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Chair: Mr. Tom Lukiwski



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• (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)): Colleagues, I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting 10 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Colleagues, before we start, I would like to go over the schedule for committee meetings next week, as approved by the whips of all parties.

Next week, on Monday, May 11, we will be meeting from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. That's eastern time, of course.

On Friday, May 15, we will be meeting from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., again eastern time.

Colleagues, I would like to take five minutes at the end of today's meeting to talk about the witnesses we will be inviting to appear after May 15.

I have a couple of general comments that I think everyone is familiar with.

When speaking, wait until you are recognized. Speak slowly and clearly. If you are speaking in English, ensure that you are on the English channel. Conversely, if you're speaking in French, make sure you're on the French channel.

To the President of the Treasury Board, if you're planning to alternate between languages, just make sure you are switching the interpretation channel to the language in which you will be speaking. Also, we would ask you to please pause briefly between switching languages so that our interpreters will be able to make the necessary adjustments.

With that, colleagues, I would invite the President of the Treasury Board to make a brief opening statement.

Welcome, Mr. Duclos....

You might have to unmute your mike, Minister.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (President of the Treasury Board): That's bizarre. It should be working. That is very strange.

Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you.

Mr. Lukiwski, thank you for reminding me of the technologically appropriate steps. I will try to be as well behaved as I can and switch, as you said, from English to French as I move from one language to the other in my brief presentation.

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. It's always a great privilege to be with your committee by whatever means it may be.

[*Translation*]

Joining me by virtual means today from the Treasury Board Secretariat are: Nancy Chahwan, the chief human resources officer for the Government of Canada; Francis Bilodeau, acting chief information officer for the Government of Canada; Marcia Santiago, executive director, expenditure strategies and estimates; and Kathleen Owens, assistant comptroller general, acquired services and assets. They will be with me to provide you with the most accurate information possible.

I would like to speak briefly about the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it relates to public servants working remotely.

[*English*]

As you're well aware, the Government of Canada has directed its employees to work from home, whenever possible, to protect their health and safety and comply with public health advice. This has meant a large-scale shift of the workforce to home offices and makeshift offices in dining rooms and at kitchen islands in homes across our country.

Regardless of where they work, however, federal employees are continuing to be productive in their efforts to provide Canadians with the government services they depend on every day and to provide critical services and the many new measures quickly developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Public servants at Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada, for example, have rolled out services and such benefits as the Canada emergency response benefit and the Canada emergency wage subsidy. As of May 5, there were more than 7.5 million applicants and 10.7 million processed applications for the Canada emergency response benefit alone.

[*Translation*]

At Global Affairs Canada, public servants have worked to bring 20,000 Canadians home safely from locations all around the world. Canada's Armed Forces has sent its members to help out at hard-hit long-term care homes in Quebec and Ontario.

Like private citizens, employees and owners of businesses across the country, public servants are contributing their skills and know-how to the fight against COVID-19. And since mid-March, a large portion of these public servants, including those supporting critical services, have been working remotely whenever and wherever possible. A critical service is one that, if disrupted, would result in a high or very high degree of injury to the health, safety, security or economic well-being of Canadians, or to the effective functioning of the Government of Canada.

Departments have identified their critical services and we continue to work with them to ensure the alignment of resources under established business-continuity planning processes.

• (1110)

[English]

Of course, sometimes delivering services through working remotely simply is not feasible. For these employees, departments are ensuring that proper protocols are being followed, including the provision and the use of personal protective equipment, proper cleaning practices and other measures.

For the most part, though, working from home has become the new normal for many public servants who are carrying out their duties during the pandemic.

[Translation]

As noted, a great many public servants are working hard to develop and deliver support to Canadians, including a host of new emergency measures.

While many public servants already have the necessary tools to do this, some require additional equipment, such as laptops, tablets, and monitors, as well as specific accommodations to allow them to do their work. Requests for equipment are being considered on a case-by-case basis, giving priority to those employees who are delivering critical services and those for whom the employer has a duty to accommodate.

[English]

With respect to using the government Internet network, the Treasury Board Secretariat, Shared Services Canada and departmental chief information officers have worked together to maximize and expand Internet bandwidth to support remote work and prioritize network access for critical operations. Our guidance to departments has recommended that anyone not supporting critical operations, service and program delivery should limit their use of the network....

I am sorry for this delay. Thank you for your patience.

The Chair: Perhaps, Mr. Minister, since you seem to be having some difficulty in aligning English to French, I would suggest that you just speak normally and put your interpretation device to “floor” or “off”. If you just pause briefly between switching from English to French, even though you don't have to switch channels, our interpreters should be able to keep up.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you for your guidance.

[Translation]

Thank you for your recommendation. I will try to translate into French what I have here in English.

In addition, we are asking employees to use their government-supplied mobile devices, whenever possible, to send and receive emails, in line with security requirements. We are also asking that, whenever possible, they connect to the network during off-peak hours and for short durations to get what they need.

To support continued and necessary collaborations within and across teams, we're also asking employees to use public cloud services, such as Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts and Slack, for unclassified work, and to use the BBM Enterprise application to secure messages for up to Protected B work.

In addition, we are working with thousands of public servants at home to support them with the safe custody and control of sensitive and classified information.

We also understand that working remotely, especially with long periods of sheltering-in-place, can be hard on our employees' mental and physical well-being, like for all other citizens of this country and others who are telecommuting in the current conditions. So we have connected them with specialized mental health services, and we are encouraging them to do things to remain productive and, more importantly, healthy—common sense things like setting a suitable schedule, staying connected, even if only by virtual means, with colleagues and loved ones, and making time for self-care—getting enough sleep, eating healthy, and exercising regularly. These are public health guidelines.

• (1115)

[English]

The Chair: Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt, and I do apologize. I know we were having some technical difficulties, but we also have a limited time frame in which to work, so I'm going to have to ask you to conclude. We will go directly to questions.

Colleagues, the minister has to leave at noon. It appears we will not be able to get a full two rounds in, but we will go as far as we can.

In our first six-minute round of questions, we'll start with Mrs. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Mr. Chair, I would like to start by recognizing and thanking our public servants, both those who are working remotely and those who are continuing to head into the office or the parliamentary precinct. As the minister pointed out and as we've all experienced, working remotely has its own set of challenges that we are trying to overcome every day.

Minister, I would like to ask you a question with regard to the responsibility that Treasury Board Secretariat has in overseeing government contracts. Does TBS provide guidelines for government contracts on, for example, sole-sourcing?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, MP Block, and I'm sorry for having taken a bit more time than anticipated because of the technological adjustments that I had to learn and apply. I think it's a good idea, indeed, to move to questions. Thank you for doing that.

On the guidance and the guidelines regarding procurement, yes, Treasury Board has a set of guidelines that have been provided, both before the crisis and during the crisis, to maintain the integrity of the procurement system.

Mrs. Kelly Block: You mentioned that there were guidelines both before COVID and now during COVID. Could you tell us of any additional oversight measures that the comptroller general has implemented to ensure adequate internal controls for COVID spending?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's a very good and important question. For the benefit of all members of Parliament on the committee, I would turn to Madam Owens, who is assistant comptroller general. I think she's on the call.

• (1120)

Ms. Kathleen Owens (Assistant Comptroller General, Acquired Services and Assets Sector, Office of the Comptroller General, Treasury Board Secretariat): Yes, I am. Thank you very much for the question.

With respect to emergency contracting, there are already controls within the policy.

First of all, the emergency limits are temporary for COVID-19, so there is a time limit to these exceptional emergency contracts. Also, reporting to the Treasury Board Secretariat is required within 60 days on the use of the emergency contracts.

In addition, you talked generally about the comptroller general. He has asked all CFOs and departments across town to track their COVID-19 expenditures and report back to him so that the spending can be tracked centrally.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you.

I note that the minister referenced that definitely these guidelines apply to the contracts awarded by PSPC, and I'm wondering if that stands true for contracts awarded for PPE.

Ms. Kathleen Owens: Yes. For any contract using emergency authorities, the same rules apply regardless.

Mrs. Kelly Block: We were advised yesterday during a briefing that one company in particular was awarded a contract now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that it's actually a 10-year contract. Can you tell me how that fits in with the emergency limits you've just described for us?

Ms. Kathleen Owens: I think you'd have to ask the PSPC about the specifics of that contract, but the emergency limits refer not to the duration of the contract but to the value of the contract.

Mrs. Kelly Block: All right. I will definitely be asking that question of PSPC when they appear before committee again.

I'd like to turn to the \$4.4 billion promised by the government for protecting health and safety, and more specifically to the \$2 billion for personal protective equipment and supplies. Can you tell us if the contracts that have been struck, according to the guidelines and measures that have been put in place and the emergency limits, allow for prepayment?

Ms. Kathleen Owens: Again, the specifics of each contract are something you'd have to ask the contracting organization, which is likely PSPC in this case.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay, but do your guidelines allow for the prepayment of contracts, regardless of—

Ms. Kathleen Owens: Advance payments are allowed within financial management policy, generally, subject to certain conditions.

Mrs. Kelly Block: What would those conditions be?

