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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey



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• (1105)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number nine 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, 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.

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

First, interpretation in this video conference will work very much as in a regular committee meeting. At the bottom of your screen, you have the choice of floor, English or French. I would ask that the witnesses who are listening pay close attention to this. The MPs are used to it. In order to resolve sound issues, please ensure that you are on the English channel when speaking English, and on the French channel when speaking 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 are ready to speak, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

I would remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Should a member need to request the floor outside their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. However, if you wish to speak to a point of order that has been raised by another member, please use the "raise hand" function.

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 and I see that our compliance level is getting better.

Primarily to our witnesses again, if you have a microphone on your headset that hangs down, please make sure that it is not rubbing on your shirt during your questioning time.

Should any technical challenges arise, such as in relation to 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.

Before we get started, if you haven't already done so, if you click on "gallery view" at the top right of your screen, you'll be able to see all video participants. It will ensure that everyone can see one another.

With those preliminaries covered, I will now thank the witnesses for joining us today.

We have with us the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, the Honourable Marco Mendicino. He is accompanied by officials from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada: Catrina Tapley, deputy minister; Marian Campbell Jarvis, assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; and Louis Dumas, acting associate deputy minister, operations.

As well, from Employment and Social Development Canada, we have Philippe Massé, director general, temporary foreign worker program, skills and employment branch; and Tara Cosgrove, executive director, integrity services branch.

Minister Mendicino, the floor is yours. You have 10 minutes.

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Mr. Chair, I'll begin by thanking you and the members of this committee for the opportunity to join you this morning.

This is not only my first appearance before HUMA, but also my first address in this new virtual era of Parliament. I hope that all of you, your families and staff are keeping well and healthy.

It has been a period of great transition for all of us and I commend this committee for continuing its important work.

We convene at an unprecedented moment in our history. COVID-19 poses one of the gravest risks that Canada and the rest of the world have seen in many generations, yet we have come together to meet the challenge.

No one deserves our gratitude more than the front-line health care workers and first responders who bravely put their own lives on the line to save others. To them, we say, “Thank you. You have our most profound appreciation.” The best way we can demonstrate our gratitude to these health care heroes is by remaining united in our most urgent cause: to confront and overcome this global pandemic.

Since the outbreak, there has been renewed collaboration throughout all levels of government and across party lines. Together, we have passed historic legislation that is delivering billions in emergency financial relief aid for workers, businesses and charities.

We have operationalized unparalleled public health care controls and launched a procurement and production effort, the likes of which have not been seen since the Second World War, and our co-operation is paying off. We are starting to see the curve flatten. There is reason for cautious optimism. However, the storm has not yet completely passed. There are still risks ahead and our work must continue.

My department is contributing in the overall Government of Canada response to COVID-19.

- (1110)

[*Translation*]

From the start, we took quick action to implement travel restrictions to limit the spread of the virus. These measures are necessary and important to ensure the health and safety of Canadians.

[*English*]

In March, Canada and the United States entered into an interim agreement prohibiting all non-essential travel between our countries. We agreed to temporarily return asylum seekers, with assurances from the United States that their rights and due process would be respected. We also agreed to exemptions to this agreement to include immediate family members of Canadian residents whose travel is essential, those who hold valid work visas, including temporary foreign workers, those who hold valid student visas and permanent resident visa holders who were approved prior to March 18, 2020. These exemptions support the Canadian economy, essential services and reuniting families.

[*Translation*]

I think it is also important to point out that my work is closely related to that of a number of my cabinet colleagues since our teams have to work together on a daily basis. We are all working hand in hand to ensure that Canadians and their families have everything they need in these very difficult times.

We are working in close co-operation, but we have very distinct accountabilities and mandates. Our government is prioritizing work permit processing for critical occupations, such as those in the agricultural, agri-food and health care sectors.

[*English*]

Temporary foreign workers are vital to the success of our agricultural and seafood sectors and, by extension, the food security of all Canadians.

Let me pause here to express my deep concern following the outbreaks at several food processing plants and farms around the country. Our thoughts go out to the families of those workers who recently passed away.

Everyone has the right to work in a safe environment in Canada, including temporary workers. That is why our government introduced mandatory 14-day isolation protocols for facilities like these. It's also the reason we added new regulations under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act to create enforcement powers to ensure compliance with physical and social distancing rules in the workplace. We backed these measures with \$50 million to help food production and employers. In addition, we've sped up the application process to take less than a week, thanks to a new, dedicated processing team, and added flexibility in online processing.

I want to also extend my appreciation to our public servants who have truly and remarkably innovated in this challenging period. The proof is in the numbers. Roughly 23,000 seasonal agricultural workers are already here to help plant and seed.

- (1115)

[*Translation*]

Last month, over 11,000 temporary foreign workers arrived in Canada on charter flights to support our farmers, prepare for planting and carry out other work in our agricultural and agri-food industry.

[*English*]

There are another 10,000 whose visas have been approved. These workers will provide critical support to our farmers and processors in particular and will ensure Canadians have the food they need.

For workers who are already in Canada and have been impacted by COVID-19, we've introduced additional strategies to address workers' rights, status restoration and timelines for documentation. Most workers are able to extend their permit to remain legally in Canada while awaiting a decision on their application, and many workers can continue to work in this situation.

[*Translation*]

The health of workers and Canadians is our top priority and that is why we are continuing to work in close co-operation with the provinces and employer associations to ensure that they have all the tools they need to keep everyone healthy and safe.

[English]

The international student program is one of the most successful programs in government. It contributes over \$21 billion per year to the Canadian economy. It remains an economic driver in cities, big and small, and the students who participate in this program contribute in many positive ways to the social fabric of Canada.

We have engaged with our provincial counterparts and the post-secondary sector and acted on their feedback by temporarily lifting the 20-hour per week restriction on study permit holders working in essential services like health care. We've also provided more flexibility for students whose classes we've moved online due to the emergency to keep them from being penalized on their post-graduation work permit eligibility, provided that they complete at least 50% of their study program in class in Canada. These changes have been received very positively, and we are actively considering other options to ensure the long-term success of this program.

I hope this brief outline of the work that my department has been engaged in as part of the response to COVID-19 has been informative. We will continue to ensure that the immigration policies that we have put in place have been effective in responding to the pandemic and will position Canada for success as we begin to reopen the economy. In the interim, we will continue to support the day-to-day administration of the travel exemptions regime by ensuring that foreign workers and international students are able to enter into Canada, because we recognize their vital importance to our economy and to our food security.

The measures I have spoken about today, the facilitation, the financial supports and the regulations, will help ensure that the enormous benefits that temporary foreign workers bring to our economy are not lost in the disruption of the pandemic, even as we adjust our programs to ensure the health and security of all Canadians.

I know I have only touched on some of our work in this busy time.

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

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

I believe we may have some questions. We'll start with Mr. Kent for the Conservatives for six minutes.

Welcome to the committee, sir. You have the floor.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to you, Minister, right off the top, and to your excellent staff, to department officials, for timely responses to a variety of my requests, comments and complaints regarding issues since the crisis began. Not all of our issues have been resolved, but the accessibility is appreciated.

Minister, your department faces massive process and protocol re-considerations as a result of the COVID crisis. In the short term, with regard to the seasonal agricultural temporary foreign worker program, Canada needs to find a balance between millions of unemployed Canadians, our workers, and the skilled, experienced TFWs who are essential in some areas of the sector to ensure food production and food security right across the sector.

Last year almost 100,000 temporary foreign workers came to Canada. You've given us the update in the last month of 11,000 with 10,000 approved. We know a good many didn't make it into the country for a variety of reasons, but I'm wondering what the department's estimate is for the total number of foreign workers being able to get to Canada for the rest of the planting, growing and harvest season.

