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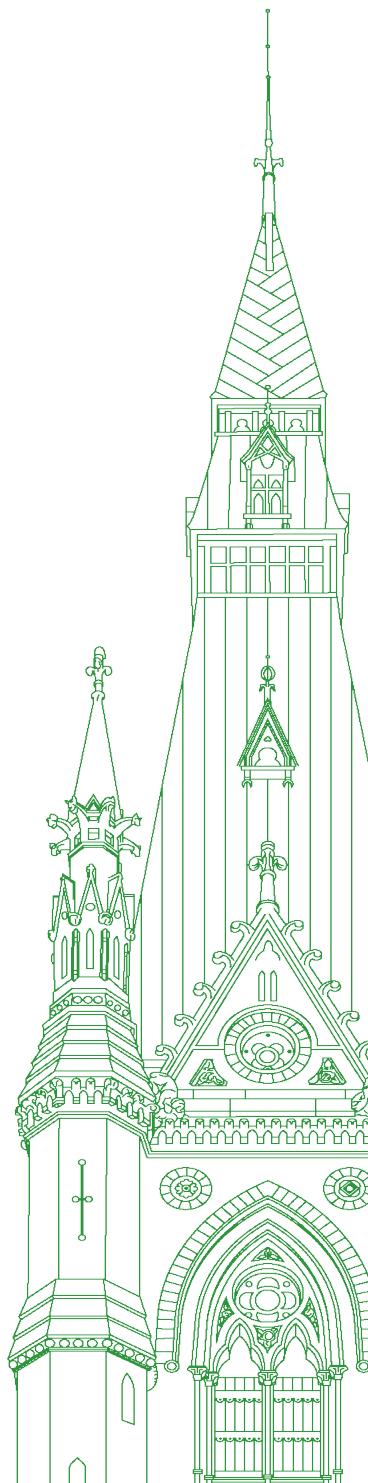
Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

EVIDENCE

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Monday, May 11, 2020

Chair: Mr. Tom Lukiwski



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• (1410)

[English]

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

This is meeting number 11 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Before we start, I'd like to announce that the next meeting of OGGO is this Friday, May 15, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. For next week, we have yet to hear from our whips as to the schedule. If you recall, at our last meeting we talked about all committee members going to their respective whips to try to tell them whether or not they wished to sit and meet on Monday, May 18, which will be Victoria Day. It's a statutory holiday. If you haven't done so already, I suggest that you contact your whips and give them your preference as to whether or not you would like to meet on Monday, May 18.

Colleagues, in just a few moments, we'll convene the meeting officially. I have asked both ministers—Minister Lebouthillier and Minister Qualtrough—to keep their remarks to no more than six minutes each, rather than the customary 10 minutes. That will save us a bit of time.

I'm also asking this of witnesses, ministers and committee members. If you begin speaking in one official language, please complete your remarks and all questions and answers after that in the one language of your preference. That way, we won't have to flip back and forth between languages. From a technical standpoint, it should then go much more smoothly.

When we get into the questions and answers, colleagues, we normally start a little late, particularly in the first hour, because of the technical issues we have to go through. As a consequence, we never seem to be able to complete a full round. Having said that, what I'm suggesting for this first hour is that we amend the question period so that the first round will be for five minutes each, the second round for four minutes each, and the third and final round for two minutes each, which should allow us to get every member involved and hopefully get answers for your questions.

With that, colleagues, I will now turn it over to Minister Lebouthillier for her six-minute opening statement.

Minister, the floor is yours.

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier (Minister of National Revenue): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for this invitation to tell you about the work of the Canada Revenue Agency in supporting Canadians during this unprecedented time. The work you are undertaking on government measures to support Canadians in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is very important.

I am pleased to be accompanied today by the commissioner of the Canada Revenue Agency, Bob Hamilton, and three members of the agency's senior management: Frank Vermacien, assistant commissioner, assessment, benefit and service branch; Geoff Trueman, assistant commissioner, legislative policy and regulatory affairs branch; and Ted Gallivan, assistant commissioner, compliance programs branch.

Since 2015, I have focused on improving the service delivery that is offered to Canadians. This means the agency and I place Canadians at the centre of all our priorities. We recently launched our People First philosophy and it is the pillar of our new service model. This philosophy is a key element in the agency's response to implementing the emergency economic measures.

Driven by the People First philosophy, agency employees have been working hard to support Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to taking part in an impressive mobilization of human resources in the field, we are also seeing a significant increase in the technology being used every day to serve Canadians in an even more accessible, efficient and rapid manner.

Allow me to give you an overview of the CRA's work over the past eight weeks. The agency started by realigning its efforts in order to be more efficient during this crisis. Then, on March 18, it announced it was pushing back the tax filing deadline for individuals, corporations and trusts, thereby relieving Canadians of that burden.

In the same spirit, the agency also announced the temporary suspension of the vast majority of audits. The agency then worked quickly to implement the government's various economic measures. First and foremost: the Canada emergency response benefit.

As I am sure you know, the agency is responsible for a significant part of administering the CERB, and the CRA is fully responsible for administering the Canada emergency wage subsidy, CEWS, as well as the Canada emergency student benefit, the CESB.