Ms. Kathleen Owens: I am not an expert in the financial rules around them, but in general, advance payments are for receipt of goods or services within the upcoming year. They can't cross fiscal years.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Are you familiar with any limits on how much can be prepaid?

Ms. Kathleen Owens: It has to be within the value of the contract. I can check with my financial management colleagues and get back to you on those specifics.

Mrs. Kelly Block: I would appreciate that.

Can you tell us—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Block. We're completely out of time.

Before we go to our next intervenor, colleagues, and for the minister, if you are going to be asking your question *en français*, please ask the entire question for the entire six minutes *en français*. Minister, you can respond on the appropriate channel.

If you are going to ask the minister a question in English, please carry out the entire question and answer period in English. Minister, you can then switch to English on your channel, rather than switch back and forth. There are a few technical difficulties when we do that.

With that, I'll go to Mr. Weiler for six minutes, please.

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everybody.

Thank you, Minister, and all of our witnesses, for joining our virtual committee meeting this morning.

We're all adjusting to working remotely. We're adapting and modernizing our systems to suddenly find ourselves working in a very different situation. I think we have to be very proud of how our public servants have stepped up to this challenge.

Minister, my question to you is this: How has the Treasury Board Secretariat provided flexibility to government departments so that they can respond to COVID-19 quickly and efficiently?

• (1125)

The Chair: Minister, your microphone needs to be unmuted.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you for your patience and for your guidance.

Thank you for that very good question, MP Weiler. I think you make allusion to a broad context, in which we have to both provide the benefits and services that Canadians absolutely require in this emergency situation as well as maintain the health and safety of our public servants.

By the way, we are all mindful—and you reminded us of that as well—that public servants may also go through difficult personal situations. They might need to look after children, they might have someone sick in their household or they might have their own personal health circumstances.

It's a combination of the two things. Nancy Chahwan, the chief human resources officer, is on the line as well, and she might want to add a few things, but the key word from the start was “flexibility”, because of the importance of respecting individual circumstances while ensuring that the machinery of government would operate appropriately.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: That's great.

What actions have been taken to increase the teleworking capacity across government? Have these actions yielded any success?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: If I may, I'll turn to Nancy.

Nancy, you would be best able to provide the level of precision and usefulness that MPs would demand.

Ms. Nancy Chahwan (Chief Human Resources Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you. I apologize to the chair, the committee and the minister for the technical difficulties this morning.

We have been able, through collaboration with Shared Services Canada my colleague Francis Bilodeau, who is at this meeting, and with others, to maximize productivity for the public service, even in these very exceptional times.

Essentially, we were able to augment the technical capacity to make sure that employees who were abiding by public health instructions and staying at home whenever it was possible were the same time able to conduct the critical business of government, and even more than that.

I should mention that we still have some employees showing up at the workplace when it is absolutely necessary to do so. We also have a great contingent of employees who are teleworking without necessarily needing constant access to the network. This is how we were able to redistribute the work and make sure that our employ-

ees—the vast majority of public servants across the country—are still contributing to the work.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: That's great. It's been amazing to see the productivity of our public servants quickly adjusting to something of this magnitude.

During these difficult times, it is essential that Canadians have access to the mental health supports they need. I'm curious. What actions has the Treasury Board taken to ensure there are mental health supports for our federal employees?

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Minister, would you like me to respond to that?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Yes, please, Nancy.

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Thank you, and thank you for the question.

It has been said that mental health is actually the second silent pandemic behind COVID-19. We have been extremely attentive from the get-go. The Treasury Board Secretariat has developed a tool kit that addresses several aspects of mental health for workers, including a very specific focus for front-line managers who have been asked to connect with the workers to make sure the essential work is continuing and the expectations are understood, but also that they are attentive to the accommodation needed for the individual situations of our employees working from home.

That tool kit is on our website. It is accessible to other employers too, and it's been used tens of thousands of times.

We also have made sure that we have reached out with webcasts. Just this week, we had a webcast, and 6,000 people accessed it to talk about how to cope with the current situation. This is not just about self-care. It's also about the care of our teams. It also gives tools, very practical tools, that allow managers to learn how to manage a team remotely. This has been a significant opportunity for us to learn about that.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Madame Vignola.

[Translation]

You have six minutes.

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoulu, BQ): Good morning.

I am trying to be proactive and cover all the bases.

How many of the 288,000 public service employees are currently teleworking? It can be a percentage.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Mrs. Vignola.

I will give you a broad idea. The majority of employees are working from home. Ms. Chahwan will be able to give you the exact percentage across the Treasury Board, if it's available. Let me remind you that the Treasury Board Secretariat gives guidelines and advice, but it does not make decisions in the departments concerned. As a result, the information is often per department.

I would also like to add that 58% of the 300,000 employees reporting to the Treasury Board Secretariat are located outside the nation's capital. Those employees have often been able to use telework techniques, even before the crisis.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: All right.

Approximately what percentage of employees are working from home?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Ms. Chahwan, do we have that percentage?

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Mr. Bilodeau, could you give us an idea of remote network connections?

Mr. Francis Bilodeau (Acting Chief Information Officer of Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat): Yes, certainly. However, the number of remote connections does not necessarily equate to the number of people who are at work. That said, on a daily basis, there are approximately 150,000 simultaneous connections to the secure network access system. Again, this is not an exact figure, because a number of public servants work outside peak hours. This indicates that more public servants are working remotely, given that a number of public servants have been instructed to try to work off-peak hours to ensure that the networks do not get overloaded.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

I assume that many of these employees must have received teleworking equipment, such as a computer, and so on.

First, how much has it cost to date to provide public servants with the equipment they need to work from home?

Second, once they are back in the office, what are we going to do with all that equipment?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Bilodeau, do you have any specifics about the costs?

Mr. Francis Bilodeau: I don't have the exact numbers. Minister Murray will appear before the committee with officials from Shared Services Canada in a few weeks, I believe. They will be able to give you some numbers and more details.

Please note that a number of public servants already had tablets to be able to telework. However, we have certainly seen a rapid increase in the use of networks and in the number of specialized tablets allowing for communications that require a much higher level of protection.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I would like to add that, not only has this capacity increased extraordinarily fast, but we also expect it to be useful after the crisis, when work habits will be different.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Yes, the crisis is causing a lot of changes. Some time ago, the GCcoworking initiative on shared workspaces was launched.

First of all, was it very popular?

Next, what lessons were learned from it?

Have you thought of expanding it over the next few months or years so that more people can take part?

• (1135)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That is a very good question. I will let Mr. Bilodeau answer it.

Mr. Francis Bilodeau: I believe the measure the member brought up is more within the purview of the comptroller general. Perhaps Ms. Owens could talk about workspaces.

As far as telework is concerned, I believe we have seen a big increase in telework capacity. This practice already exists in many organizations outside of government. We are seeing an increased capacity for telework that the government should consider as COVID-19 measures begin to be relaxed and we see a return to the workplace.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: The number of Government of Canada office buildings is quite amazing. If more and more people are looking at the option of continuing to work from home, what will be done with those buildings if they are used less and less?

[English]

The Chair: Minister, please keep your answer very brief, if possible.

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Yes, this will be a very short answer: it is an important issue that we will certainly want to consider after the crisis.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Okay. It's an issue to watch.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Green for six minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Honourable Minister, are there collective agreements currently expired for which negotiations have been temporarily suspended because of COVID-19? If so, how many agreements are there and how many employees are affected?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: As you already know, and it's worth repeating, we are extremely grateful—and “we” includes all Canadians—for the hard work that public servants do all the time, particularly in the context of the difficult crisis that we are living through.

There are currently 35 agreements signed with public servants, covering about 70,000 employees, and we are continuing our important work with the remaining bargaining agents so that we can conclude agreements for all public service employees.

Mr. Matthew Green: Certainly we're all in support of the public workers. I can't imagine what it's like for public sector workers who've been without a contract for quite some time.

For those contracts that have expired, how long have they been expired, and what is the estimated liability in the federal accounts for any outstanding payback that might be accrued or owed to the affected employees?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: For the precise answers to your questions, which I believe you deserve to get, I will turn to Nancy for the length of time that we have been engaged in discussions, dating to when those agreements expired, and any other related matters.

[Translation]

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Thank you, Minister.

I thank the member for his question.

[English]

The last round of collective agreements took us until the summer of 2018, for the vast majority of collective agreements, and we have been at the table ever since bargaining agents signalled their intent to launch the process.

Mr. Matthew Green: As it relates to the outstanding payback that is accrued or owed, can you expand on that, please?

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Yes. I don't have the precise numbers. I'm not sure if Glenn Purves is on the call with us, given the technical difficulties, but if not, we can send that information after the call. However, I can say—

Mr. Matthew Green: Sure. I will go on to the next question, just because my time is limited.

According to the Government of Canada InfoBase, as of March 31, 2019, the federal public service comprised just under 288,000 employees. Permanent or indeterminate employees account for 83% of the federal public service, term employees for 11%, casual employees for 3% and students for 3%.

Has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the number of term, casual and student employees in the federal public service?

• (1140)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: It's a very good question. I know some of the answers. However, I would prefer to turn to Nancy for more complete answers.