● (1120)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Mr. Kent, for the question.

I do want to say that it has been very collaborative to work with you and your staff, and we will continue to engage to work through the issues in the cases you have brought to my department's attention.

I do want to underline that we are indeed concerned about Canadians and unemployment, and we are providing financial support to Canadians right across the country through a variety of programs so they can bridge over this very difficult period.

When it comes to the temporary foreign worker program, as you point out, the reason for this program in the first instance is that there are some sectors of our economy that have proven stubborn over the years to recruit the domestic labour and skill that we need, so in an effort to fill those gaps, we have the temporary foreign worker program. In particular, that program has been a real success in the seasonal agricultural sector, and that is why we have ensured that, as part of our overall immigration policy, we have created an exemption for seasonal agricultural work.

I want to again take a moment to highlight the way in which we are facilitating their entry with an exemptions regime by innovating, standing up new teams, and processing times have truly come down remarkably so that we can prioritize their entry into Canada.

Some of the numbers you had asked about I already mentioned in my opening remarks, but we have approximately 20,000 already here and 10,000 who are approved and who we are attempting to get here. We are working very closely with our provincial partners and employers to ensure that they get here as quickly as possible.

Hon. Peter Kent: Okay. Thank you.

Minister, even before the COVID pandemic, GTA communities and beyond were struggling with the downloaded costs of accommodating thousands of men, women and children who availed themselves of the Prime Minister's illegal border-crossing invitation and made irregular asylum claims. Many of them are now clients of expanded homeless shelters and food banks. In the city of Toronto, just for example, more than 3,000 shelter beds have been added to the system since 2015. Again, before COVID the city had pleaded with the federal government to provide more than \$100 million to cover the costs to date and going forward.

Now, I know you don't write the cheques, but might you remind the Prime Minister of his unfulfilled obligations to cover the costs that his misguided policy, it's fair to say, has downloaded on the GTA?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First of all, when it comes to asylum, Mr. Kent, I hope you will agree that Canada is truly a role model in the world. That is because we believe in taking a compassionate approach to those who have been displaced through no fault of their own. Indeed, that work will continue, as it is truly one of the enduring values that underpin our immigration system.

With regard to the interim agreement we have entered into with the United States, as I pointed out, it upholds those rights while ensuring that we are protecting the health and safety of Canadians throughout this pandemic.

With regard to your question about our financial commitments to ensure that refugees are able to access the essential services once they are making their claims, our relationship with the provinces, and in particular with municipalities like Toronto, have been very strong over the years through successive governments. In particular, when it comes to Mayor Tory, with whom I have a very good working relationship, as do the rest of the members of our government, we have ensured that year over year they are getting the financial resources they need to bridge over the time in which individuals are coming and making asylum claims. That system has worked very well over the years, and as I say, it will continue.

Hon. Peter Kent: So will that \$100-million cheque be cut?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Well, as you say, Mr. Kent, I don't cut the cheques, but certainly we have made sure in the past that through a variety of programs, including the interim housing assistance program, cheques have been cut. Of course, we will continue to partner with the City of Toronto and other cities that are doing their fair share to help land asylum claimants and refugees.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Kent.

Colleagues, I regret to inform you that we have a technical problem that will require us to suspend for a few minutes. It relates to the phone lines.

• (1125)

(Pause)

• (1125)

The Chair: Madam Clerk, thank you very much. I believe we have our technical issues resolved.

We will now go to Mr. Dong for six minutes, please.

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

Good morning, Minister. It's very nice to see you at the committee, online.

As you know, I have a particular interest in international students. Our public universities, such as Seneca in my riding, rely heavily on international student revenues. While waiting for the provinces' direction on the upcoming semester in September and the plan to act on recruitment, I want to hear from you on what your message is to potential international student candidates around the world. Specifically, when will you reopen the application intake?

• (1130)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Mr. Dong, both for your question and for your ongoing advocacy regarding international students.

I want to take a moment to reiterate what a tremendous economic contributor this program is to our economy. It pumps approximately \$21 billion into the economy each year. It also adds to our social fabric. The skills and experience that these international students bring to our post-secondary institutions are very significant.

I want to say that we have been engaged directly and extensively with our provincial partners, as well as the post-secondary institution leaders themselves. As a result of their feedback, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, we have made a number of modifications to the international student program to ensure its ongoing success. We have created additional flexibility around online classes to ensure that those who are here are able to take their online courses this spring semester in a way that will not penalize their ability to work after they graduate.

We've also made some similar modifications for those international students who are abroad and who had plans to come to attend school this spring but were not able to because of the travel restrictions that are in place. We have ensured that they are able to continue to participate in those programs.

As I mentioned as well, we have widened the parameters of the work permits that attach to student visas to ensure those who are taking a degree in the essential services sectors, such as, nursing or medicine, or those taking a diploma in health care work.... Think about the additional support those students can lend to our front lines, whether it's in a long-term retirement home or in hospitals where we know COVID-19 strikes very hard and very quickly.

When you put all of these measures together, you'll see that our government has truly committed to ensuring that the international student program is a success, while at the same time protecting the health and safety of all Canadians throughout this pandemic. Of course, when it comes to our intake process, we look forward to having some additional news for you in the not too distant future.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Minister.

I know how committed you are to supporting international students. You were at one of my Zoom meetings and talked to the international students face to face. Thank you very much for that as well.

International students, when they graduate, are entitled to apply for a one- or three-year work permit, as you know. It is a crucial tool for them to accumulate enough points to apply for their permanent resident status. Obviously, they're facing a tremendous challenge during COVID. Would you consider a one-year automatic extension to those work permits?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: On the issue of extending visas and permits, in general terms my department has exercised its discretion judiciously in these circumstances to ensure that there is the least amount of disruption, particularly for those visa holders—students and workers, as I mentioned—who are here in Canada, recognizing that it's a challenge to get back home given that there aren't many international flights right now. Of course, those flexibilities are appropriate and they're exercised responsibly.

With regard to your question about the consideration of what occurs in the future around the one- to three-year requirement and having that requisite Canadian experience, I'm open to considering those options. Of course, we always have to balance the integrity of this program, because we do want to be sure that we are attracting the best and the brightest, those students who are here to acquire a degree, to put their shoulder to the wheel and to contribute to the economy, especially in the essential services, and then take those experiences back home, should they choose to and when they choose to.

With regard to transitioning from the international student program to permanent residence, those pathways do exist. As you point out, we have a points system that looks to align the skills and experiences that our Canadian economy needs with the ones that are presented by the students.

All of those principles will continue to apply as we seek to leverage the benefits of this program going forward.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Minister, for keeping that in consideration going forward, because I know, from talking to international students, that is perhaps the number one issue they would like some help with.

Around the world, we see that COVID-19 brings out the best in people as well as, unfortunately, sometimes the worst. I have seen an increased boldness in discriminatory actions against Asian Canadians in my community. I hear and I see that happening to newcomers and to international students as well.

In that context, and with the new interpretation, perhaps, of globalization post-COVID, what's your message to new Canadians, the

best and brightest that we try to encourage to immigrate to Canada? What's your message?

• (1135)

The Chair: Could we have a short answer, please, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: My message is that we are with you and we will condemn any and all examples of hate and racism in its many forms. This is work that I know our government has stood for, and I hope that all members of our House will join us in condemning these things. There is no place for racism or hatred in any form, even during a pandemic. Of course, we will be with those students and those Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[*Translation*]

Next we'll hear from Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

I will be sharing my time with my colleague Christine Normandin.

Minister, thank you for being here. We know that you are dealing with many issues in your portfolio.