Regarding the CERB and the CEWS, I am especially proud of how quick and easy the application process is for Canadians. And I must emphasize that the amounts are paid promptly. In fact, most people receive their payment by direct deposit within three business days—sometimes even two days.

We have also demonstrated significant technological capacity, which is very impressive when you consider the online services were set up in just a few weeks. When the CERB was launched, the agency's system registered 30,000 applications in 12 minutes. Since April 6, the agency has reviewed and processed nearly 7.5 million CERB applications, for more than 4.45 million individuals.

I am very proud of the agency's incredible work under these circumstances. In fact, the media described the technological implementation of the CERB as a “small miracle.” This miracle would have been impossible without the exceptional cooperation between the agency's public servants and those from Employment and Social Development Canada.

On April 27, the agency deployed a new economic measure, namely, the Canada emergency wage subsidy. Again, everyone pitched in to make this application process a success. To date, the agency has received over 128,000 applications for the wage subsidy.

Finally, the agency will soon be able to launch the Canada emergency student benefit, the CESB. Students will soon be able to submit their application through the agency portal and the My Account service.

The CRA was able to mobilize a lot of people in the blink of an eye, starting with the agents at its call centres. To keep up the pace, the agency also reassigned many employees to new duties. A total of 7,500 employees answered a call to lend a hand to the call centres. Of course, while all this work took place, the CRA also made sure that appropriate compliance measures were put in place for all applications for emergency financial assistance.

• (1415)

Ensuring compliance is an essential part of the agency's mission. We are committed to preserving the integrity of our Canadian tax system. In this regard, the agency developed strict auditing measures—electronic and manual—and several safeguards for claimant eligibility, refund terms, and even tax loopholes. You can rest assured that offenders will face severe consequences, up to and including imprisonment.

Mr. Chair, this pandemic continues to have a terrible impact on many of our fellow citizens—not only on their health, but also on their economic well-being. However, I am proud of the efficiency with which the entire government has mobilized in recent weeks to support Canadians. As the saying goes, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” I can proudly tell you that agency employees have shown that they are, indeed, very tough.

I am now ready to take your questions. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We will now go to our five-minute round of questions, starting with Mr. Morantz.

Mr. Morantz, welcome to our committee. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Marty Morantz (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm delighted to be here.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

You've described your programs as being miraculous, but of course not everything is coming up roses. Is your agency aware of any individuals who are currently collecting the emergency benefit, the CERB, but who should not be, because they are not eligible?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Thank you for your question, Mr. Morantz.

The Canada Revenue Agency's priority was to ensure that Canada emergency benefit payments would be delivered quickly and efficiently to eligible Canadians. As with all other benefits administered by the agency, we may undertake audit activities at a later date.

[English]

Mr. Marty Morantz: With respect to eligibility, can you advise us as to how many prisoners in Canadian prisons are currently receiving the \$2,000-a-month CERB benefit from your agency?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I'm sorry, Mr. Morantz, I didn't quite understand your question.

[English]

Mr. Marty Morantz: Madam Minister, there have been reports of prisoners in Canadian correctional institutions receiving CERB payments who are not eligible to receive this benefit. Are you aware of this? How many prisoners across Canada are receiving the CERB payment?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: We are currently experiencing a historical situation like we haven't seen since the Second World War. As I was saying, the important thing for the Canada Revenue Agency was to ensure that Canadians receive benefits to help them get through the current crisis. I can assure you that the agency has mechanisms in place to recover the money that will need to be recovered.

• (1420)

[English]

Mr. Marty Morantz: I know there was no answer to that question, so I'll move on, Mr. Chair.

With respect to the social distancing regulations that are in place, it's difficult now for Canadians, particularly seniors and others who still file with paper forms, to get tax information to their preparers. Will you direct your agency to extend the tax filing deadline beyond June 1 to allow Canadians more time to file?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Our government understands that Canadians are going through a very difficult time. We are here to support them. That is why we have announced a series of measures, including extending the deadline for filing income tax returns to June 1, 2020. We continue to monitor the situation and developments very closely and are currently working on solutions that will be communicated to you shortly.

[*English*]

Mr. Marty Morantz: I'm glad to hear that an extension is not off the table.

Recently we've been hearing from Canadians who filed their tax returns with paper T1 forms that they are experiencing extreme delays in receiving their refunds. When will these Canadians who filed paper forms have their returns processed?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Mr. Chair, all of the agency's teams are mobilized to give effect to the emergency measures that need to be made available to Canadians. As I mentioned, the agency reached nearly 7.5 million Canadians.

We continue to process tax returns, whether paper or electronic, so that people receive their benefits and the money they are owed as quickly as possible.

[*English*]

Mr. Marty Morantz: Madam Minister, I contacted your agency, and they indicated that delays are to be expected and that they could not provide a concrete timeline. Canadians who file by paper need to have their refunds, particularly to help them during this crisis.

Can the minister confirm how long it takes your agency to process a paper tax return and tell us the reason for the delays?

The Chair: Minister, if I may interrupt, since there are only about 10 seconds left for your answer, I would request that you provide that answer in written form. You can send that to the chair of our committee, who will then be able to distribute it to all committee members.