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Thank you, Minister.

We don't have an indication that the composition per se would have changed. There is some lag for us to get the numbers, but what I can tell you is that with regard to the term, indeterminate and casual employees, we have made sure that people were as productive as they could be, using telework, as we discussed before.

As for students, we know that there has been a significant drop in referrals compared to last year. The Public Service Commission is responsible for the programs for student recruitment. They and Treasury Board Secretariat have worked together to make sure that our students are provided with a good opportunity to contribute to resolving the crisis and to help us as we work on recovery.

This is important for our students. It can affect their graduation, but this would also allow us access to a qualified workforce that typically continues and forms *la relève* and—

Mr. Matthew Green: My apologies, but I'm really interested in getting to the heart of the matter here. I'll be watching with interest, particularly with regard to the students, given this government's reliance on the Canada summer jobs program as a way to supplement student employment. I'm hearing that there might be a shift even in our own federal government, and I'll be watching that with interest.

What will be the impact, then, of the pandemic on the composition of the federal public service in the medium to long term? I know that a lot of people are very afraid that austerity days are to come and that there will be attacks on public sector workers. I'm just wondering what the medium- and long-term impacts will be on composition.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: If I may, I will step in. As Nancy has said, and as you seem to be agreeing to, Mr. Green, we are going to need to look after students and our youth in the weeks and months to come, because they are going through very difficult circumstances.

Today's announcement, by the way, about the unemployment rate tells us that there is a 13% unemployment rate for all Canadians, but it is almost 35% for young Canadians. We will need to look after them, because they will be extremely important in relaunching the economy and supporting the public service in the future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to our five-minute rounds. Go ahead, Mr. McCauley.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you stated in the briefing document that you provided to the committee that employees working from home are responsible for safely guarding the information. How are you ensuring that there are no privacy breaches?

Also, are employees being tracked?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: We are not only, as you say, quite mindful of the importance of maintaining the integrity of the government—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Minister, we're short on time. Can we just go to the answers, please?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: In that case, I will turn to Francis, who would know a lot more about the various measures that have been taken.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you.

Mr. Francis Bilodeau: I guess I would say there are two parts. We've increased the technological capacity for employees to work securely and remotely by increasing secure remote access and access to the VPN and by, in some instances, augmenting the capacity around things like Microsoft Office 365, which is up to protected B.

We've also reissued guidance to all employees, reminding them that they're to use only vehicles and instruments that are appropriate for the nature of the conversations they're having.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How are we following up on that? The reason I ask is that last year we had what I understand was the very worst year in our Canadian history of privacy breaches. We had 5,000 incidents of improper storage or handling of private documents. The very worst department in the entire federal service was TBS, with over 10%, so how are we actually ensuring privacy, besides just issuing guidance?

The reason I ask is that the department, when confronted with the 10%, commented that it was merely rebriefing employees on proper safeguarding practices. What are we doing besides that?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Before I turn to Francis, I will say that I know the public service quite well and can assure you, Mr. McCauley, that they do all they need to do to preserve the integrity of the system. For more details, perhaps Francis would want to step in.

• (1145)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. Thanks.

Could I just ask for no more interruptions, please? Can we just stick to the answers, please? We're short on time. Thanks very much.

Mr. Francis Bilodeau: With regard to the network, there is ongoing monitoring and oversight by a combination of CSE and SSC. With regard to other media, including paper, etc., employees are trained and are provided guidance. As well, we expect the access to information and privacy groups within departments to be monitoring and the employees to self-report.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great. Thanks very much.

Ms. Vignola was talking—and I'm sorry I missed some of the answers—about the public sector working at home. We don't have an exact number of how many are working from home, besides a vast majority, but do we know how many are working from home or how many are on paid leave right now because they're not able to productively or properly work from home, either because of reality circumstances or because of a lack of proper equipment?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Nancy, would you like to provide whatever information we have at the level of the secretariat?

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: We have very little aggregate information at this point. Departments are collecting it and we are working at aggregating it. We should have data towards the end of the month, but the vast majority of people are—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Would you provide that to our committee when you have it?

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Pardon me?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Would you provide that to our committee when you have that?

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Absolutely.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

Also, a number of employees who were working and who were on paid leave for a shorter period have now received equipment or access to the system and are back to work, so to speak. Could you could provide those numbers as well?

How much are we paying for public sector employees to be working at home? We're covering Internet, I assume, for the majority of them, or other equipment. Would you be able to provide how much we're paying for this?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: This is directly linked to the question asked by member Vignola just a moment ago. We can—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It wasn't specifically for covering Internet access, I don't think.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That's right. Your question is even more specific.

In that case, who on the team would be best able to answer?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You can get back to us at the same time you're providing the other information.

Minister, we've been talking to the Information Commissioner, Ms. Maynard, about access to information. She's trying to get the government to be more proactive with transparency.

We've seen all ATIPs put on hold. When will we start seeing members of Parliament and Canadians have access to the access to information requests? What are we doing to proactively ensure transparency in this time?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I had, indeed, a very good discussion—

The Chair: Unfortunately, Minister, while it's an excellent question, we're out of time. I would ask you to provide a full and complete answer to Mr. McCauley's question in writing. Write to our clerk, and he will distribute that answer to all committee members.

We'll now go to our second five-minute intervention.

Go ahead, Monsieur Drouin.

[Translation]

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the minister for taking the time to join us and discuss his department and issues related to COVID-19.

I, too, would like to thank all the public servants who are working hard to ensure that Canadians have access to the services they need in these difficult times.

I represent a number of public servants, and I wonder about the measures taken.

Have we taken any additional steps in the event that a public servant's spouse is infected with COVID-19?

How does the department support employees who are sick and those caring for their spouse?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you for your question, Mr. Drouin.

You brought up two very important things. Let me quickly summarize them.

First, we owe a very great debt of gratitude to public servants, since their personal conditions during the crisis also affect them and because their professional responsibilities have increased in recent weeks.

Second, you asked me what we are doing to support public servants so they can continue to work for Canadians. We have implemented measures for mental health and physical health. We are giving them the tools they absolutely need to be well and do a good job. This includes all the steps they can take to protect the health of their loved ones and, in some cases, to care for their children.

There is a lot more to it than that. Ms. Chahwan can tell you more about how we take care of employees and those around them.

• (1150)

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: Mr. Drouin, thank you for your comments and your question.

As the minister mentioned, several specific and extraordinary measures have been put in place for as long as it takes to manage the crisis.

In the situation you just described, we have made sure that people's income would be maintained. We have also ensured that those dealing with difficult situations have access to psychological services with far fewer requirements than before, while ensuring reasonable diligence in the use of those services. For example, they can consult social workers and psychotherapists without necessarily going through psychologists. This also helps us to support the efforts of all Canadians.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you.

I am fortunate to represent public servants who work in French and English. As parliamentarians, we also have to use translation services.

How do these services work for public servants? How can public servants continue to work in the language of their choice?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I am going to let Ms. Chahwan answer that question.

Ms. Nancy Chahwan: This is an extremely important issue. The crisis is no reason to stop ensuring that both official languages are respected at work. At the Treasury Board Secretariat, we made sure

to remind the official languages champions in all departments of the importance of being able to communicate in either language.

I am aware that some complaints have been filed with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and were made public. Despite this, we are making sure that we do everything we can to meet the requirements.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you very much.

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

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Drouin, you have less than 30 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Drouin: So, I will just finish by saying thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, we'll only have time for one more five-minute intervention. I apologize, Mr. Jowhari; once again you've drawn the short straw. Our final five-minute intervention will go to Mr. Aboultaif.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Minister, we have shortages of PPE. I've been receiving calls from beyond Alberta from professionals who are looking to get PPE so they can go back to work. Are you aware that a few flights came back empty?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Providing personal protective equipment to our public servants is an absolute priority. If you want more details on that, I can turn to some of the representatives.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you, Minister. Can your department or you, Minister, provide the manifests for Air Canada and Cargojet for all the flights getting that equipment from the beginning until now?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I would love to answer your important request positively; however, you would need to turn to PSPC, because they are the ones handling all matters of international procurement.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you. I would like to make that request, if you don't mind, to get us this information or ask the department to supply it. Would that be possible?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I think you can make that reasonable request to them, and if you would like my assistance to connect you to their team, I would be glad to do so.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: That would be great.

Minister, do you know if the government purchased PPE directly from suppliers or from other countries?