I would like to talk to you about Quebec in particular. As you mentioned, Quebec depends on temporary foreign workers to support our agricultural industry, which is a very important sector of our economy.

We know that farmers are worried. Some temporary foreign agricultural workers have already arrived, while others are still waiting. Will those who are still waiting be able to come to Canada? Can the government expedite the processing of these files so that all needs can be met? How will the government ensure the safety of the workers who come to Canada? Will the federal government take charge of these people when they arrive to ensure that they are quarantined?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for the question, Ms. Chabot.

First, I would like to thank you for all the work you do in this area. It is so important.

I have had many discussions with my Quebec counterpart, Minister Jolin-Barrette, which has made it possible to make a lot of progress with regard to the arrival of temporary foreign agricultural workers in Canada and Quebec. Processing applications for workers in this stream is a priority for my department and we are working very hard on that. We have been able to make progress by dedicating a lot of resources to the processing of applications of temporary workers.

[English]

I will just say that we will continue to place the resources that are necessary to expedite and prioritize the arrival of temporary foreign workers in Canada. As I mentioned, 20,000 are already here, and there are another 10,000 who will, we hope, be arriving in short order.

To address the last part of your question, Madam Chabot, what we are doing to ensure the health and safety of the temporary foreign workers is putting in place a set of regulations around mandatory isolation, that 14-day period in which we have to be sure that they are asymptomatic. We are providing \$50 million to the agricultural sector to ensure that the accommodations that need to be made in both lodging and workplace safety are made to protect not only the temporary workers who are coming in but the overall security of our food supply chain.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): It is my turn, Minister. It is good to see you again.

I also have questions about temporary foreign workers in the agricultural industry. We hear a lot about the problems caused by closed permits. Because of the pandemic, some workers' employment was terminated because their employer did not have any more work for them. These workers could not return to Guatemala, for example, and they could not go and work elsewhere.

There is also the case of Quebec's maple syrup producers. They ended up with a labour surplus because sugar shacks had to be closed. Meanwhile, apple producers would have liked to have those workers to prune their trees. This type of problem was occurring even before the COVID crisis. For example, if a hailstorm destroyed one crop but another could be saved, foreign workers could not be transferred.

Would you be open to the idea of granting workers with a closed permit 30 or 60 days to go work for another company? That would enable them to continue to work, and there would be more time to process new applications or conduct new labour market impact assessments or LMIA's. It would also make it possible to quickly respond to urgent labour needs, for example, in the case of businesses that need someone one day a week.

• (1140)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for your question and for the work that you do, Ms. Normandin. I know that you are in contact with my team regarding this priority.

We will continue to examine the possibility of making work permits issued under the temporary foreign worker program more flexible. Given the urgency of the current situation, we need to find new ways of doing things and new solutions to ensure food security. We will continue to work together to find solutions.

[English]

In the meantime, as I mentioned, Madam Normandin, we are continuing to prioritize the approvals of new temporary foreign worker permits as well as invite extensions of the temporary foreign worker visas that are about to expire. We are granting implied status to temporary foreign workers who are here and whose visas

are expiring, and if they have to move from one job to another within the same sector, we are trying to find ways to expedite that process as quickly as possible.

I look forward to continuing to work with you on that important initiative.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Normandin and Mr. Minister.

[English]

Next we have Jenny Kwan for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister. I also appreciate the calls that we've had and the responsiveness of your office.

I would like to follow up on the question—and I hope you have an answer for me today—with respect to temporary foreign workers, for example caregivers, when they have to meet the two-year work requirement and their work has been interrupted because of COVID. Will that period of time when their work has been interrupted count towards their two-year work requirement?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Kwan, thank you for the opportunity to work with you on these issues.

The short answer is that we are continuing to explore that as an option. We don't have a definite answer for you today, but we are exploring it as an option. As we discussed, in the meantime there are a variety of programs that caregivers can access to bridge them through this period and COVID-19.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I hope we can get an answer soon, because their 24-month work requirement is essential towards their path to permanency. If we don't count that period, it means that these workers will be further penalized and delayed in the process of reuniting them with their loved ones. Already, as it were, my view is that these workers should be allowed to come with permanent resident status on arrival. That is not the case, and this further penalizes them. I hope that you will take that into consideration.

With respect to citizenship certificates, it's been brought to my attention that there is a delay, actually long delays, for people trying to access their citizenship certificate so they can move forward with the process of coming to Canada and so on. When will normal processing of that resume?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for the question, Ms. Kwan. As you know, my department has actually made significant progress over the years at reducing backlogs when it comes to citizenship applications, but of course COVID-19 has had a very direct and significant impact on our operational capabilities.

Notwithstanding that, as I mentioned in my remarks, my department is standing up alternative processes, including the exploration of new innovative and online solutions for all of our lines of business and services, including in the area of citizenship ceremonies. You may have seen in recent days that we've had a couple of virtual ceremonies, or at least one, if I'm not mistaken. Those are the types of solutions we will continue to explore going forward.

It's important, and I'm happy to work with you on that.

● (1145)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister. Perhaps I will connect with you and your staff offline. I have a particular case that is stuck in the system at the moment.

It's been brought to my attention that there are some caregivers, for example, whose employers are telling them that the CERB they collect is their income, and therefore they are required to go to work. In that instance, that is clearly not the case. What should the caregivers do?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, no worker should have to go to work in dangerous conditions. That readily applies to caregivers. That's one of the reasons we have put in place protections around mandatory isolation, to protect the workers, to protect the families, to protect everyone—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry to interrupt, Minister, but I'm raising a very specific example of people who are applying for CERB and are receiving CERB, and whose employer is telling them it is their income, but the employer is still requiring them to go to work.

In those circumstances, should people be filing a complaint in the vulnerable workers category and getting an open work permit? They're very scared about that. They're afraid they would lose their job if they complain about it to their employer. They worry about what would happen to them.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I was coming to that, Ms. Kwan, and I agree that it sounds very problematic. I would be happy to work with you if you are concerned about a specific case.

When it comes to occupational health and safety, that matter falls squarely within provincial jurisdiction, but there are other protections in place that we can explore together.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, for specific cases, but on the whole, when that happens, should people complain to the vulnerable workers stream?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I think that if workers are being told that the Canada emergency response benefit is their income and therefore they still have to work, that is a problem, and yes, we need to address it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Some employers may want to rehire their workers because they're hoping that after COVID-19 they will be able to do so, but they might be required to apply for another LMIA. Would you consider waiving the cost of the LMIA for those employers so they are not hit twice because of this situation?

The Chair: Make a short response, Minister, please.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As you know, in some cases, particularly in the caregiver class, we have looked at waiving LMIA fees,

but that program is administered by my colleague, Minister Qualtrough. I am happy to take that feedback to her to have that conversation.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

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

Now we go to Mr. Kent for five minutes, please.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair. I'll be splitting my time with Ms. Dancho.

Minister, given Canada's massive unemployment for the foreseeable future, and notwithstanding your comments to the Canadian Bar Association immigration law section last week that immigration will continue to be an economic driver, what is the government's scale-back planning for economic migrants and refugees for the next two years from the current immigration target of 350,000 by 2021?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Mr. Kent, I stand by the comments I made to the Canadian Bar Association, in that when you look back in history, in spite of the many challenges our country has faced, there is a very forward-looking trend that looks to leverage both the value and the economic prosperity that are driven by looking around the world for the best and the brightest. I believe that is an enduring value that will continue.

How we do that, keeping in mind our levels and our operational capacity, is of course going to be driven by the context. As we all know, we are in the midst of a pandemic, but immigration is a hallmark, and it will continue to be. I think Canadians relate to this. The journeys in coming to this country and contributing both to the social fabric and to our economy will last beyond COVID-19.