Thank you for your understanding.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order—

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Kusmierczyk for another five-minute round.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): Chair, thank you very much. I will be splitting my time with my colleague, MP Jowhari.

Minister, thank you very much for your excellent testimony and your excellent report. Can you provide an update on exactly how many new, approved Canada emergency wage subsidy applications

there are to date, whether the number matches the expectations we had for the uptake for that program and whether you have any feedback you can share?

We know that the CERB process was fairly simple and very straightforward. That's the feedback we heard. What are we hearing in regard to the CEWS program?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: As I mentioned, we know this is a very difficult time for Canadian companies and their employees. Our government is doing everything it can to support Canadians.

The application process was launched two weeks ago. We have received over 127,000 applications since the launch. The majority of the companies are small and medium-sized enterprises.

[*English*]

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you very much for that, but to follow up in terms of the feedback you're receiving regarding the application process, what are you hearing from the businesses that are going through the application process? Are they finding it fairly straightforward, as folks are with the CERB, or are there any challenges you're seeing?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I would like to say to my colleague that the companies that apply find the process simple. Indeed, the objective of our programs was to have simple and fast processes to be able to support all our companies.

If you'd like a little more technical detail, I could let the officials respond, either Mr. Gallivan or Mr. Vermaeten.

• (1425)

[*English*]

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Yes, please.

Mr. Bob Hamilton (Commissioner of Revenue, Canada Revenue Agency): Mr. Chair, can I come into the discussion?

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Hamilton. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Thank you.

Just to respond quickly on the wage subsidy program, it's fair to say that it's a more complicated program than the CERB. As the minister indicated, the CERB was relatively simple in application, with a priority on getting the money out but also with proper verification to make sure that we catch up on people who don't deserve it.

In contrast, the wage subsidy covers a bunch of more complex business arrangements. One of the things we did in response to that was to engage with stakeholders as we were developing it, to find out some of the questions and answers that we needed to know in order to make it simpler for businesses to apply.

The feedback has been good from that perspective. I note that the CFIB has been very positive in terms of our ability to answer their questions, but there's no doubt that it's a more complicated program.

We've been quite satisfied so far. There is a lot of interest in the questions. The take-up is probably a little less than we thought it would be at this point, but we know from all the questions that people are still perhaps sorting out exactly how they will apply.

The Chair: Mr. Kusmierczyk, you have about one minute left.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Thank you very much. I yield that time to my colleague.

The Chair: Go ahead, please, Mr. Jowhari.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to my colleague for sharing his time with me.

Minister, in your speech that was handed to us, you talked about mobilization and reassignment of a lot of resources within CRA to be able to deliver the programs. With the limited time that is available, can you share some of the challenges, especially with training and technology and the extended hours? How did you manage that process? We had a lot of calls coming in to say the process was slow, but those calls have now almost disappeared. I'd like to know how you managed that process. Could you shed some light on that?

The Chair: Unfortunately, Minister, we're completely out of time, so once again I would ask that you prepare an answer in writing to our clerk, who will then be able to distribute your answer to all committee members.

Now we'll go to a five-minute round once again, to Madame Vignola.

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I would like to inform you that I will be sharing my time with Xavier Barsalou-Duval.

Good afternoon, Madam Lebouthillier. First and foremost, I would like to congratulate each and every member of your department for the immeasurable and extraordinary work they have been able to do so far. My questions are for clarification, not accusations. I like to understand things.

In your speech, you said that Canada Revenue Agency had realigned its activities. What exactly did you mean by that? What are those activities?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: You're absolutely right when you say that the agency employees did an incredible job.

In order to be able to deliver benefits to people, whether the Canada emergency response benefit or the Canada emergency wage subsidy, all employees had to focus on the emergency measures we had to implement for Canadians. In addition, we need to ensure the safety of our employees. So many of our employees are working from home. We had to organize telephone services at home, while at the same time maintaining data privacy for all Canadians. That's why we're saying that they did an incredible job.

• (1430)

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you. In your speech, you also said that there has been a temporary suspension of the vast majority of audits.

What about the 50 investigations of companies using tax havens? Have these investigations also been suspended?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I can tell you that these investigations are ongoing. When we talk about audits, we're talking about the regular work that is done on a daily basis. It's part of the agency's work.

With regard to the audits, if you want more technical details, one of the officials in charge could answer your question.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I just wanted to know if the investigations had been stopped; thank you.

I'd like to continue on the topic of tax havens. I know it's a hot topic. People want to understand what's going on. You recently said that \$1 billion was invested to counter these tax havens.

How much money has the government been able to recover through this investment? It invested \$1 billion. How much money did you ultimately recover?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Thank you. Initially, the money invested was also used for organization, to put in place and consolidate the tools our public servants use. This made it possible to hire auditors and rebuild an expertise that had been taken away from us by the previous government, for which this was not a priority.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: At the end of the day, how much did this \$1 billion investment bring in?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Investigations are ongoing and cases will be litigated. Requests have been made in this regard, as per regulations. Mr. Gallivan, who really is the expert on tax evasion, will be able to answer you very well.