• (1155)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Our strategy in the Government of Canada is based on both international procurement in a world in which PPE is solicited by a large number of countries as well as on procurement through a significant increase in domestic production. Domestic production is supported by ISED and international procurement is supported by PSPC.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Are you suggesting that we have a direct contract with other countries, or is the procurement going through a middleman or the private sector?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I know you want some clear and accurate answers, so again I would encourage you to connect to PSPC for all the good information you're seeking, and I would be able to support you in that.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Minister, this question is on PPE for the armed forces. We've been asking the armed forces to assist, especially in Quebec in the Laval area and others. How are we making sure that our armed forces are getting the protection they need to be able to help in this hard time?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: We always needs to be reminded of the importance of protecting our armed forces, especially in light of what they're currently doing in Ontario and Quebec. Again I would be happy to help engage you with Minister Sajjan, who is very mindful of that and could provide details on how he does that.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: In your opening remarks, you mentioned 7.5 million applications to CERB for \$14 billion in assistance. Is that on a monthly basis?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: No, this is a cumulative number since March 15.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: If we take the \$14 billion and divide it by 7.5, that's less than \$2,000. Is that correct?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: In this case you would need to seek guidance from Minister Qualtrough and Minister Lebouthillier. They would explain to you—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: That's in your speech, Minister.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Yes, we know the figure, which I mentioned for your knowledge this morning. It is 7.5 million people, for a total of 10.5 or 10.7 applications, which adds up to a number of billions of dollars, the details of which I would be happy to try to solicit from other ministers—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: I think it's fair to ask that question, because it was in your opening remarks.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair? Do I have another minute?

The Chair: No. You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: As my final question, you mentioned unclassified work in your speech. How do you define “unclassified work”?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: At the federal level, we have different levels of classifications. They range from unclassified to very secret levels. Each of these levels is managed through directives that the Treasury Board Secretariat provides, and these directives are implemented by the different departments and agencies.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, I'm going to excuse the minister and his officials, with our thanks. I know you have an appointment at 12 noon, Minister. We thank you for your appearance here today, and we again thank all of your officials.

Colleagues, we will suspend for just a couple of minutes while we prepare our next slate of witnesses.

We are suspended.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: Colleagues, I'm calling this meeting to order. We are reconvened.

For the benefit of those witnesses who have joined us, I'd like to make a couple of comments to assist you in your presentations.

Before speaking, make sure you are recognized by the chair.

When you are ready to speak, you can either click on the “unmute” button or press on the space bar if you're using a desktop computer. When you release the space bar, you will automatically go back to mute.

When you're speaking, please speak slowly and clearly for the benefit of our interpreters.

I'd also like to explain some of the guidelines regarding the interpretation. If you are speaking in French, please go to the French channel. If you wish to make your comments and remarks in English, please make sure you're on the English channel. If you are going to be switching from one language to the other, please pause briefly before going to the second language to allow our interpreters to catch up with you. If a question is asked of you in one language, I would ask that you give the response in the appropriate and corresponding language.

I understand we have four presentations. We will go immediately to them, but I would remind colleagues that we must adjourn at 1 p.m. sharp, because our technicians need time to start setting up for the next meeting, which will start approximately an hour after ours.

With that, I'm not sure of the order of speaking, but I have representatives from the Canada Employment and Immigration Union, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, Service Employees International Union Healthcare and the Union of Taxation Employees.

First up, I have Mr. Bourque.

• (1205)

Mr. Eddy Bourque (National President, Canada Employment and Immigration Union): Dear members of the standing committee, as national president of the Canada Employment and Immigration Union, please allow me to begin by thanking you for the time to speak on behalf of our 20,000-plus members from Service Canada, IRCC and IRB. It is our members who work to serve the public and ensure the delivery of key government services every day, such as old age security, CPP, employment insurance, as well as processing applications for citizenship, permanent residency and refugee status. It is our members who have been responsible for the enormous task of responding to the initial influx of EI claims and inquiries, and adjusting quickly to the changes in program delivery across our three departments at a crucial time.

It is worth noting that over 70% of our CEIU members are women. Many are single mothers, and many are among the lowest income earners within the public service. They are disproportionately responsible for child care and domestic labour while also being on the front lines of the pandemic, physically and virtually. They have been working across Canada in various offices and call centres where they serve the public and ensure the delivery of key government services and initiatives every day. Needless to say, our members have gone above and beyond in an unprecedented fashion while being heavily impacted by this pandemic.

As we focus on Mental Health Week, we must highlight the importance of providing a safe and healthy workplace for all. As the surge in EI claims placed unprecedented pressure on our members at Service Canada, the number of incidents of verbal abuse and physical violence increased drastically. Our members deserve safe and healthy workplaces and fair working conditions.

Our members fear for their safety and fear being vectors of transmission for their loved ones or also for anyone accessing in-person service centres. While closing the centres has postponed the urgency of the matter, it is critical that personal protective equipment is available and that safety measures are upheld by management. There were many reports of managers coercing members to continue to work in unsafe conditions. While the response from the employer was tepid to past requests for plexiglass barriers and security presence, the pandemic underscores the importance of these measures to protect against the risks of the pandemic and also to reduce the risk of physical violence.

In call centres, the downtime between calls is inadequate especially when calls involve verbal abuse or other triggering matters, and the emphasis on limiting call time often leads to frustrated Canadians calling back with new problems. It's time to provide more adequate training and support to call centre staff, allow appropriate downtime between calls and place an emphasis on successful resolution of calls rather than rushing through the queue.

Overcrowded offices, bedbugs, bat-ridden buildings and outdated telework policies conspire to create a toxic environment where members working in close proximity become vectors of transmission as their own health deteriorates. The alternative of working off the kitchen table for months on end highlights the need for a modern, humane and sustainable approach to office space use and teleworking within the public service that is consistent with promoting

mental health, reducing medium- and long-term health risks and reducing the risk of spreading the virus.

Members are now reporting that they are being pressured to return to unsafe working conditions when what they need is empathy and support from management to do their jobs. The mental health impacts of the pandemic present an opportunity for our government to lead the way through compassionate, safe and humane approaches to management that are conducive to good mental health outcomes and good service to Canadians.

Just before the pandemic, our members rallied to mark four years of continued service through the Phoenix nightmares. Many are still doing their jobs in the middle of this pandemic while still sorting pay issues and continuing to show up and get the job done.

CEIU is proud of the work done by our members every day, but especially the tremendous work accomplished in processing a record-breaking volume of activity and delivering critical government supports to Canadians in need.

• (1210)

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that sweeping changes across the public service are possible. Telework works, and the barriers we thought existed can be overcome. Health and safety at work is a critical public health issue, mental health awareness is a success factor in delivering quality services to Canadians and communications between the union and management are critical for everyone's safety, especially during a pandemic.

We hope that the federal government will remember the incredible dedication and commitment our members have shown throughout the pandemic and every day, and we look forward to talking about it further at the bargaining table.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bourque.

We'll now go to Mr. Aylward, representing the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Mr. Aylward, please present your opening statement, hopefully in six minutes or less.

Mr. Chris Aylward (National President, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, and I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to participate today.

I would like to start by commending the federal government for its rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our 140,000 members in the federal public service are proud to be a major part of this response and proud of their contribution in this very difficult time. Many are on the front lines battling the virus and delivering emergency financial support to millions of Canadians.

The government has been in unprecedented regular communication with our union as the pandemic has unfolded, and we are encouraged by the spirit of co-operation. It has allowed us to facilitate significant changes across the public service in order to help Canadians but also to support the tens of thousands of public service workers who have had their work and personal lives upended.

Our members at Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada have helped process literally millions of applications for financial assistance for individuals and businesses and are continuing to do so every day. Border service officers deal with potentially infected travellers daily, and food inspectors are in grave danger at meat-packing plants that have been overrun with COVID-19. Our members in our federal corrections institutions face similar threats, and thousands have stepped forward to do completely new jobs whenever there has been a need to support the government's relief efforts. They have done so around the clock when needed, with their children by their side, with family members to care for and with the constant stress of changes that the virus has brought to the daily lives of each of us.

These are just a few of the examples of how our members are putting Canadians first during this crisis, but as time passes, their employer's words of gratitude are beginning to ring hollow. That's because 140,000 of these PSAC members have been working without a new contract for years, and many have been waiting up to four years. There is no reason for this continued delay.

Elsewhere in Canada, the need to provide stability to the public service and fair compensation to public service workers during this pandemic has been recognized. The Government of Ontario bargained and settled with its teachers' unions in the first weeks of this crisis, and the Quebec government is at the bargaining table with unions representing over 500,000 public sector workers. Canada Post, a large federal employer, reached a tentative agreement with Public Service Alliance of Canada members just weeks ago.

The government implemented massive changes at lightning speed across the public service with the help of our members, yet it has refused to move forward on the comparably modest task of settling a round of bargaining. PSAC members represent 50% of the federal workforce, and these are the same workers who continue to experience four years of Phoenix pay nightmares and have yet to be compensated for their hardships.

Canadians need a stable public service that is well supported during this difficult time, and our members certainly deserve the right to a basic, fair collective agreement. As part of their response to COVID-19, we are urging the federal government to get their negotiators back to the table with a mandate to reach a fair settlement for the benefit of PSAC members and all Canadians.

On a separate matter, the government must continue to make the health and safety of federal public service workers a top priority.

Despite some exceptions that we continue to work through, we acknowledge that the federal government has worked hard to keep the vast majority of our members safe during this pandemic. Moving forward, whether on the front lines or in offices, our members need to know that protective measures and training will be in place and that personal protective equipment will be in stock and available. In addition, working with provinces to speed up testing and contact tracing is very important for our members in addressing any future outbreaks at their work sites.