● (1150)

Hon. Peter Kent: As you know, Conservatives have always been strong supporters of a strong immigration policy. In normal times we do need immigrants to grow our society and grow our economy, but given that the economic crisis will linger long after the health crisis has passed, can Canada accommodate an additional 1% of immigrants and refugees added to our population in the foreseeable future?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I pointed out, the work that my department has done, notwithstanding the impacts of COVID-19, has been truly remarkable in a variety of lines of service, including continuing landings in ways that are truly innovative, and I commend our public servants for adapting to the situation.

With regard to your specific question around levels and how we will continue immigration to Canada, I have a mandate letter. That letter is very transparent, and we will continue to examine the circumstances, including the surrounding context, of Canada's response to COVID-19 as we plan for the future.

I think Canadians will support immigration, and we should all support it as parliamentarians, not just because immigration is an important policy but also because it's part of who we are. It is a part of our fabric, part of our identity, and I believe it will continue to be long after we have overcome COVID-19.

Hon. Peter Kent: Agreed, Minister.

Time is short. I have just a quick question. When will you provide to Canadians an updated target intake figure?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Mr. Kent, being the veteran that you are, you will know that I am scheduled to provide an update in the fall. In the interim, I look forward to many more conversations with you, as my critic in this area, and all parliamentarians.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thanks.

Mr. Chair, I cede my time to Ms. Dancho.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Dancho, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, yesterday I had the opportunity to question your cabinet colleagues about small businesses in my riding that have been left behind by your government. Although they offered no answers, they insisted your government is listening to small businesses and will do everything it can to help them. However, back in February, I provided you with a letter regarding an alarming small business issue in my riding. Since then, my office has sent four more letters and emails to you about this issue.

As you may recall, the issue involves a moving and storage company in Winnipeg that, in February 2019, began moving and storing furniture for government-assisted Syrian refugees settling in Winnipeg. They were hired to do so on behalf of a Quebec-based company contracted by your department. Over a year later, payment has not been made for this contract, and nearly \$25,000 is owed to my constituent, which is a considerable amount.

Given the devastation happening to small business across this country, can I have your guarantee that you and your government will move quickly to find a resolution to this issue?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, please.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: In 30 seconds, Ms. Dancho, you have my guarantee that I will work with you and get back—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: When will that be? Will it be next week? It'll be 12 weeks then that we have been waiting for a response.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We will be back to you next week, yes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Before Friday, May 17, at 3:30 p.m. central time, you will provide me with an answer for resolution for my constituent.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We will be back to you before then, yes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you. Great.

That's all, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull is next.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I feel a lot of gratitude for having the Minister of Immigration here. Thanks, Minister Mendicino, for being here. I also want to echo the sentiments of my colleagues who found your office and yourself to be accessible and responsive at this time, which is really great to see. It is much needed and much appreciated. I also want to say thanks to your team. I know every minister is backed by a very strong team and yours is no exception.

I have three areas of questioning. My colleagues have echoed some of my comments, so I may focus in other places.

My first question is about the settlement service agencies. Canada has a network of settlement service agencies that I think is very robust. This network plays an essential role in the successful integration process for both immigrants and refugees. What is being done to ensure that enough flexibility is given to those organizations at this time to support immigrants, refugees, international students, temporary foreign workers, non-status persons and any others who may be experiencing heightened vulnerability during the pandemic that we're in?

• (1155)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull, both for your work in this area and for the very constructive conversation that we had recently with regard to the work that settlement service organizations are doing across the country, as well for your advocacy regarding vulnerable populations. Let me just say a few words about the latter, because I believe it's the gist of your question.

Our government has invested over \$157.5 million to support municipalities in addressing people who are living in vulnerable situations. This is in addition to \$50 million that we have provided to help women's shelters and victims of gender-based violence, to strengthen their capacity to manage throughout the course of the outbreak. In addition to that, we have provided \$100 million to Food Banks Canada, which will again provide food security and the necessities of life that are required for our vulnerable populations. These are just a couple of the very concrete investments and initiatives that we have put into place to ensure that no one is left behind throughout the course of COVID-19.

I directly engage with our settlement service organizations routinely. I have been holding frequent calls with our umbrella organizations across the country, including the likes of OCASI and COSTI. I think we owe them a debt of gratitude. They too are adapting to the circumstances, and they are providing the essential support that is needed to our vulnerable populations throughout COVID-19. That's work that I look forward to continuing with them.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks very much, Minister. That's great. It's great to hear that there's a close working relationship with those organizations, because I think they play an essential role.

I want to go back to the temporary foreign worker program. We all know just how important this program is to our food system, and the food system is particularly vulnerable right now during this pandemic. I'm concerned about labour mobility and many temporary foreign workers potentially not being able to work in the jobs that were initially intended for them. I want to understand a little better how the program's been adapted to accommodate and support them in being able to find work elsewhere, hopefully relatively quickly for everybody's sake.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I mentioned earlier to my colleagues from the Bloc Québécois, we are looking at and continuing to study options to create that flexibility within the closed work permit class, particularly for those temporary foreign workers whose visas have expired or for those who have lost their work. We are prioritizing the extensions of those visas and working very closely with those workers as well as the employers in the essential services sectors, such as the health sector, as well as those in the food sector and the agricultural and seafood sectors, to try to provide the continuity that they require.

I will also say that we have ensured that workers in this sector have implied status while they move on to that next position, and we'll continue to find ways to prioritize them, because we know that this is vital for food security for all Canadians.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Great. That means that if they have a new job offer and a labour market impact assessment, then essentially, I think, they're able to work right away. Is that right?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It depends on exactly the kind of permit. Some permits are more restrictive than others. In some cases there is an ability to move from one job to another within the same organization or the same employer, but in some other cases it's very much restricted to the position itself.

Those are precisely the types of solutions that we are looking to create through some additional flexibility. In the meantime, I believe the resources and the expedited processes that have been put into place, not only by my department but also by my colleagues Minister Qualtrough and Madame Bibeau, will together ensure that we have the ability to move workers around to fill the gaps in seasonal agricultural work, because this is a critical time of year and the planting and seeding season has to continue.

As a matter of fact, we've made a lot of good progress, as I mentioned, Mr. Turnbull. We saw really good numbers in April and we're starting to see those numbers pick up in May as well.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

We will go to Mr. Kent. Go ahead for five minutes, please.

• (1200)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, many rejections of approved TFWs at border entry points seem to be a result of inconsistent recognition or refusal by CBSA officers of the workers' approved status. How is this being resolved?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It's being resolved when those cases and those issues are brought to my attention. Of course, you and I have worked very closely on that. I thank you for your collaboration, and we will continue to do that work together. I'll just say there has been a real and renewed spirit of collaboration among all members in the House, and that is vital to resolving these issues.

We have tried in the interim to provide operational clarity and guidelines to our partners at CBSA. By and large, the system—both the travel restrictions to limit the spread of COVID-19 and the exemptions regime, which includes temporary foreign workers—is working very effectively. That was evidenced last month by the good numbers that we saw in the arrivals of temporary foreign workers in the seasonal agricultural sector. We are starting to see the same progress with those numbers picking up in May as well.

Hon. Peter Kent: The Province of New Brunswick is the only province to have imposed a blockade, if you will, against approved temporary foreign workers. How has the government worked to resolve that difference?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm not entirely sure that's how New Brunswick characterized it, Mr. Kent, but I will tell you that I have been engaged with my provincial counterpart in that province, and I know that all levels of our government have been engaged with our counterparts in New Brunswick. As with all provinces, New Brunswick officials are making decisions that they feel are the best in terms of the public health care interests of their people. It's a jurisdiction that we share with New Brunswick.