Mr. Ted Gallivan (Assistant Commissioner, Compliance Programs Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): As the minister mentioned, we have a lot of cases, over 3,000, before the courts. A lot of these audits are going to end up in court. However, we have already recovered, in gross figures, \$4.4 billion, and we are several years ahead of our projections.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much, Mr. Gallivan. I will now hand over to my colleague Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have only 30 seconds, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you Mr. Chair.

I have a very brief question for you, Minister. I'm an accountant by training, and when I worked in accounting offices, we had organizational charts that explained the structure of a company and who owned it.

On their T2 return, on which they report their income, I'm sure that businesses indicate whether they own another corporation. So the Revenue Agency knows that one business owns another. From that, it is therefore quite possible for the Agency to know who uses tax havens and who does not, since it...

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur Barsalou-Duval, we're completely out of time, sir.

Our next intervenor is Mr. Green. Go ahead, Mr. Green, for five minutes.

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

With recent announcements, I think it's generally felt that by targeting only those convicted of tax evasion, the government is setting the bar far too low and is still letting public money go to companies that use offshore tax havens and funnel resources to tax-sheltered jurisdictions with public money.

To the hon. minister responsible for CRA, will companies under investigation with regard to the Panama Papers and the Paradise Papers still be eligible for the large business credit, yes or no?

• (1435)

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I would say that your question is too complex to be answered with a yes or no answer. What I can say, though, is that all the programs we put in place really serve to protect the workers and employees of companies, regardless of who their employer is. I can assure you that we continue to fight against companies that use these stratagems.

[English]

Mr. Matthew Green: I can certainly appreciate folks wanting to evade their taxes, but I want to make sure we don't evade the question.

How many companies and taxpayers disclosed in the Paradise Paper cases have been convicted of tax evasion?

The Chair: Minister, you're on mute.

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

As I was telling you, Mr. Green, this type of case is complex because people use very sophisticated schemes. We will continue to protect employees, no matter who they work for. My goal is really to make sure that Canadians have money to pay for their groceries and their housing. Companies that use schemes will be prosecuted and held accountable. That could go as far as jail time.

[English]

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm assuming that through the good work of the CRA and through your investigations, honourable minister, you ought to have a list.

Are you going to use the list of tax havens to draw up a list of companies that will not be eligible for credits to the large companies, and if so, what is this list and which tax havens are mentioned in it by country?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Among other measures we've taken in recent years, we have been working with the OECD. We assess four countries a year and exchange information. Our goal remains the same: to have everyone pay their fair share.

The Agency is only responsible for administering the programs. With respect to the creation of the programs and their eligibility criteria, Minister Morneau will be in a much better position to answer you. We have listened to the concerns of our colleagues and Canadians and we will continue to work to find solutions.

[English]

Mr. Matthew Green: As do we. It doesn't have to be as complicated as is being presented here today.

You frame these benefits specifically in terms of tax convictions, yet we know that most of these are structured settlements that happen in a civil matter outside of the public eye, probably in non-disclosure protected deals. By a simple yes or no, aside from the companies that are found guilty of tax evasion, will companies or their subsidiaries that use these tax savings to legally but, I would argue, irregularly pay less tax be eligible for the millions of dollars in the large business credit?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: As I was saying to my colleague, my job as minister is to manage the programs. If my colleague wants more information on the criteria, I suggest he addresses his question to the Minister of Finance.

[English]

Mr. Matthew Green: I will note that the question was not answered.

I will say, however, that I did get feedback from my constituents here that your front-line CRA workers here in Hamilton Centre are doing an incredible job under this stress and this pressure. I did want to go on the record and say that to you, to end on perhaps a more amicable note.

Mr. Chair, it's back to you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Green.

We'll go now to our four-minute round of questioning, starting with Mr. Morantz.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, literally hundreds of billions of dollars are being spent in an unprecedented way in order to cope with the crisis. What is it that your agency is specifically doing? What measures are specifically being undertaken to ensure that there is accountability for all these hundreds of billions of dollars of taxpayers' money that are being spent?

• (1440)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I thank my colleague for the question.

The Government of Canada is indeed working very hard. We are experiencing the most severe crisis we have had since the Second World War. A lot of money...

[*English*]

Mr. Marty Morantz: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. There's a limited amount of time. I would like the minister to answer the specific question. What measures are there for accountability?

We know that we're going through a hard time. What are the accountability measures for hundreds of millions of dollars?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: As I was saying, the agency has verification mechanisms. Right now, we are focusing all our energies on putting money back into the taxpayers' pockets. When the crisis is over, we will use our usual verification mechanisms.

[*English*]

Mr. Marty Morantz: In the finance committee meeting on April 16th, I asked your officials about problems with the call centres, and they seemed quite proud of their answer. They said that according to your internal study, 88% of Canadians who called your call centres got accurate information. Of course that meant that 12% did not. Do you think that this is good enough, Madam Minister?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: We recognize that there is a problem with the high volume of applications for all the new programs we have put in place. For this reason, we strongly encourage people to use the online services. I am very proud of the fact that we have been able to reach close to 7.5 million Canadians. There is more work to be done. It's not perfect, but we look for solutions on an ongoing basis.