The government has done a commendable job at supporting workplace mental health in the federal public service in these extraordinary times. As the emotional and physical strain of the pandemic continues to grow, this should remain a top priority for the government.

More broadly, PSAC is pleased that the government has responded to the crisis with progressive measures to support Canadians. Actions such as expanding access to employment insurance; the CERB; supports for students, parents, seniors; women's shelters; food banks; and emergency housing have all been welcomed and much needed.

- (1215)

Many of PSAC's non-federal government members, such as the almost 30,000 workers we represent in universities, have been hit hard by closures and have been helped by the government's financial support.

Lastly, our union urges the government and all parliamentarians to look carefully and optimistically at the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has created enormous hardship, suffering and tragic loss for so many, but it has also created an opportunity for big change. The horrific living and working conditions in the long-term care sector have been exposed, as have other dangerous consequences of decades of government cuts, low wages and corporate greed. People are more conscious of their own vulnerabilities and understand better the importance of having robust social support systems in place and the need for strong public services.

There is a consensus that going back to the way things used to be is not an option. The government has made important decisions to support Canadians, decisions that have required significant funding. The impact of the pandemic is severe, and a lasting recovery will take time. The federal government's expenditures are an investment in Canadians and in the future of this country.

What this pandemic has shown is that public services are unique and indispensable. We cannot return to an austerity mentality and cutbacks to social services and programs. Instead—

The Chair: Mr. Aylward, thank you. I'm going to have to cut you off there. Unfortunately, we have very limited time to get all of the questions in.

We will now go to the representatives from the Service Employees International Union Healthcare.

Madam Stewart, you have six minutes or less, please.

Ms. Sharleen Stewart (President, Service Employees International Union Healthcare): Thank you. Good afternoon.

Members of the committee, thank you for hearing from me today. More importantly, thank you for taking the opportunity to hear from SEIU.

We represent over two million members across the United States, Puerto Rico and Canada. I proudly serve as international vice-president of our union and as president of SEIU Healthcare, which represents over 60,000 front-line health care workers in the province of Ontario.

Many of these members are employed in the long-term care facilities that have become an epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. The crushing impact on these homes, their staff and the residents they care for cannot be overstated. Simply put, our system of care has failed.

We knew two things about this virus early on: one, that this was severely contagious; and two, that the elderly were especially susceptible to illness and death. You would think that subnational governments responsible for congregate care settings of the elderly would immediately recognize the risk of inaction around the long-term care sector. But provinces like Ontario overlooked the privately run long-term care sector and the inherent vulnerabilities that underpin those facilities.

Please note that I want to highlight the role of provincial governments only to stimulate discussion about what role the federal government could have in the future as we overhaul the long-term care sectors across Canada.

In black and white, the data tells us that these outbreaks and the resulting death toll seem to be concentrated in for-profit facilities. Deaths in for-profit homes are 50% higher than in non-profit homes. The rate of death is nearly double in for-profit homes.

Behind each COVID-19 number is a tragic story. Christine Mandegarian, Arlene Reid, Sharon Roberts: each a woman, each in her 50s, each a person of colour and each a personal support worker. If you are now willing to recognize them as health care heroes, then I submit to you that it will be an injustice to the families in mourning if we do not reveal the failings of our system.

First, Canada must maintain an ongoing supply of personal protective equipment. This is our number one concern. There is a chorus of cries from our nurses, personal support workers, dietary aides and cleaners. You name the job classification; they will tell you that there is rationing of PPE. Workers who should have been supplied much earlier continue to be left without the appropriate masks, shields and gowns, leaving them to wear garbage bags instead.

Second, out of concern for public health, employment in long-term care facilities should require full-time jobs with such benefits

as paid sick time and a pension. Then workers would not be labelled as “wrongdoing pollinators” and be restricted to only one facility, as if they had done something wrong other than seek a living wage paycheque.

Third, mandate higher staffing levels to improve quality of care for residents and seniors. Providing higher levels of front-line staff would ensure that we have the human resources available to bathe, change, feed and care for our elderly, not just during a pandemic but always.

The failings we experience today were made worse because of the competing self-interest at the core of for-profit long-term care corporations—namely, the fiduciary duty to their shareholders. The failed experiment of for-profit operators in our long-term care system must come to an end.

Members of the committee, whatever form an overhaul might take, the federal government can and should play a role in supporting these precariously employed women who deliver our care. We are calling on the federal government to strengthen the retirement security of precariously employed, low- to modestly paid care workers without access to workplace pensions. After a career of serving our communities, they deserve to retire with the economic dignity they have earned. Without the support, the home care and long-term care sectors will leave behind workers incentivized to seek employment in other parts of our health care system that provide a more secure retirement.

• (1220)

Before I end, I want to point out the big elephant in the room. Each member of this committee, and your colleagues in Parliament and across government, are going to be heavily lobbied by massive for-profit long-term care corporations and their industry associations.

Are companies like Chartwell, Revera, Sienna and Extencare going to lobby for higher standards for senior care with mandated staff-to-resident ratios, for transparency into transfer payment agreements for government contracts, or for full-time jobs for the women who deliver the care? Instead they will push to reduce regulations or for the government to pay for expenses the company itself should be paying.

When the lobbyists of the for-profit providers knock on your door, I want you to remember all those who have died and ask yourselves whose side you will be on: the side of shareholders profiting from our care system, or the side of the elderly and the women who care for them, too many of whom we have already lost.

Thank you.

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

We will now go to our last intervention, representing the Union of Taxation Employees, Monsieur Brière.

You have six minutes or less, please, sir.

Mr. Marc Brière (National President, Union of Taxation Employees): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My opening remarks will be in both official languages. I will do my very best to go from one language to the other and to stay within the six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I, too, would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in this forum today.

The Union of Taxation Employees, commonly known as UTE, is a component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada and represents some 28,000 employees at the Canada Revenue Agency.

[*English*]

I want to start by extending my compliments to the federal government, especially the Canada Revenue Agency, for stepping up in these difficult times due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the Union of Taxation Employees and the Canada Revenue Agency have enjoyed, for the most part, a history of meaningful, respectful and collaborative consultations, the COVID-19 crisis called for a new era of collaboration, innovation and timely decision-making. During this time UTE set aside our difficulties and polarization around the collective bargaining process in an effort to deliver the government's mandate and promises to Canadians, and we called upon our members to step up to do what was needed in these trying times.

● (1225)

I am pleased so far with the co-operation, which has allowed us to agree on key issues, such as leave for our members who cannot work due to the pandemic and also the postponing of any set guidelines in regard to staffing or grievance issues.

It is important for me to mention the commitment and the exemplary work done by our members, who have been assigned new tasks and additional programs like no other department in the federal government. They work evening shifts and weekends from their homes, juggling work with their family obligations and child care obligations as well.

UTE members have shown unwavering dedication and commitment to their work as they rapidly implement the government's various financial support measures for the public during the pandemic, such as the massive Canada emergency response benefit, the wage subsidy, the student benefit and extensions to the GST credit and the Canada child benefit, all of this without forgetting that they must continue to process the benefits that are normally remitted to the public, as well as the tax returns for individuals and corporations during this tax season.

When COVID-19 hit, UTE was in the middle of conducting strike votes in an effort to engage the CRA in returning to the bargaining table to negotiate a fair and reasonable collective agreement for our members and to take job action if necessary to achieve an agreement. In light of the crisis, the PSAC UTE decided to suspend the strike votes in an effort to do our part to assist in controlling the spread of the virus and, more importantly, to assist the CRA and the Canadian government in their efforts to provide economic benefits to those Canadians who are greatly in need at this time.

Initially, the CRA scrambled to outfit some critical workers with equipment so they could work from home. At the same time, other large numbers of critical employees were required to physically report to the workplace to provide service to taxpayers. Through collaborative efforts between the CRA and UTE, we were able to reduce the number of employees required to be physically at the workplace and to increase the number of employees able to telework to meet the ever-changing new and efficient demands for the delivery of economic benefits and services to Canadians.

When the CERB was implemented, CRA needed to expand its capacity to help Canadians with the process of applying for the new benefit. CRA put out the call to its non-essential employees, employees who were at home, asking them if they would volunteer to work the phones, answering questions from applicants and providing other services, notwithstanding that these functions were not part of their work descriptions and were outside their normal hours of work. CRA's employees responded loudly and proudly, with over 7,500 volunteers stepping forward, the vast majority of whom are UTE members.

These volunteers agreed to work long hours and on weekends answering questions and processing applications from Canadians, some four million of whom have applied for support since the onset of the pandemic. The agency's virtual call centre hours run to 11 p.m. to ensure service is accessible from coast to coast, in contrast with the normal extended hours to 9 p.m. offered during the regular tax-filing season.

Our members have also been asked to complete verifications for eligibility—and this requirement will continue as time goes on—in order to ensure compliance and safeguard the country's economic interests. Other members are working from tax centres, supporting the government's boost to the GST/HST credit and the Canada child benefit in response to the pandemic.

UTE lauds the government with respect to its initiatives to safeguard the economic interests of Canadians, and we are proud to be a contributing and critical component of the delivery of these initiatives. At the outset, and with the ever-increasing levels of service and effort required to deliver these benefits, we knew that this would be a daunting task, but at the same time, we had confidence that our members would accept the challenge and deliver the necessary services with the professionalism, dedication, loyalty and integrity that they have always shown.