However, I'm also assured by New Brunswick officials that they are committed to the temporary foreign worker program in the long run, and that is a collaboration that will continue.

In the meantime, for the New Brunswick temporary foreign workers who are impacted, we have found new work for them in the region so as to ensure that we're taking an all-hands-on-deck approach to guaranteeing our food supply chain.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

Can you provide an update on department operations with regard to economic immigration through express entry and the provincial sponsorship programs, as well as the pilot projects? Are any of these programs suspended pending the end of the COVID crisis?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I mentioned, Mr. Kent, our operational capabilities have been impacted by COVID-19, just as all lines of business in government have been affected and, quite honestly, as all of society and all businesses have been. Notwithstanding those challenges, we have set up new alternative processes. We have equipped our personnel with the online tools and resources they need to continue landings. Those landings will continue in a variety of classes, including in the economic class and the humanitarian class.

As you know, we will be providing some additional numbers and an update in the fall, and I look forward to delivering more news at that time.

Hon. Peter Kent: Would it be prudent in the short term to assign more decision-making responsibility to provinces and municipalities with regard to immigration and refugee intake, given the very different needs and capacity-absorbing capabilities of different regions of the country?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Mr. Kent, we always stand ready to receive offers of support from our provincial partners when it comes to landing refugees in the humanitarian sector. I will always accept a call from my provincial colleagues on that front.

In the meantime, we are collaborating very closely when it comes to the administration of the provincial nominee program, which is a program that has for many years been a tool used by the provinces in concert with the overall levels plan that we intend to continue to ensure is implemented. I'm looking forward to an upcoming FPT meeting with my provincial colleagues this summer.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

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

Mr. Vaughan, you have five minutes, please.

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

On the issue that was raised by my colleague from the Conservatives, I have a couple of questions about the refugee flow into the country during this time. You referenced that it hadn't stopped. How many regular refugees have arrived, and under which categories?

• (1205)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you very much, Mr. Vaughan.

To clarify, under the current non-essential travel ban that exists with the United States, we have entered into a concurrent arrangement whereby we are returning to the United States those who arrive at official points of entry. When they arrive at the official point of entry, the safe third country agreement continues to apply as a means of ensuring due process and the rights that would apply in those circumstances.

In between official points of entry, we have successfully sought and obtained assurances from the United States that those protections will be in place, but at the same time that those who are

turned back will be allowed to return to Canada should they choose to pursue their asylum claim.

In terms of the additional numbers, if you'll just give me one moment, I will provide you with an update, but I will say that the numbers have been quite manageable in the interim. I think it is a reflection of the fact that the agreement is working, that our system is working.

If you'll indulge me and move on to your next question, I will continue to get those numbers and provide them in my subsequent answer.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Sure.

Just to confirm, the support for the Toronto shelter system, combined with our annual allotment of \$157 million and the top-up from our department, the \$42 million extra that's being sent to the City of Toronto, amounts to almost twice what they received last year. Is that part of the negotiations that you're involved with in terms of looking for additional top-ups that may be required to accommodate some of the pressures that large cities face?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, thank you for highlighting the additional financial commitments and supports that have been delivered to the City of Toronto, and indeed to municipalities right across the country.

Yes, of course I will continue to make the case for those supports as required, because municipalities are an important partner when it comes to the work that we do in landing refugees.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the numbers that have come in, what are the arrival numbers in the last month?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: In terms of the actual physical individuals who have come in, what I have here is that we had 12 at our airports, four who arrived at our marine ports and 37 by land. That is just within the COVID-19 period.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of irregular claims, the Conservative member referenced a concern. How many irregular claims across land bridges have we had in the last month?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Mr. Vaughan, I will have to come back to you with that precise number, but in the last report it was in the low teens.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In my understanding, it's 11. Would 11 people be consistent with the number that you've seen for people who have come across the land bridges?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It would be. I just don't want to commit to that number, because it was a few days ago, but I'm confident in saying that it's in that range.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: In terms of the impact on the shelter system, would that significantly reduce that pressure for cities like Toronto?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I think that the logic follows. Of course, that doesn't mean we don't have an obligation to our vulnerable populations. As I pointed out in answer to Mr. Turnbull, and as you well know, Mr. Vaughan, because you are a vociferous advocate in this area, we are continuing to provide that support to municipalities to take care of every person who is in those vulnerable populations.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I have one last question on temporary foreign workers.

We know that under the Conservatives, a number of fast food restaurants availed themselves of this program. I'm just making sure that we're not staffing up service jobs, which could be filled by Canadians, with temporary foreign workers, and that the temporary foreign worker program is focused on highly skilled labour required for the agricultural sector.

Is that the priority?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It is, but just before I come to the rest of my answer, I have an update on the question you just asked. It appears that there are 24 individuals who have sought claims, and that is the most recent number we have.

Yes, of course, the temporary foreign worker program is designed, as I say, to ensure that we fill those gaps for which it had been difficult to recruit domestic labour. There are programs that put the appropriate focus on the seasonal agricultural sector as well as the seafood sector precisely to achieve that end.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have two and a half minutes.

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

Is this the second round?

The Chair: Yes, this is the second round.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Great.

Minister, I would like to emphasize a point. You are right in saying that the situation in the agricultural industry is urgent. As you said, temporary foreign workers are essential in the processing and fishing sectors. When the first of these long-awaited workers arrived, there was a problem, and these sectors count on those workers.

The first problem is that you handed the responsibility for quarantining these workers over to farmers, who were given a nominal amount to do so. In our opinion, that was a mistake. We already know that there is a shortage of workers. We want to ensure that all of the jobs in this sector are filled as quickly as possible and that the government takes responsibility for the quarantining and health of these workers.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Chabot, we share that objective. As I said, there are resources in place to help the industry. We implemented protection mechanisms to help temporary workers. I gave several examples. We will continue to look for solutions.

I would like to say a few words about support for

[*English*]

the seafood workers.

My colleague, Minister Jordan, announced recently \$62.5 million in initiatives that will provide maintenance and inventory supports that will add additional storage capacity and will also address health and safety conditions. This is in addition to all of the support

that my colleague, Madam Bibeau, has announced in the agricultural sector for farmers.

When you take all of these measures together, Madam Chabot, you see that our government is really fulfilling our commitment to the sector and to the workers who are arriving here in a great number, as I said. There was good progress in April, and we will continue to make that progress going forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

The last questioner is Ms. Kwan, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kwan, you have the floor.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

On the issue around open work permits, I hope the minister will expedite changing those permits for workers who have been impacted from an employer-specific work permits to open work permits across the country.

On the question around migrant workers and undocumented workers—those who have an expired social insurance number or those without a social insurance number at all—can the minister give us a quick update on what progress has been made in supporting these workers?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: My understanding after engaging with CRA and ESDC is that if the individuals in question meet the criteria for eligibility under the CERB, they can apply using their SIN, which does not expire for tax purposes, regardless of the status of their work permit. Depending on their situation, they might or might not be able to apply online, but they will be able to do so through the call centre.

As I mentioned in my conversations with you, we are looking at ways to ensure that all vulnerable populations are receiving access and eligibility to the programs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Would those workers with an expired SIN, though, who would not be eligible, as well as those who are undocumented workers, be able to use their ITN, their individual tax number, to apply for emergency benefits?

• (1215)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm sorry. I don't have a definitive answer for you on that last question, but I do know that my staff is continuing to engage with our colleagues in different department to try to get some clarity.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have two quick questions.

It has been brought to my attention that IRCC's phone line for MPs for non-emergency cases has ceased. When will that resume?

Second, can you give a quick update on what's happening with the application process for parents and grandparents? It has been delayed since the beginning of the year. No doubt COVID has impacted this as well. When can we see that program resume?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, I'm happy to speak with you offline about any service interruptions. If you have concerns, you can always send me an email and we'll get back to you as quickly as possible.