[*English*]

Mr. Marty Morantz: I will finish by adding that two reports, the Stantec report and the CFIB report, which were both released very recently, had far worse results than your internal report. According to Stantec, which you had commissioned on your own, 87% of Canadians were dissatisfied with the service. Now, with the added volume of calls, how can Canadians be assured that they're going to have their paper returns processed in time and other questions answered accurately?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: As I mentioned earlier, given the exceptional global situation—on this we agree—our government's priority is to ensure that people receive the Canada Emergency

Benefit and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy. So we've put all of our energies into getting money back to Canadians. We continue to process tax returns so that people receive their money as quickly as possible.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll now go to Mr. Weiler for four minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Madam Minister and other witnesses, for joining our committee meeting today.

I want to start by saying thank you for the incredible work that all the folks at the CRA have done to get these benefits out. The numbers are truly astounding. The feedback that I've heard is that the process has been fairly simple. I know that even with the wage subsidy, businesses in my riding are already receiving that in their bank accounts.

Minister, given that these benefits are being disbursed very quickly and given that you mentioned that ensuring the sanctity of these programs and ensuring they're not abused is going to be done after the fact, I was hoping you could explain how exactly the government intends to handle fraud related to the emergency response benefit.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: These programs were put in place to ensure that people were able to pay for their groceries and housing, despite the high number of applications. When we talk about the 7.5 million people who have applied for the CERB, we can see that there was an urgent need to reach out to Canadians. We have put these programs in place and counted on the good faith of Canadians, trusting that people will only apply for them if they really need them.

As I was saying, there are mechanisms in place. Mr. Vermaeten is responsible for this area. He could tell you what kind of auditing could be done with the taxpayers.

• (1445)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm not sure if one of the other witnesses wants to try—

Mr. Frank Vermaeten (Assistant Commissioner, Assessment, Benefit and Service Branch, Canada Revenue Agency): I'd be happy to speak to that.

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead, please, sir.

Mr. Frank Vermaeten: I think we're doing a lot. We have a lot of systems in place to ensure that the right people are getting the money.

We are the CRA. We have a lot of information that we collect regularly on people, such as the amount of money they have earned and the amount of money they're going to earn this year. We have those records. We have that, and the CERB, as you know, is based on social insurance numbers, so we can do a matching between the amounts that individuals receive through the CERB and the income they're earning.

We're also asking employers to provide us with additional information in February of next year on the T4 information they provide to us so that we know when people earned income and when they were rehired.

That way, I think we'll be able to do a very good job of matching the two. If there is a mismatch, we'll be writing people letters to indicate to them that our records show they may have earned money at the same time, and if they have, we'll of course be asking them to pay that back.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Great. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Weiler, you have approximately 30 seconds.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Minister, the scientific research and experimental development program is really important for innovation-oriented stakeholders. I was wondering if you could give us a quick update on the program and where things stand during the pandemic.

The Chair: Make it a very short answer, please, Minister.

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I can tell you that we have a process in place for reviewing research and development applications. We have equipped staff to prepare them to resume service to Canadian companies.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We will now go to Mr. Aboulaif for four minutes, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboulaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Minister.

The question is this. Many ineligible people have applied for the CERB who should not have applied, who should not be getting this money. You mentioned there were seven and a half million applications you received from four and a half million Canadians and your system was so incredible that you were able to basically identify and make sure that you reviewed and controlled every single application that went through the system. How is it you were not able to discover the ineligible people who have applied for the CERB at the same time, before there is a backlog down the road?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I thank my colleague for his question. As I mentioned, the Agency put in place a simple and quick program to respond without delay to Canadians who were in great need. We also know that people may have inadvertently made mistakes. I would not want to assume that people are dishonest. As Mr. Vermaeten mentioned earlier, audits will begin next year. In any event, it is part of the agency's mandate to conduct audits. We are going to make sure that people who owe money to the agency turn that money over.

[English]

Mr. Ziad Aboulaif: Minister, why did the audit not happen up front, since you designed the program specifically to do so? Why did it not happen at the beginning?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I think the answer is very simple: this is a historic situation. Canadians were experiencing great hardship and losing their jobs. The fact that 7.5 million people applied shows how important this program was to our population.

• (1450)

[English]

Mr. Ziad Aboulaif: But some people probably received more than \$6,000 in the first two weeks. That means there must be a red flag there to tell you money is going where it should not be going. In the meantime, how many applicants do you think applied when they were ineligible?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: When the audits are done, we will be able to recover the money, but my primary objective was really to ensure that families, single mothers, people in our community, workers who had lost their jobs and seniors who were in financial difficulty because of COVID-19 received money to help them get through this crisis.

[English]

Mr. Ziad Aboulaif: The question is, how many? What do you estimate the number of people to be? That's the question.

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: When we have responded to the population's plight, when we have fed our people, when we have made sure that people's housing is paid for and that our families and our people are safe, we will be happy to do the checks and give that information to my colleague.

[English]

Mr. Ziad Aboulaif: That's not the question. The question is, how many? What do you estimate?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Aboulaif. We're completely out of time.

Minister, if you don't mind, please respond to Mr. Aboulaif's question in writing to our clerk.