[Translation]

I reiterate that UTE members are working hard despite the fact that they have not had a wage increase since November 2015 and are working under a collective agreement that expired on November 1, 2016.

In addition, term employees, many of whom have worked loyally for the CRA for many years, are uncertain about their future and are treated very differently than the rest of the public service in terms of entitlement to indeterminate employment.

We respectfully request that the federal government follow the lead of provincial and municipal governments, which moved quickly to settle contract negotiations with their employees and employee unions during the pandemic.

• (1230)

[English]

In closing, I want to thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to address this committee. I remain available to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

Colleagues, as I mentioned at the outset of my remarks before this meeting started, I need about five minutes at the end of this meeting to discuss some witnesses that we'll be bringing in post May 15, so we will have time for one complete round of six-minute interventions.

We will start with, Mr. Aboultaif.

Six minutes, please, sir.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I think it's me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Well, that's a little change from what I have on my list, but Mr. McCauley, go right ahead.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

Witnesses, thanks for your comments.

Mr. Brière, let me start with you. First of all, thanks very much for your very upbeat and positive report on what your workers are doing. It's inspiring to hear that message, as opposed to a constant attack and a self-centred focus.

Do you know how many of your workers are actually working from home and how many are in the office? The reason I ask is that a lot of work is being done, especially around the CERB, which is great, but there are still a lot of outstanding tax issues with the CRA that we're hoping to get looked after for our constituents. We're told that it's going to wait. We understand that, 100%, but we're just trying to get an idea of how many are working on past cases and how many are still in the office with access to files.

As a follow-up question, what's going to be needed at your offices for us to move forward in a safe manner, such as space in the workplace and so on? I'd like to hear back from you.

Mr. Marc Brière: To answer your first question regarding the number of people working either on-site or remotely, there are about 2,500 employees at the CRA who are still working on site as

we speak, and there are, I would say, about 30,000 people working remotely.

The CRA has expanded its bandwidth greatly, and it's a bandwidth that's shared with the Canada Border Services Agency. We can have almost 40,000 people, the entire staff of the CRA, working remotely right now. The vast majority of these workers are critical workers. On site, they are all critical—2,500. There are also roughly 22,000 who are doing critical work from home, and over 8,000 who are doing non-critical but still important work.

To your question about what we are looking for to go back and resume the normal activities—if that ever happens—we are in discussions with CRA, and all the departments are looking at making resumption plans.

With the new reality, it looks like not everybody will be going back to work on site. There will be a portion of employees who will be able to go back on site, but we need to have physical distancing to work safely. It's harder in some locations like the big tax centres in Winnipeg, Jonquière, and Sudbury, with a massive office. I think you cannot ask 3,000 people to work in that kind of office while still keeping a safe distance.

It looks like a percentage of employees will go back to work, and some others will be working remotely. That seems to be the way of the future. That's what we envision. The CRA is looking into its resumption plan, but it's far from being ready right now, in my opinion.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks.

You mentioned “critical” and “non-critical”. Could you define for us what you term as “critical workers”, the 2,500 who are physically still in the offices?

Mr. Marc Brière: There are 22,000 critical workers at home and 2,500 in the office. They're all doing critical work. The difference is that those working on site are not able to work remotely, either because of the equipment or because some of the jobs have to be done on site, like receiving the mail and opening up the paper copies of tax returns, for example.

Anything that has to do with processing the tax returns, the Canada emergency wage subsidy, the CERB, all those programs from the government are critical to the government and to the population. That's what we mean by “critical”, on top of the regular tax work processing the T1s and T2s for corporate and individual tax returns so that people can get their reimbursement on time if they are waiting for one.

• (1235)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Great. Thanks very much, Mr. Brière.

Mr. Bourque, I'll pose the same question to you. What will it take in your view to have a safe return to the offices for your workers? Are you in the same situation as the CRA, where we have these large plants of 2,000 or 3,000 people in a call centre where it's just not practical?

Mr. Eddy Bourque: Yes, for us it's the same thing. One of our biggest concerns is around reopening the in-person services. We've been pushing for plexiglass and security at the front end, and making sure that there's physical spacing for clients as well.

Right now we do have a lot of our members working from home. I think between 60% and 70% of staff are working from home, for those who can. As we know, they've been provided with a laptop, a headset and a phone but no ergonomics besides that, which is a concern. Yes, it can be done in the short term, but working long term from home without the proper equipment and setting is going to be hard on the employees.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Quickly, Mr. Bourque, you mentioned that you have some of the lowest-paid workers in the public service. What would it be on an annual basis?

Mr. Eddy Bourque: I would say between \$40,000 and \$55,000.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thanks very much for your time.

The Chair: Mr. Kusmierczyk, you have six minutes.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I'll be splitting my time with my colleague MP Fergus.

Thank you very much, Mr. Brière, for your testimony.

There was a terrific article in Maclean's magazine this week. The title is "Pulling off a bureaucratic miracle: How the CERB got done". It's an excellent article, and I highly recommend everyone have a read of that. It talks about the fact that when the call went out to the CRA folks to get folks to work the phones to help people process their payments, their applications and whatnot, 7,500 folks from your outfit raised their hands and volunteered—tremendous work.

I know the UTE folks have been asked to work, as the article states, seven days a week, including an extra five hours on weekdays and a combined 15 hours on weekends, which amounts to about 80-hour workweeks.

I just want to read one excerpt from the article, which I think is important. It highlights the tremendous, heroic work of UTE folks:

Julian Nicholson, a CRA resource officer in Hamilton, Ont., helps colleagues navigate the CERB and, in spare moments, talks directly with taxpayers. He works 12-hour weekdays, as well as a shorter shift on Saturdays. Nicholson says in early April, he once took 185 calls in a single day. "This has been our moment," he says.

Knowing the tremendous work the folks here have put forward, how have they managed to strike a work-life balance, with the tremendous pressure they've been under in the last few weeks?

Mr. Marc Brière: Thanks for your nice words about our members.

Obviously, those who are processing all the benefits and answering questions from millions of Canadians have been working around the clock. The people working 75 to 80 hours a week obviously have a very hard time balancing their work and personal lives. The job had to be done. The call was made, and we had to deliver. People at CRA are used to processing a high volume of transactions, but this was unprecedented, so it's not easy.

I am always trying to be positive in talking to the media and to the public, but obviously—I have notes here from my different regions—there is a lot of anxiety. Some people are exhausted. Some people are starting to ask for vacation or to slow down a little bit and have somebody else helping out. It depends on every individual, but to say that it is easy would be lying. It's not easy. We are processing millions of transactions in record time, so it's difficult, but people are keeping good spirits.

If you noticed, I mentioned in my remarks that the challenge, the cloud over our heads is not having a contract. Imagine, we are doing this without having a contract for three and a half years. People are finding that unacceptable. We are trying to get back to the table, but right now we're holding on. Obviously, we'll need to follow up closely for the mental health of our members.

It's a challenge for many people at Service Canada also, but at CRA the load is pretty heavy. We're hanging on, but we are following up closely. So far it's going okay, and if people have some anxiety and difficulty, we're helping them out in collaboration with the employer.

• (1240)

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you very much, Mr. Brière, and please do pass along our sincerest thanks to all of your members for their tremendous work.

I will yield the rest of my time to MP Fergus.

Mr. Marc Brière: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Fergus, you have about two minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses with us today and I tip my hat to them and to their union members, who have done an outstanding job helping Canadians. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the work of members of Mr. Aylward's and Mr. Brière's unions.

Ms. Stewart, my question is for you because you are the only one who brought it up. Do you think we should break the numbers down or collect data to see if there is a race-based impact on long-term care facility employees?

[English]

Ms. Sharleen Stewart: Yes. Thank you very much for the question. It's an extremely important one.

The statistics already show that the majority of senior care workers in home care and long-term retirement homes are marginalized people. They are predominantly women and, of course, women of colour.

In the inquiry that we're requesting from the Ontario government, that is absolutely a question that we have on the line. All three of the members...actually, all six now in Ontario have been men and women of colour. That's in the workforce, but we're also asking in the communities to take an examination of that. I believe it's tied to a number of things, predominantly income and the fact that so many of these workers have to work in multiple jobs so they're in the community a lot and on public transportation. They come in contact with very many clients and residents, so that just adds to the potential of spreading the viruses.

Absolutely, I think that's an important examination we all have to look into.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Madam Vignola.

[Translation]

Mrs. Vignola, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bourque, you mentioned ergonomic issues related to working at home because a number of people are working at the kitchen table.

Have you received a lot of calls regarding the onset of pain over these six weeks of telework? If so, do your members have access to occupational therapists or advice on workplace ergonomics?

Mr. Eddy Bourque: As you mentioned, it has already been six weeks since teleworking began. More and more of our members are contacting us to say that it is not working. Currently, the employer is letting them pick up and bring home their ergonomic chairs or keyboards. However, the problem is that the kitchen table is not at the same recommended height as their desk at work.