With regard to the parents and grandparents program, we remain committed to our work in reuniting families. No government has done more. We've had to defer the relaunch of the program. It was our intention to do so at the beginning of April, but because of COVID-19, we've pushed that back. I'll have more to say going forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister; and thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Minister, you offered us an hour. We took an hour and fifteen minutes. We're very grateful to you for the information you've provided and for being so patient with us as we work through the technical challenges. You're more than welcome to come back.

Thank you very much for your appearance here today. You're free to go. I understand your officials are going to stick around for the rest of the meeting.

Thanks again, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Mr. Chair; and thanks to all the members of the committee for their questions and their work. Please stay healthy and safe.

The Chair: Folks, we're going to suspend for two minutes while the minister gets unplugged, and then we'll be right back with officials.

• (1215)

(Pause)

• (1215)

The Chair: We're back in session. We have with us the officials who were introduced at the outset. I don't think we need to do that again. We'll launch right into questions, beginning with Mr. Kent for six minutes, please.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you again, Chair; and thank you, Deputy, and to the other officials who are joining us today.

First, what is the current processing backlog of asylum claimants? The last time we met with you and the minister at the immigration committee, that number was somewhere in the mid-80,000s, so I wonder what it might be today.

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): That number would continue to hold steady. We'll get the exact figures from the Immigration and Refugee Board for the honourable member.

Some processing has continued throughout this period and will continue to move forward. I'll get back to you with a very precise figure. It hasn't changed much.

Hon. Peter Kent: We've seen in the recent months before the COVID crisis that in a number of provinces, regions and communities across the country there is a need for expedited recognition of credentials of immigrants with valuable medical experience and qualifications, such as nurses, general practitioners, midwives, and so forth, and I assume that those requests remain today.

I know that the current protocols are set by federal and provincial professional associations in most cases, but is the department working with the provinces to address the needs of these very often small and remote communities?

• (1220)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We have reached out to a number of professional associations. This is the responsibility of the provinces, and the provinces work with the professional associations to see if we can make lists of foreign-trained medical professionals available.

I'm going to turn it over to my colleagues at ESDC, who actually have more of the responsibilities.

Mr. Massé, perhaps you have a longer answer on that.

Mr. Philippe Massé (Director General, Temporary Foreign Worker Program, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): I wish I had a longer answer. These are the responsibilities of my colleagues. I don't have the latest status, although I know they were looking at opportunities to expedite some of the processes that are at play.

Mr. Kent, you correctly identified the important role of the provincial regulatory authorities in this case. I can certainly go back to my colleagues to clarify the next steps there.

Hon. Peter Kent: On the half-dozen pilot programs that the department was planning to launch this year, the minister spoke to the fact that some changes have been imposed by the crisis. Are these pilot projects, particularly the one with regard to remote and northern communities for the intake of skilled permanent residents, still active?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Those programs are indeed still active, and we remain open for business, although it's certainly not in the same fashion that it was before this crisis. Any individuals whose permanent residence application had been approved before March 12 are still eligible to travel and eligible to come to Canada, if they can find a way here. That's provided by the two orders in council.

As for continuing to work with municipalities and provinces on the pilot projects we've established, that's ongoing. We continue to look at application intake, but as you can imagine, some of that work has slowed down.

Hon. Peter Kent: The minister clarified there is a very small number, almost zero, of irregular refugee claimants coming into Canada. However, we're facing a new situation with regard to persecuted Hong Kong pro-democracy residents, who can come to Canada without a visa. We're told several hundred of them plan to make asylum claims when they are in Canada, if they are not already here.

I'm wondering how the department ensures that the Immigration and Refugee Board will guarantee a fair and impartial hearing for those claims at a time when there is political sensitivity with regard to federal government relations with China and some timidity in recognizing the crisis for those pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We are sensitive to the nature of this situation.

At this time, they aren't allowed to come to Canada, with or without a visa, if they are in Hong Kong at the moment. There are a number of people in Canada who have made inland asylum claims, and that remains open at this time. My understanding is that a number of Hong Kong residents have done that. Those claims are now before the Immigration and Refugee Board and will be adjudicated as they come up.

Hon. Peter Kent: You're saying that those who are in Canada now or who can make their way to Canada would have that 90-day residency period enabled and could make a claim during that time.

The Chair: I'd like a short answer, please.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: It would be difficult for them to make their way to Canada at this point, but for those in Canada who wish to claim asylum, we still have avenues open that allow people to make inland asylum claims.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kent. Thank you, Ms. Tapley.

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

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon to the departments and all of my colleagues.

My questions are for both departments, ESDC and IRCC. I just want to talk about a situation that's happening in my province of New Brunswick. I know Mr. Kent alluded to it earlier.

On April 28, the Government of New Brunswick announced that it would ban any new temporary foreign workers from entering our province as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The decision is having a significant impact on our province, in particular our agriculture, aquaculture and forestry sectors. Indeed, the New Brunswick farmers' union has stated that our province is making it difficult, if not impossible, for farms to ensure production, especially as the season begins amid uncertainty and instability.

We've heard from companies like J.D. Irving with respect to the forestry sector. We've heard from different farmers that temporary foreign workers are critical to the operations of these companies, of these organizations and of these sectors, and it's not easy banning

temporary foreign workers and bringing students in to replace them in these jobs.

Here's my question: Was ESDC or IRCC informed by the Government of New Brunswick of its intention to ban the entry of temporary foreign workers into the province? If so, when?

• (1225)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I can start and then I'll turn it over to Mr. Massé.

No, we did not have advance warning of what the Government of New Brunswick intended to do in this situation.

Mr. Philippe Massé: It's the same here. We found out about it at the same time.

Mr. Wayne Long: Were officials at ERDC or IRCC consulted at all by the province? Was there no consultation whatsoever?

Did you have any reaction to that, or were you surprised that you weren't consulted?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We have a pretty robust federal-provincial table on the immigration side, but no, we were not consulted in advance of this.

Mr. Wayne Long: Does ESDC or IRCC have any data regarding the economic impact of the temporary foreign worker program in each province?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I'd be happy to get back to you on that. We do have some work in this area and I'm happy to share it. Mr. Massé, I think, may have even more.

Mr. Philippe Massé: We can certainly look at some of the research that was done, and there were certainly studies around the impact of the TFW program in the fishing sector and the agriculture sector, and we can share those studies with you. We know that Atlantic Canada, in particular, New Brunswick, makes up a half of the TFWs who come to work in the fish processing and seafood sector, so we understand that's a big loss for that jurisdiction.

We're working with employers and we'll work with the province on looking at alternate solutions, of course, in the context of the decision that was made, including supporting access to domestic labour. There's obviously a recognition that there's a loss of experienced workers in this country in that sector. We can share some of the studies that we have available.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

Would either department conduct an impact analysis of the ban? Is that something you would look at, just so that we have information with respect to that? There's a lot of debate certainly in southern New Brunswick and across the province. We're hearing from industry, from farmers and from people in the forestry sector that there is a major economic impact to the ban. I'm just wondering if you will be conducting a lot more analysis, with the premier's decision.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We won't be conducting an economic impact analysis on the sector from the premier's decision.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Massé.

Mr. Philippe Massé: Yes, I agree. I think there will be an opportunity to look at the impact of this whole COVID situation on the program and what that means going forward. We'll be turning to those impacts very soon. There are a lot of lessons to be learned in terms of the adjustments that we're going through now. It will be part of the agenda for sure.

• (1230)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

I don't know how much time I have left. If I do have time left, it's certainly—

The Chair: You have less than a minute, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay. I'll pass. I'm good.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have six minutes.