We will now go to Mr. Jowhari for four minutes, please.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To save the minister and the department from providing a response in writing, I'm going to ask the same question again that I had asked earlier.

Minister, in your opening statement that was submitted, you mentioned the mobilization of so many CRA resources as well as the reassignment of up to about 7,500 employees who answered the call. You also talked about keeping the process's integrity as well as implementing strict auditing.

Can you share with us some of the initial challenges in your partnership with the employees and in the training? How did you work with the unions and other departments, such as ESDC, to be able to roll out all these programs, which were coming at different stages?

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I thank my colleague for his important question. Indeed, when we made the request to the agency's employees, we knew that we would need additional call centre staff. Seven thousand five hundred Canada Revenue Agency members offered to help.

For the much more technical details, I'll direct you to Commissioner Hamilton.

[English]

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Sure. I'm happy to come in, Mr. Chair, if you can hear me.

The Chair: Yes. Go ahead, please, sir.

Mr. Bob Hamilton: To understand this, I think, without going on too long—but it is a very interesting story for the agency—you can think about the unprecedented volume of demands we had and the strain it was going to put on not only our call centres but on processing at other parts of the agency. This was coupled together with the physical distancing that we had to adhere to and with keeping people at home to try to flatten the curve and not spread the virus.

That was quite an interesting combination of factors to have to put in place, so we did realign the agency. We pushed a pilot project that we had for enabling call centre agents to take calls remotely. It was going to be a small-scale project and it turned into one on a very big scale because of the nature of it. We had to get people on the phones to answer the questions. Our call centre volumes are very high. That was one thing we did.

We had other parts of the agency that couldn't work because they needed the access to the workspace, but they had to stay home, and because we slowed down our audit, verification and collection activities, we had those people available. We put out a call and said, "If anybody can help with the phones, please put your name forward." That's—

• (1455)

Mr. Majid Jowhari: How did you manage the long hours, the 11 and 12 hours, with the employees as well as the union?

Mr. Bob Hamilton: Well, we had very good discussions with the union every step of the way as we tried to develop our business plan. We've been walking this balance between keeping people separated and at home as much as possible while trying to get the very important work done. We worked very much hand in hand with the unions.

We've had shift work in a couple of places, and as the crisis has moved on, we've had to change our business plan to try to bring in other parts of the agency. At each step of the way, we've checked that business continuity plan with our unions and our employees. We've had good communication with employees to tell them what's going on.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hamilton, sir.

We'll now go to our final two-minute rounds.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have two minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to complete the question I was asking earlier. Every business, when it fills out the T2 form in its income tax return, mentions its shareholders and owners. So it is easy for officials to know who owns which business and to trace it back to the owner of the parent company. If the parent company has assets in tax havens, you can get the information.

First, Madam Minister, does the Canada Revenue Agency maintain a list of the companies that use tax havens?

Second, have you considered using this list to ensure that those receiving government assistance are not companies that use tax havens?

It's not complicated, just take the list and check the information on the T2 form to see if the company uses tax havens or not.

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I know this is a very important issue for you. I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Ted Gallivan, who can answer you about the very technical aspects. It's a lot more complex than you think.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I am an accountant.

Mr. Ted Gallivan: Of course, we have several lists. The complexity relates to the companies' behaviour. Some companies have abusive tax planning that targets Luxembourg, for example. We know which companies are targeting Barbados or other tax shelters.

We are therefore very aware of the schemes used, but we are also aware of the case law in Canada. We look at the cases that are before the courts, hence the complexity of this issue. There's a lot of planning—

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I understand your answer, but—

The Chair: I have to interrupt you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

You are now completely out of time.

We'll go now to Mr. Green for our final intervention, for two minutes, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much to the honourable minister.

You will note that on April 15, I provided your ministry with a letter requesting that you provide information on how individuals who are not able to file their taxes by the June 1 date can ensure that their supplementary income supports, such as the GIS, the GST, child tax benefits and other associated provincial benefits are not cut off as a result. In my letter, I recommended that you consider extending the deadline once again, until the fall, and that the federal government extend the current benefit payments until October 2020, based on the 2018 income filings.

Can you comment on that? In our office, we process hundreds of these through our volunteer tax clinics, and many people are at risk of getting cut off from those significant monthly income supports.

[Translation]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I recognize that some Canadians have not been able to access the usual services, such as the community volunteer income tax program. That is because of the current situation. We have received your letter and those of other members of Parliament, and we will take your comments and recommendations into consideration.

[English]

Mr. Matthew Green: Please note that GIS, honourable minister, accounts for sometimes 70% to 80% of a person's income. When you look at what a typical OAS pension is, it's only \$613, so we're talking about \$12,000 extra a year, \$1,000 extra a month, which right now is in critical peril.

I implore you to please consider having these extended using the 2018 filings.

• (1500)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

Minister, I'm sure you will take Mr. Green's comments under advisement and provide an answer to Mr. Green if you possibly can.

Minister, thank you very much for your appearance here today.

We have to set up for our second round of questions, which will be with Minister Qualtrough.

Minister, once again, thanks to you and to all of your officials. You are excused.

Colleagues, we will suspend for a couple of moments while we prepare for our next round of witnesses. We are suspended.