Certainly, as time goes on, there will be more and more cases.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: It is possible that more and more people may decide to work from home for security and other reasons. If this is the case, has the employer shown any openness to compensating employees or setting up part of their living environment so that they can work safely?

Mr. Eddy Bourque: We have not had these discussions yet, because we are only starting to see cases, but the discussions will definitely come.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: All right, thank you, Mr. Bourque.

Ms. Stewart, since the early 1990s, the federal government has been gradually backing out of health transfers to Quebec and the other provinces.

In your opinion, what impact has this withdrawal had on the current situation for your members and users of the healthcare system?

• (1245)

[English]

Ms. Sharleen Stewart: Thank you. That's a great question as well.

There's definitely something broken in the system. We all know that front-line health care is managed and delivered by the provinces, but I think there is a role for government to play, to oversee what the governments are doing on the front line. Senior care is an issue for federal, provincial and municipal governments—the accountability and regulations and what the provinces do with that money, especially for the for-profits.

All of the homes, for-profit and not-for-profit, get the same money through envelopes. As I said, the for-profits are accountable to shareholders, so where do those dollars come from? Then when the transfers are going through, there need to be regulations and accountability taken over that.

I think the federal government needs to take a look and find the answers. I'm not sure exactly what they might be, but I think there's a role here for the federal government to oversee some of what's going on in the provinces.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: The question was not whether the federal government has to enter into provincial jurisdiction. I want to know whether reducing transfers to the provinces by up to 22% since the 1990s has had a significant impact on the quality of working conditions and on the users' living conditions.

What do you think would happen if health transfers went back up to 50%, where they should be?

[English]

Ms. Sharleen Stewart: An increase in money to the front line would definitely help secure the full-time employment of workers who need to be there. We need to address staffing levels in those homes, so any resources that can be put back in by the federal government would absolutely make a huge impact on the outcome.

Again, similar to what the federal government has done through this pandemic in adding financial support, which has been great, there need to be regulations and oversight regarding those transfers, always. More money is always welcome, but it should go to the right places: directly to the front line and into the levels of care.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Ms. Stewart.

Mr. Chair, I am giving the rest of my time to my colleague Xavier Barsalou-Duval. How much time do I have left?

[English]

The Chair: You have approximately one minute.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): My question is for those who work in the public service, particularly for the Canada Revenue Agency.

Mr. Brière, you told us earlier that it is quite a struggle to succeed in meeting the demand and answering all the questions the public is asking, with the many hours of overtime that it requires. I feel that clearly shows that you are understaffed. Have you considered adding more staff to meet the demand? Have you considered your options? What was the employer's response to these needs?

[English]

The Chair: Please give a very brief answer, if possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Brière: With the exceptional workload we have right now, we definitely need more people. We also had to adjust quite rapidly. So the agency asked non-essential employees who are at home and not working to get involved and help the call centre agents to answer questions. Approximately 7,500 people came forward and were trained to assist the 2,500 permanent employees in our call centres, which helped us cope with the situation.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank, on behalf of our committee, all of the witnesses who appeared here today. Your comments and observations were both insightful and informative. We thank you for your participation.

Colleagues, I will excuse the witnesses now—

Mr. Matthew Green: Do I not get time? You said you needed five minutes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Green. That's completely my error.

Mr. Matthew Green: That's okay. You may have forgotten, but I certainly did not.

The Chair: You have not just five minutes, sir, but six minutes.

Mr. Matthew Green: I appreciate the time. I'll claim it all.

My comments will be directed to Ms. Sharleen Stewart.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the families of Christine Mandegarian, Arlene Reid and Sharon Roberts, as well as the untold number of other workers who have succumbed fatally to COVID on the front lines of health care. It could be argued, of course, that LTC is solely within the provincial jurisdiction, but given the scale of the tragedy and the magnitude of the loss within LTC, I think taking that line would be gravely irresponsible.

I want to cite something from investigative journalist Nora Loreto. She identified, through her research, that of the 4,408 Canadians who have died from COVID-19, 3,790 were in residential care. That's 85.9% of the deaths.

In previous questions, we heard about the ongoing inquiry into Ontario's LTC homes. Back in 2018, CBC reporter John Lancaster stated that he was shocked at how many of these facilities spend

less per capita on feeding their residents than our prisons do on feeding their inmates. Of course, you referenced Pete Seeger's famous line, "Which side are you on?"

I'd like to talk about that and start there. Just how big is a company like Chartwell?

● (1250)

Ms. Sharleen Stewart: Chartwell is a big company. It's a North American-wide company. In Canada it is definitely one of the for-profit homes. I can share some numbers with you. Chartwell is valued at over \$2 billion a year, and last year it paid out almost \$130 million in dividends to shareholders.

These are nursing homes that are supposed to be.... Well, the public sees them as being not-for-profit because, of course, money comes from the public purse. The same amount of money goes to not-for-profits as goes to for-profits, so they are cutting money from the public envelope somewhere. I can tell you exactly where it is. You see it. It's on the front line. It's in the care for those seniors.

Not providing full-time work for personal support workers causes them to have one, two or three jobs. As to the hours of care, residents are getting, on average, about 1.9 to 2.25 hours of care per day. We are calling for it to be at least a minimum of four hours a day.

You have companies like Extendicare, which receives over \$263 million a year in revenue from the Ontario government, and I can tell you, that money is not going to the front line. You can see it through this pandemic. The numbers are astounding. Notice the difference between deaths and infections in not-for-profit homes versus for-profit homes.

We need to do better, and that's what we're calling for in the inquiry. We're looking across the country to do the same thing.

Mr. Matthew Green: It's certainly not lost on me that these privatizations started under Mike Harris. He is now, of course, the chair of the board there at Chartwell.

We've heard you reference some other lobbying efforts that might be coming down the pike. I believe there is a call for extended EI instead of paid sick days. Why would that be an important thing for these big multi-billion dollar corporations to lobby for rather than having paid sick days for their workers?

Ms. Sharleen Stewart: It's because it's all in their best interests. Again, as I say, the lobbying is for their shareholders and certainly not for the seniors who are living in their homes in their dying years, or for those caregivers who can't seam together full-time work. Paid sick days are a dream. We did have it in Ontario, and then the government took it away, which was unfortunate.

We hear the chief medical officer saying that we have to stay away when we're sick. These low-wage earners cannot afford to do that. Again, the companies are putting away profits to that degree to the shareholders. A company like Revera is owned by the Canada Pension Plan. I think we need to start there. That's a federal issue. Take a look at that.

Mr. Matthew Green: Yes. Essentially, Bill Morneau can call them as the sole shareholder, tell them that he's not satisfied and have that company start there.

I have to say that if people are paying attention to this, to where the concentration is for lost seniors' lives, our most precarious people in long-term care, this is not only an outrage, but a national scandal.

We know that in terms of an inquiry, provincially this is being led in Ontario by your union, SEIU Healthcare. What can we do federally to provide a national inquiry or something of the sort to ensure that as we come into a second wave, we aren't leaving our most vulnerable people to be sacrificed once again?

• (1255)

Ms. Sharleen Stewart: Absolutely, and as I said in my opening statement, we have to be ready for the next wave and to make sure that there's proper personal protective equipment in these homes. We must have infection control measures. When we try to talk to these corporations, they're not talking to us. We should not see personal support workers wearing garbage bags to protect themselves because multinationals like Chartwell are not providing them with the proper personal protective equipment.

The inquiry is a pre-pandemic and post-pandemic one. We have to do better for the seniors of our country. They put a lot into our society. They deserve respect and dignity at the end of their lives.

Mr. Matthew Green: I couldn't agree more.

The last question is for PSAC.

The Treasury Board is developing a back-to-work plan for reintegration. Have you been contacted and consulted, and are you satisfied with it?

Mr. Chris Aylward: Thank you, Mr. Green, for the question.

The Chair: Give a very brief answer if you could, Mr. Aylward.

Mr. Chris Aylward: We have just started talks with the Treasury Board regarding a reintegration into the workplace. We have not seen the plan, but Treasury Board has committed that we will see it in the coming days. We look forward to consulting with Treasury Board on the reintegration into the workplace.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you for the time, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, sir, and my apologies once again for temporarily forgetting that you had six minutes left for an intervention.

Once again, thank you to all of our witnesses. It was a pleasure listening to your testimony. You are excused.

Colleagues, we will now take the remaining time, the remaining four minutes that we have before we have to adjourn, to talk a bit about witnesses following May 15. The committee did invite the witnesses listed on meetings eight and nine of the work plan that was dated May 8 of this year. The subjects of these meetings are the distribution of medical supplies and cybersecurity.

Raphaëlle, perhaps I'll turn it over to you for a more in-depth explanation of some of the witnesses that we have coming forward post-May 15.

Ms. Raphaëlle Deraspe (Committee Researcher): Yes, certainly, Mr. Chair.

The witnesses that we suggest from the work plan are, on the distribution of medical supplies, the Minister of Health, the president and chief executive officer of Canada Post, the vice-president of Amazon Canada and the president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

As for the ninth meeting on cybersecurity, the proposed witnesses are the Minister of Digital Government, the president of Shared Services Canada and the chief technology officer of Shared Services Canada, as well as the director general. Also, we have officials from the Communications Security Establishment and, finally, a witness that we had today, Mr. Bilodeau, the acting chief information officer.