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

Good afternoon to the witnesses. Thank you for being here.

I would like to use some of my time to move a motion that I duly tabled with the committee on Wednesday, May 6. You all received that motion, dear colleagues. The motion, that I hope you will accept, proposes that we invite the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry to answer our questions about COVID-19 and its impact on workers, particularly with regard to pension plans.

I am moving this motion because it was impossible to get any answers from Employment and Social Development Canada at the last meeting. As you have all read, today is a black Friday. Two million jobs were lost in the month of April alone. We all know the impact that has on workers. It is already being announced that many businesses in some large industrial sectors will be placing themselves under the protection of the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act or protecting themselves from their creditors. It is absolutely urgent that the committee hear from the minister to determine the impact that the situation could have on workers' pension plans.

Thank you for supporting this motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Chabot presented a notice of motion, even though it was not strictly necessary since the motion was in order under the Standing Orders. I can now listen to or accept other proposals.

Would anyone like to speak to the motion?

Ms. Christine Normandin: No one would, Mr. Chair.

It is therefore my understanding that I have my colleague's permission to continue with questions. Is that correct?

The Chair: Yes, you have the floor.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I would like to come back to the issue of temporary foreign workers in the agricultural industry. From the beginning of the crisis, we have seen—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Normandin. We need to vote on the motion now if no one else wants to speak to it. You will not lose your speaking time.

• (1235)

[*English*]

(Motion negated: nays 8; yeas 3)

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

From the beginning of the crisis, work has slowed down at some embassies, including those in Guatemala and Peru, which has led to delays in processing visa and work permit applications for temporary foreign workers, particularly in the agricultural industry.

Despite all that, workers whose visas had been processed but not yet affixed to their passports were able to get on flights at the last minute. Small measures were put in place to speed things up.

However, for a long time now, farmers have been calling for the faster processing of applications of workers who come back year after year. Such a measure would have made it possible to fast-track the processing of applications and to put less pressure on embassies abroad from the start.

Ms. Tapley, I would like to hear your thoughts on the possibility of fast-tracking the applications of temporary foreign workers who come back year after year and who meet the criteria each year.

[*English*]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We have a pretty expedited process when it comes to seasonal agricultural workers, particularly in Mexico, where a number of them come from. We quickly put in place a number of workarounds to deal with this situation. In both Jamaica and Guatemala, we've looked at foil-less visas to be able to go in a passport.

The reality, however, is that for those who've been here and who we see as a trusted partner in this organization, we do expedite those visas very quickly, and we will do. As the minister mentioned, 10,961 individuals are ready to travel. Those visas have been processed and they're ready to go. We have another 4,100 and change. We're in the process of bringing those applications forward and processing them.

Our times for processing applications right now are diminished, are reduced, and we're quite pleased about that and being able to bring this forward. We're pushing as hard as we can with our colleagues at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Fisheries and Oceans, and Global Affairs to make sure that we can bring workers here as quickly as we can.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

Right now, 85% or 90% of foreign workers have arrived for the planting season. However, farmers are worried that there will be a shortage of workers in the fall because many crops must be harvested manually.

What measures have been put in place by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and the Department of Employment and Social Development to ensure that there will not be a shortage of workers in the fall?

[English]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We continue to wait for additional applications to come in. This would be the normal process in terms of when those applications would come in. We continue to look at our capacity to do this and to be able to move those applications forward as quickly as we can. I'm quite pleased about what we've been able to do to date.

Mr. Massé.

[Translation]

Mr. Philippe Massé: Good afternoon.

Thank you for your question, Ms. Normandin.

The process is already well under way at the Department of Employment and Social Development. Most employers already have the necessary approval. That is already in place. For those who do not, we are giving their files priority and using an expedited process.

We are in constant communication with the employers and the source countries to see how we can facilitate the process and ensure that connections are made. We are working with several levels of government. We want to do everything we can to help. We are on the right track and we hope that will continue.

• (1240)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Right now the border is closed, but it will gradually reopen at some point and irregular migrants will once again become an issue.

Have you already come up with an action plan for the reopening of the border based on the Canada-U.S. safe third country agreement?

[English]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for that question.

As you know, the safe third country agreement continues to apply at ports of entry, and we've seen a number of individuals come through who have met exemptions to the safe third country agreement. Others have been turned back, as is the agreement with the U.S. For now, these arrangements remain in place with the United States, including the arrangement of what to do between ports of entry at the land border. We continue to examine the situation and how this will work in the future.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Normandin.

[English]

Thank you, Ms. Tapley.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, and thank you to the officials.

The minister mentioned that work permits and visas are being processed in the turnaround time of one week. Is that for all work permits and visas, including the need for extensions?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: That's in certain categories. I wish we could turn everything around in one week, but no, what the minister mentioned was just for certain categories.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could the officials provide the processing time and the backlog in the different categories to the committee, please? I think it's really important to understand what that situation looks like.

Particularly, I'm wondering about the instance where people have expired work permits. What is the turnaround time for their applications to be processed?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: For those with expired work permits, we continue to emphasize—and we have reached out to all our clients—that there is an implied status if you have reapplied for that work permit, and that's been key.

I wonder if Mr. Dumas might be able to add to that question.

Mr. Louis Dumas (Acting Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Deputy Minister Tapley.

Indeed, as Deputy Minister Tapley said, according to certain categories, we have certain processing times, but we do prioritize those that need an extension. We've had a number of reorganizations within our operations sector here in Canada to really address those priorities. We'd be happy to provide you with further numbers on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If you could, please do so. When I'm talking about expired.... If people with expired work permits, for example, have lost their jobs and their work permits expired right at the cusp of that period, they actually don't have implied status. They are in a very difficult situation, and I wonder what will happen to those individuals. That's what I'm concerned about. If we could get those numbers, it would be very helpful. I think it's misleading to say that it's being processed within one week when it doesn't apply to all categories.

On the question of exemptions, I've asked the minister about exemptions for people receiving CERB and other government emergency support at this time. On the IRCC website, the only place I can find where the exemption is indicated, where people would not be penalized in the immigration process, is for spousal, parents' and grandparents' applications. There's no language about applications for TFWs, for example. I brought this to the minister's attention. That is, I think, a technical oversight. I wonder if the ministry will fix this oversight on its website. I looked just this morning, and I have not seen an update.

As well, do you have any further information with respect to exemptions for other government emergency benefits, aside from CERB?

The Chair: Ms. Tapley, your connection is not great. If you could hold your microphone close and speak slowly, that will greatly help the interpreters. Thank you.

• (1245)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for that. I think this is better.

For CERB, as the member indicated, we do not consider such a program to be social assistance for the purposes of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] sponsorship and also for our other programs. We can certainly look for means to clarify that on our website and look at how we communicate with our clients.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think it would be very helpful and useful to give certainty to people. That would apply to anyone who's engaged in the immigration process and receiving emergency government assistance.

Is that just for CERB, or is it for other emergency benefits as well?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: What I have is just for CERB, but we can look into other benefits as well. The same would apply, I believe, in other categories, but we will get back to you on that and confirm.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would appreciate that because, as you know, instead of coming forward with a direct universal payment, the government has come out with all sorts of different programs, and people will qualify under different sets of circumstances. If they qualify, it would be astounding if the government would later on, in a different program, penalize people because of those benefits. I hope that exemption of not penalizing people engaged in the immigration process would apply for all government emergency benefits at this time.

In terms of open work permits, the minister mentioned that work is under way with respect to that. Can the officials give us an update? For people with employer-specific work permits, if they've lost their jobs at this time, it would almost be impossible for them

to secure employment. Therefore, making open work permits available to them would be quite essential.

