that we will be working with provinces and territories to provide a top-up of salaries for various essential service workers. This is something that is, again, very collaborative. It's going to be worked out with each of the provinces and territories. Ontario and Quebec, I think, sort of have a framework. I don't know that it has actually been finalized, but the idea here is that we want to recognize the heroic work. I'm very happy that you've asked the question.

In addition to this—I think of, for example, some students who are working at the local grocery store part time—we've also allowed workers who earn \$1,000 or less to be able to collect the emergency response benefit. I think this is really important, particularly for workers such as PSWs, who were working three positions and are now down to one. They can earn \$1,000 at their work and still be eligible for the emergency response benefit.

The last thing I would say on this relates to the point that MP Doherty brought up. It's about my conversations with stakeholders. I have to tell you that my time is spent in dialogue and in conversa-

tion, across party lines, with my PT partners in labour and industry. I am getting input first-hand from these groups. There was a real need to recognize the work that these front-line workers were doing.

• (1250)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you very much, Minister.

There are two groups that I didn't mention. In a previous life, I used to work for a company called Canada Packers and then an aquaculture company Stolt Sea Farm. Certainly, the front-line workers in our beef plants across the country and seafood and fish processing plants also—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Long, you're out of time.

Mr. Doherty is next for five minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Minister, following on Mr. Long's comments, wouldn't you agree that the number one thing we could be doing as parliamentarians and you as the Minister of Labour is to ensure that our front-line workers, our essential workers, those who are keeping us safe, keeping us informed, keeping us healthy, keeping our supply chain moving and our grocery stores stocked are working in safe and secure environments?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: My focus, MP Doherty, on this has been about the health and safety of all of our workers.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Would you be agreeing with me then?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: My main priority and what I've heard in all of my conversations has to do with two things. One is identifying what is needed, and the other is doing the best that we possibly can in order to protect workers.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, what have you done in terms of our federal prisons, federal prison workers, and the health and safety of the Correctional Services guards as well as the, let's say, guests who are staying in our federal prisons? There are 118 cases in the Mission federal prison and over 300 cases nationwide. The union is calling for assistance from the federal government. What have you done to assist that?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: With respect to the situation with Mission, I know that Correctional Services Canada brought experts in. Minister Blair is the lead on that, but I am aware of the situation. The experts were brought in, and changes were made in order to accommodate the issues that were identified by employees in order to provide—

Mr. Todd Doherty: I'm trying really hard not to interrupt you. Minister, where do you step in? Where does your mandate step in, and where do you do your job? The questions I've asked previously you continually defer to other lead ministers, and I agree there are other lead ministers, but when do your office and you step in to fulfill your mandate?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Let me assure you that I'm working with my colleagues on each of these issues. The letter that you referred to, for example, with Minister Garneau.... We are working together. With respect to public health and safety and corrections, I am working with Minister Blair.

In answer to your question, yes, we are working together to get the PPE and to help get those supports in place, but for the transport issue, that's Transport Canada.

Finally let me say that if, for example, a Correctional Services officer has an issue and says they don't feel that it is a safe work site, they have the ability to make that complaint through the Canada Labour Code.

• (1255)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, we're still talking about receiving PPE. We're over eight weeks, maybe even 11 weeks, into this process, and we still have not received the PPE. While we have Canadian operations that are trying to do their best to do that, we still haven't received enough PPE, and we're still asking our front-line workers to reuse and recycle.

Minister, do you feel that is a responsible way of handling a global crisis?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: I would say in response to that question that we are working extremely hard to assist all levels in order to get them the PPE. PPE is being provided to various sectors, and I am working with the Minister of Public Services and Procurement. I have done assessments with respect to all the stakeholders that I have identified and what PPE is required. FETCO, for example, has provided me with a list and other union leaders have provided me with lists, and we then respond to what is needed.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Minister, have you worked on any of the issues that have been brought forward with respect to our truckers who are working under incredible conditions keeping our supply chain going? There are no washrooms available for them. They are not being provided with PPE along the routes. It's a well-publicized issue, and I'm asking you if have you done anything for our long-haul truckers who are helping to keep our stores stocked. Are they receiving the attention that they require?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Yes. I'm very happy you asked that question. I have weekly calls with Monsieur Laporte of Teamsters Canada and the trucking association. I have regular calls as well in order to determine what the needs are.

In terms of rest stops, my team has made calls, as Minister Garneau has, in order to assist in having certain rest stops along all highways open up so that truckers can have access to those rest stops. Together, as I mentioned previously, we did have industry and labour meet. A joint statement was issued with respect to how we are working collaboratively and sharing information. I think

that's really important, because we have to know where the needs are so that we can best respond to them.

So yes, we've done quite a bit in this regard. We'll continue to work together in order to ensure that our truckers have the support they need.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Vaughan, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thanks very much, Chair.

I'd just like to review some of the questions asked and get clear answers on them.

In terms of the health guidelines, we heard about problems in British Columbia, about how British Columbia labour laws are being enforced or not enforced in old age homes or in seniors care. Is that an area of exclusive provincial jurisdiction?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: It is. It's exclusive jurisdiction. In addition to that, though, the Public Health Agency of Canada has worked with the Minister of Health and the Minister of Seniors and provided guidelines suggesting—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: But those guidelines don't compel a provincial government to act in any particular way.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That's right.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: They're simply frameworks for use.

Also, the allocation of masks in the health care system, in seniors residences and also in homeless shelters is made by the provincial B.C. government.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: They decide whether or not a hospital is prioritized over a seniors home, or a homeless shelter is prioritized over a seniors home, or a seniors home is in fact prioritized over a different provincial workplace.

• (1300)

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Yes, MP Vaughan, and thanks for raising this. It's really about us working collaboratively. We as a federal government want to provide the support, but it's up to each of the provinces and territories to determine how that support is distributed. We think that's important, because they are in each of the communities. They know their communities better than anyone else does.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the issues that were raised around Quebec and overriding Quebec labour laws, or overriding Quebec collective agreements, or overriding public service agreements with the Government of Quebec, we don't have the federal authority to unilaterally override Quebec labour laws or override collective agreements or tell the Premier of Quebec how to assign public servants to which jobs. That is not an area of federal responsibility.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That's correct.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of airline workers, we're aware of five airline workers who have contracted COVID. We're aware that there are 200 in isolation. Are we aware of how much of that is related to the repatriation of Canadians and the fact that they were coming from areas with high infections and we were working night and day to evacuate Canadians to safety? How many of those isolations are directly tied to rescuing Canadians and have nothing to do with masks? Even if you had a mask, you would still be in isolation. The mask wouldn't prevent you from getting COVID. It may prevent you from spreading it.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: MP Vaughan, that's an excellent question. I don't have those exact details, but the point you're making is well noted.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: On the issue of stockpiles—

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan, excuse me, but we need to adjourn because of the demand on the resources of the House.

This will be your last question.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Okay.

On the issue of PPE, while we set guidelines and we clearly have a federal stockpile to share and distribute with the provinces, the provinces also have a responsibility to maintain stockpiles as well.

Hon. Filomena Tassi: That's my understanding. We are doing absolutely everything we can. Even though this is a provincial jurisdiction matter, the federal government isn't quibbling about jurisdictions. We are working very hard to get as much PPE as we possibly can and then provide it to our provincial and territorial partners.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

We are now at the appointed hour. As I indicated, there are significant demands on House of Commons resources in order to keep the committees moving.

Minister, thank you so much for your attendance.

Colleagues, thank you very much for this meeting. We won't be apart very long. We'll see you on Monday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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