The Chair: Thank you, Raphaëlle.

Colleagues, one other thing I should point out to you is that Monday, May 18 is Victoria Day. That doesn't mean we cannot meet virtually on that day. I believe the whips of all four parties are communicating with members to see whether or not they would like to have a meeting on that date, to cancel the meeting outright or to reschedule the meeting for sometime later in the week.

Could I get some comments from committee members?

Mr. Green, I see you have your hand up. Let's go to you first.

Mr. Matthew Green: I don't know what it's like federally, but what are the implications for our staff? I want to be considerate about our staff having that day off or whatever would be granted to them in a typical scenario.

The Chair: I'll ask Paul if he has more information.

That's a good question. I assume, Matthew, it would be all the staff who would work that day, should we have a meeting, would be subject to the normal holiday time regulations. They would get time and a half probably, perhaps double time. I believe it is a statutory holiday.

Paul, am I right or am I wrong?

• (1300)

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Paul Cardegna): Mr. Chair, you are right. It most certainly is a staff holiday. It's a statutory holiday. I don't know the exact provisions for everyone involved under their terms and conditions of employment.

I'm sure the whips are involved and are aware it is a statutory holiday. They are the ones responsible for setting the schedule, because they are balancing the resources among all the committees, including of course, the special committee on COVID. As a result, if the committee has preferences for which days it should meet, it would be more efficient for the members to talk to their whips directly because the whips are setting the schedule. We don't know what the schedule for the week of May 18 will be yet.

The analysts and I suggest that we isolate for the two meetings following May 15 the witnesses that Raphaëlle just read from the work plan that was distributed yesterday.

The Chair: Thank you, Paul.

Colleagues, the normal practice has been that the whips announce the next week's meetings one week in advance, so we have not yet heard from the whips. Paul is quite correct. Our representative from the whip's office has contacted me. I'm not sure, Kelly or Ziad, if you have been contacted, but probably the best route is to communicate through your whips. I assume we will find out next week what the meeting schedule will be for the week of May 18.

I haven't heard anything yet, and I'm not sure if any other member of this committee has heard from their whips.

Paul, go ahead.

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, the suggestion that the analysts and I are putting forward is that we identify which witnesses—and again Raphaëlle made the recommendation of those she read off who are isolated for our meetings eight and nine of yesterday's work plan—and that we contact them for the two meetings following May 15. I can't put down specific dates, but if the committee is interested in that proposal, we can put it to them for a decision.

The Chair: Thank you, Paul.

Are there comments, anyone?

Kelly Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I suggest that we contact our whips as soon as possible to voice our opinions as to whether or not we should be meeting on a statutory holiday. I don't know if we need to contact you, Tom, as a Conservative member, so you can communicate what we would prefer and then the others will do the same.

I don't think it's necessary for us to ask staff to come in on a stat holiday to do this work. We could potentially catch up in the following weeks, but I would leave that for other colleagues to speak to.

The Chair: Again, colleagues, the whips are the ones who will be determining the schedule. I've expressed my preference. For what it's worth, I've suggested because it is a stat holiday that we cancel the meeting outright and reschedule it, rather than have it on

a stat holiday, but each of you, as was mentioned before, should get hold of your own whips and do it as quickly as possible.

Mr. McCauley, did you have a comment or question?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Yes. I have a comment.

We brought this up before about wanting our witnesses to table their remarks in advance rather than reading them. In today's meeting I think we took what felt like 40 minutes just having witness statements at the beginning, and the minister was going on and on, and flipping back from French to English. I'm wondering if, again, we can discuss, as a group, to agree that we're not going to take up our committee time listening to people read a written speech.

The second part is that I'm generally fine with postponing it. Maybe we can see if we can do it Tuesday morning before the virtual.... If not, we'll just move it back in the calendar.

The Chair: Kelly, thank you. We've already discussed it once, but I'll turn it over to our clerk first, before I go to Mr. Green, about the problems with appending statements and going directly to questions. Because we're meeting virtually that's really not an option.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I realize that, but there's nothing that says they have to be able to make a statement to begin.

The Clerk: There's nothing that obliges a witness to make an opening statement. However, our previous practice of taking an opening statement and appending it to the evidence unfortunately requires a motion of the committee to do so. The committee isn't empowered to entertain this motion, pursuant to the order adopted by the House, so we find ourselves in a unique situation.

Also, the speaking notes we got today for the witnesses in the second half we received anytime from last night to this morning. There was simply not enough time for us to translate them, to be able to distribute them to members ahead of time.

These are some of the reasons for having witnesses deliver their opening statements before the committee. For the broader public to hear the comments of the witnesses is one of the reasons we've been doing that. I do understand the frustration members are having. We are hoping that we can regulate the technical issues soon.

• (1305)

The Chair: Mr. Green, I think you had some comments.

Mr. Matthew Green: I did. Thank you.

I can appreciate members of the public who come in as experts and have their six minutes. What I'm having a difficult challenge with, though, is ministers who come in with a one-hour time limit, regurgitate what amounts to a press release, and then have their staff fumble around reanswering questions that have already been answered.

If I can share this with you, I don't ever want to have to publicly interject with staff or cut people off. I don't like being put in a situation of having to do that, recognizing as the fourth party that all this time that's been used up affects my round and that I'm going to get bumped out. We've even seen members of the governing party and other folks get bumped out because of the fumbling that's happening here. If there's a motion or some way we can forgo or perhaps post the opening statements, or if they can be put out in a media release, I'd be happy with that. On the record, I don't want to get frustrated with having to interject because I'm not getting my time.

The Chair: Thank you, Matthew.

Before I go to Kelly Block—and correct me if I'm wrong, Paul—I suppose that if ministers are appearing, we would be able to contact them prior to their appearance and let them know that the committee would appreciate it if they could go directly to questions and somehow have their statements available but not read into the record.

The Clerk: If we have their statements available, we could consider it as a brief and post it on the committee's website. Then you could ask the ministers to go directly to questions if you want. That is an option.

The Chair: We'll go to Kelly Block first.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Really quickly, Tom, I think that's an excellent suggestion. If we don't do that, then we should at least ask them to choose a language to give their statement in so that we don't have the fiasco we had today.

The Chair: As you know, that's why I interjected halfway through, Kelly, and asked if a question started *en français* to complete it, and the same thing in English, so we didn't have to worry about spending precious seconds trying to wait for the interpretation to catch up.

Colleagues, that takes us back to Raphaëlle's presentation. We have the list of witnesses. I've heard no one else suggest that we add or delete any of the witnesses suggested, so are we comfortable with going forward with the work plan and the witnesses who have been proposed?

Paul, do we need a recorded vote for this?

The Clerk: I think Madame Vignola would like to intervene, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Francis Drouin: I would too, after that.

The Chair: Yes, it's Julie first and then Francis.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'd like to make a suggestion.

Often, when time is short and we start another five-minute round, Mr. Green and I do not get a second turn. If there doesn't seem to be

enough time for everyone to have a turn, could we go to three minutes? That way, we could each have a little bit of time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, Madame Vignola, you're quite correct. The committee has the ability to set whatever time frame we want. I have arbitrarily done that on a few occasions and cut the times off from six to five to four minutes in an attempt to get as many questions in as possible.

I will take that under consideration, and going forward if it looks as though we're not going to be able to get two complete rounds or the third round in, I will propose that we cut down the time allotted to see if that meets the concurrence and the agreement of committee members.

Francis, I think we have you up next.

• (1310)

Mr. Francis Drouin: I just have a question with regard to one particular witness, and that's Amazon. I know we had all submitted our lists before, but there has been some clarity provided with regard to the role that Amazon is playing, and I would just ask if it's still the will of Mr. Green to propose that particular witness.

Mr. Matthew Green: It is absolutely, 100%.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Okay, so you want the same answer?

Mr. Matthew Green: No, I want them in front of our committee. That is what I want, Frank.

The Chair: Raphaëlle, having heard that, can I entrust you to try to make sure we incorporate a representative from Amazon to appear at the appropriate time?

Ms. Raphaëlle Deraspe: Yes, it is already included, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Are there any other questions or comments? We are running a little over time, and our technicians do have to leave to start setting up another meeting.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Just really quickly, when can we get the updated schedule?

The Chair: The schedule is already out for next week.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Sorry, Tom. I mean the updated witness list, not the meeting schedule.

The Clerk: If I may, Mr. Chair, we hope to publish a notice of meeting today. If not, we will publish one on the weekend.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thank you.

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, if it is the intention of the committee to adopt the proposal that was put forward by the analyst, this should be done by a recorded division.

Do you want me to proceed to that right now?

The Chair: Yes, please, Paul, if you wouldn't mind.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 10; nays 0)

Thank you, Paul, and thank you all.

I'll just give a brief goodbye. We'll see everyone again on Monday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., eastern time.

Thank you all. Have a very good weekend, and stay safe.

The meeting is adjourned.

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