Can you give us an update on where you are in terms of realizing this?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We are concerned about the situation for many of the reasons that the member already indicated. We're working to try to find a means to address this.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do you have a timeline?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I don't have a specific timeline. I'm hoping it will be very soon.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. I just want to emphasize the urgency of this. As days pass, people are stuck in that precarious situation, and they're desperate. People want to get back out into the workforce. It also has further implications, again, tied to their work permit expiry time period. All of these things are rolled together with huge implications.

The minister talked about—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan. You're out of time.

Next we have Mr. Albas, please, for five minutes.

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

Actually, I believe Mr. Vis was supposed to be the one taking this round.

The Chair: We'll move over to you, Mr. Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you to the witnesses today. My questions are going to be a little more granular, and I will be seeking some data on processing times and visas issued.

My first question is to Mr. Massé.

Can you please confirm, yes or no, whether LMIA's are still being processed by ESDC?

Mr. Philippe Massé: Yes, we're still processing LMIA's.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay. How many favourable LMIA's have been processed by ESDC since March 15?

Mr. Philippe Massé: I would have to get back to you with specific data on that. We are prioritizing agri-food and agriculture and other essential services applications at this time.

Mr. Brad Vis: I look forward to that data. Thank you.

Are you still processing LMIA's under the general criteria, the general classification, as well?

Mr. Philippe Massé: The program is still open. We are, of course, applying our due diligence in assessing the applications, including requiring employers to provide credible evidence that they've tried to hire Canadians. We review employers' employment insurance history to see if they've recently laid off. We're also pursuing some enhancements to our administration, including ensuring that the business or the employer has a genuine need for the workers.

For those who applied prior to the COVID-19 situation, we're asking employers to readvertise in the current situation, and that includes posting for two weeks, that they reach out to under-represented groups and that they use our job match service. This is, in particular, in the low-wage areas, to ensure that all Canadians who are currently unemployed have opportunities for those jobs. We continue to work on strengthening that as more evidence comes to bear, as well as working with provinces and territories on the labour market situation. There's a number—

• (1250)

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

Is it correct, yes or no, that you generally use labour market survey data issued by Statistics Canada in the determinations you make on behalf of the LMIA applications?

Mr. Philippe Massé: That is part of the assessment. That's not the only element that we look at, as I've just mentioned. Of course, the labour force survey is not up to date, and we're looking at other pieces that we can bring to bear.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay. Thank you.

To immigration, can you please provide the total number of new work permits issued since March 15, 2020, and under what classifications?

We've already heard the ag numbers from the minister, so I would assume that the other numbers would be available too.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We're happy to get back to the committee, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you. I would specifically like information on the total number under skill levels A, B, C and D broken down for all committee members, if possible.

To Citizenship and Immigration, how many temporary foreign workers are expected to arrive in May and June, including agriculture? We heard the agriculture numbers, so I would assume you have the other numbers, too.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I have the agriculture numbers in front of me. Other numbers will be down considerably to what they have been in previous years, given difficulties travelling. No, I don't have those exact projections in front of me.

Mr. Brad Vis: If you could please provide that information to all committee members, that would be very helpful, and please provide which work permits would fall under essential services and which would not.

Again to the deputy minister, since March 15, how many work permits have been renewed in Canada? I believe that the minister said this was a priority, and this follows along the lines of questioning earlier.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Mr. Dumas, would you have that, by any chance?

Mr. Louis Dumas: I do not, but we'd be happy to get back to the committee with that information.

Mr. Brad Vis: Okay.

To the officials at ESDC, how do you believe the new labour force survey data, which was issued just today, impacts your deter-

mination to move forward in determining who should be issued a favourable LMIA survey? As you will note, it said that more than one-third of the potential labour force have not worked or have worked less than half of their usual hours since March 15.

The Chair: Please give a short answer.

Mr. Philippe Massé: We're, of course, looking at that as well as other data that becomes available, such as data from our CERB and EI systems, to inform those assessments. Of course, that is reflected in the guidance given to officers assessing applications.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Can it be the will of the committee that we receive the answers I asked for from the officials within 10 business days?

The Chair: I don't see that as unreasonable. I would ask the witnesses to make their best efforts to provide the information in a timely fashion.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Young, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): I would like to give my time to Mr. Dong, if he's there.

Mr. Han Dong: Yes, I'm right here. Thank you, Kay, for giving me your time.

Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank the officials for being here with us at the committee today.

In my riding, which is a very diverse riding, there are many neighbourhoods that house newcomers and some international students as well. For example, in Parkway Forest there are lots of young professionals and recent graduates who went through the study permit program, and they are looking at the provincial nominee program as a pathway to citizenship. For example, people will be taking a master's degree and, in certain fields after two years' study, sometimes they're waiting for the opening of the PNP, because they're in suspense throughout the year. There is, unfortunately, a lot of unpredictability in the PNP.

To the officials, are we working on increased transparency or predictability of PNPs, particularly in Ontario, when it comes to the student stream?

• (1255)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Mr. Chair, we work closely with our provincial counterparts. The additional transparency in the Ontario program would be the responsibility of the Province of Ontario. I would add that we have continued with express entry draws throughout this period. We've done some rather large draws, and when we've done those larger draws, that minimum cut-off score has lowered a bit, which has been helpful, particularly to more of the students who were in that pool.

Mr. Han Dong: That's great.

With COVID-19 going forward, because we have a very ambitious goal to welcome 350,000 immigrants to Canada, as was announced, are you looking to expand the PNP program and give more numbers to the provinces, large provinces like Ontario?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Mr. Chair, at this time we're not looking to make changes to the levels planned that the minister announced on March 12. I believe the minister indicated this in response to another question. We are thinking about next year's levels plan. We started consultations with province and territories around the levels plan, and we are now considering how best to do broader consultation throughout the summer so that we can come forward. As you know, we have a statutory obligation to table our levels by November 1.

Mr. Han Dong: That's very good to know. I encourage you to consult with as many professionals in various communities as possible, because I'm sure the message you will be hearing will be very different now, considering COVID is affecting our economy and a demand for labour in various fields.

I want to move to people who apply for citizenship and haven't been able to become a Canadian citizen due to the cancellation of their citizenship ceremony.

Is IRCC considering any alternative ways to help them complete the final steps to becoming a Canadian citizen?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Yes, as the minister indicated, we now have done one ceremony virtually, and we are looking at making sure we have plans in place to be able to proceed with more of those ceremonies.

Mr. Han Dong: I strongly encourage you to do more of those ceremonies, and very quickly as well. Otherwise, we will have a backlog when this whole thing's over and put an additional burden on already very stressed-out citizenship judges, because I've been

told they held many ceremonies across the country last year, so the virtual setting I think is the way to go.

My other question has a bit to do with what Ms. Kwan asked. Can you confirm to the committee again that receiving CERB will not affect one's ability to sponsor parents and grandparents?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Yes. I am happy to say again that we do not consider CERB to be social assistance for the purposes of immigration, so that should not affect applications.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

Can you give us an overview or an update on what we are doing abroad in taking in different kinds of visa applications.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Our missions remain open abroad. A lot of our staff has been assisting colleagues at Global Affairs in repatriating Canadians on those flights. However, what is a patchwork abroad is our visa application centres. Some may be open for only very limited functions such as biometrics. Others are closed altogether. That's a big patchwork across the country. Our missions, however, remain open.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dong.

Thank you, Ms. Tapley.

We are at the appointed hour. I would like to thank the witnesses very much for being here and for providing the information that they have.

I also want to thank my colleagues. This was a very productive meeting where everyone stuck to their time. That is greatly appreciated.

With that, the meeting is adjourned. We will see you on Friday.

Thanks, everyone. Enjoy your weekend.

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