• (1500) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1510)

The Chair: Colleagues, we are reconvened.

For the benefit of Minister Qualtrough, I'll repeat what I mentioned in my opening remarks before she came on the line. If you begin by speaking in one official language, please continue to speak in the same official language without switching back and forth. This will help our technical ability to avoid delay.

Colleagues, for those of you who have just joined us, I have a similar request of you. If you ask a question in one official lan-

guage, please keep the entire question and the responses in the same language so that we don't have to switch back and forth.

We'll remain with the same procedure as for the first hour, so it will be five minutes for questions in the first round, four minutes for the second round, and then two minutes in the final interventions.

With that, Minister, I'll turn it over to you for six minutes, please.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Mr. Chair, I apologize. My remarks are in both languages, back and forth. I'm going to do my best to just do English, so please indulge me.

Hello, everyone. I'm pleased to join you today to speak about the measures to support Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic as they pertain to my current portfolio.

Before I begin, I'd like to thank the committee for your study on our government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Your work is truly essential to our democratic process.

It's been nearly two months now that Canadians have been adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic gripping our country and the world. To give you a sense of the scope of the need, I can tell you that we've received 11.38 million applications, of which we have processed 11.29 million applications under the Canada emergency response benefit, both through Service Canada and through the CRA. A total of \$30.48 billion in payments have been made to 7.83 million people.

The CERB was created to come to the aid of Canadians during these unprecedented circumstances. In reality, our EI system was not built for the situation of a global pandemic. It doesn't cover all the different situations in which Canadians find themselves in this time of a public health crisis. Service Canada and CRA stepped up, formed a team, and in the space of a couple of weeks elaborated and put into place a system that really responded to Canadians' needs. For eligible workers, the CERB provides temporary income support of \$500 a week for up to 16 weeks. It applies to workers who have stopped working for reasons related to COVID-19. It also supports working parents who are staying home to care for children because of school and day care closures.

We've made extraordinary efforts to make this emergency benefit as inclusive as possible. Workers, including the self-employed, can earn up to \$1,000 per month while collecting the benefit. The benefit also applies to workers who've recently exhausted their regular EI benefit payments and aren't able to start working again because of COVID-19. This helps many seasonal workers, including fishers and those in the tourism industry, who may not have had their usual seasonal work to return to as a result of COVID-19.

Now I'll say a word about supporting temporary foreign workers and ensuring Canada's food supply.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult to bring in the needed temporary foreign workers. That's why we've made modifications to our temporary foreign worker program to try to add some flexibility to the system. I want to emphasize that there are definitely jobs available for Canadians in the areas that are also supported by temporary foreign workers, as has been the case historically.

I'll now say a word about students and youth.

We've announced comprehensive support for post-secondary students and recent graduates, representing an investment of approximately \$9 billion. As part of that support, we introduced a four-month Canada emergency student benefit. Students who are not receiving the CERB and meet the criteria for this new benefit will be able to apply to receive \$1,250 per month between May and August. Students with permanent disabilities and students with dependents could receive an additional \$750 per month.

We've heard a lot in the past few weeks about how these payments might disincentivize students to work. Well, that's not what we've heard from young people across the country. We've heard very clearly from students that they want to work and serve in their communities in this time of crisis. That's why we also announced the creation of 76,000 additional jobs and training opportunities, including jobs in the agriculture and processing sectors, through mechanisms such as our youth employment and skills strategy program. This is on top of the 70,000 jobs that will be available through the Canada summer jobs program, with greater flexibility for employers to hire young people this summer and through the fall.

Other important measures to help students during the COVID-19 pandemic are changes to the Canada student loans program. These changes will expand eligibility, increase the weekly cap and double the value of our grants. These new measures came in addition to earlier measures to pause the repayment of student and apprentice loans, interest-free, until September 30, 2020.

Mr. Chair, we've taken these measures with the goal of helping Canadians and supporting our economy. As the situation evolves, my colleagues in cabinet and I will be ready to respond to whatever Canadians need.

I'm available now for questions.

• (1515)

The Chair: Minister, I'm not sure whether you have completed your remarks or you—

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, I have.

The Chair: Oh, I—

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I apologize. I said that I'm available for questions, and that was my clue. I apologize.

The Chair: No, no, that is fine. I was just having a little difficulty picking that up. I thank you for the economy of your words. It gives us more time for questions.

Colleagues, we'll now go to our first round of questioning.

Mr. McCauley, please go ahead. You have five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Minister Qualtrough, it's good to almost see you here.

Minister, you've been repeatedly asked, both by MPs and by the media, whether people who do not feel safe to return to work remain eligible for the CERB if they do not return. The finance minister said that people would still be eligible, but you haven't clarified with a yes or no.

Can you please tell us now if workers who are called back to work, but fear for their own or their family's safety, remain eligible for the CERB?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question.

I suspect that the nuance I've felt and am obligated to provide—which I will provide here again today—is that refusal to work is a very complicated process, with investigations, and I didn't want to dive into the provincial labour law and federal labour code.

The message I'm trying to convey at the end of the day, Mr. McCauley, is that if you feel unsafe to work and you are not working for COVID reasons and you otherwise qualify for the CERB, then you are eligible.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You're in agreement with the finance minister, then, that if you feel unsafe—

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Well, yes. If someone has gone through the process of whatever their federal or provincial refusal-to-work regime is, then at the end of the day, yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Well, that is very different, though, because in the Province of Alberta's labour code, for example, you have to have proof that it's unsafe. You can't just feel unsafe because of COVID. You would actually need a ruling from the labour board, so you're kind of contradicting yourself.

If I am at home and I can go back to work, but I do not feel it's safe to go back to work because perhaps I'm living with an elderly person or someone with a compromised immune system, and I refuse, under EI laws or the labour code, it has to be checked. The finance minister says that I can refuse, but you're saying that it's nuanced because of the province.

Do you agree with the finance minister that if someone says "no" because they fear for their safety, they can remain on CERB?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Well, I think it—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I just want to get a straight answer from you. Do you agree with the finance minister?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. McCauley, it is fact-pattern-specific. If you have to stay home to take care of a loved one, you absolutely can go on CERB.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: We're not talking about a loved one. Specifically, if you feel unsafe returning to work, the finance minister says yes, you can stay at home and stay on CERB, but we're not getting that same precise answer from you. Why not?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm trying to respect provincial jurisdiction. From an eligibility for CERB perspective, the answer to your question is yes, but there is also a layer of provincial labour jurisdiction in some cases.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: But the province is not deciding the CERB.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: No.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You are.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: If you are saying that if someone stays home because they feel unsafe returning to work, they can still stay on CERB, that's the same as the finance minister. If I'm hearing that, well, wonderful.

The government has stated that the wage subsidy is going to be extended past June. Is there talk right now about extending the CERB past the original stated time?

• (1520)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Right now, as I've said publicly, we are looking at the interaction between the CERB and the wage subsidy. With only a week or two into the wage subsidy, we're looking to see how many people transition from the CERB to the wage subsidy. We're trying to figure out what the next phase of support will be for individual workers.

Right now, I think it's premature to say exactly what the next phase of support for workers will be, but we are definitely not abandoning workers.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Yes, that's fair.

Let me ask you, then, about the uptake for the wage subsidy. Of course, for CERB it was immense immediately, with millions in the first month. The uptake on the wage subsidy to me seems very small.

What were your projections? What are the government's original thoughts on the relatively small number of people applying for the wage subsidy versus the almost eight million people who have applied for CERB?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Again, I think it's too early to tell exactly what the pace of the applications will be as they come in. I'm very interested to see if there are things we can do to streamline it. If it's processing, we can look at doing the best we can to help people, and 1.3 million or 1.7 million employees have been approved for the wage subsidy. That's not an insignificant number, and if that's a weekly number, one could predict that it would grow quite quickly over the next weeks.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How much time do I have?

The Chair: Mr. McCauley, I forgot to buzz you in at the outset, but I'd say you have just a little under a minute left.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Minister, you talked about streamlining the application for the wage subsidy. What are you thinking of?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: To be honest, I'm not actually sure where there are hiccups in our system and our process, or if there are any. I can tell you from a data collection point of view—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: How are we getting feedback? I see that Dan Kelly from the CFIB is tweeting and commenting on a lot of different issues. Chambers of commerce are. How are we getting feedback on how we can streamline it or make it work better?

The Chair: Minister, that's a good question, but in the interests of time, I would ask that you fully answer Mr. McCauley's question in writing. Please send that to our clerk so that he can distribute your answer to all of our colleagues on this committee. Would that be possible?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. MacKinnon for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon (Gatineau, Lib.): Good afternoon, Madam Minister. I am pleased to hear your voice, though I can't see you. It will be a pleasure to see you again.

I want to talk about temporary foreign workers. In the regions of Quebec, as in all regions of the country, access to these workers is essential. It is of paramount importance for the Canadian economy, for our food security and for the success of our food products across the country.

[English]

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry, but there is something very wrong with the sound. The MP who is speaking in French and our interpreter I think are vying for the sound. They are both at the same level and it is very hard to hear either of them.

The Chair: Mrs. Block, I'm hearing the same problem.

Mr. MacKinnon, perhaps we could try to solve this. If you want ed to speak in English, let's see if that helps at all.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I'm going to suggest....

[Translation]

Is it better if I press here?

[English]

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Paul Cardegna): If I may, Mr. Chair, it may be an issue...

[Translation]

Mr. MacKinnon, can you check that you have selected the French channel? That would be very helpful.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: All right, I'll do that. It was actually closed. Is that better? I just want to confirm that it's better, so we're not interrupted again.

[English]

The Chair: It's much better, Steve.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: All right. Do you want me to start over, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: We're wasting time as we go along. I'll give you an extra 35 or 45 seconds because of the delay, but if you could start again, that would be fine.

● (1525)

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: All right. I'll shorten my question.

Madam Minister, can you comment on the situation of temporary foreign workers and explain how the changes you have made will improve things, given COVID-19?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for that really important question. It's lovely to hear your voice as well, Mr. MacKinnon.

We've taken a number of steps on the administrative side of the temporary foreign worker program, as well as in streamlining some of our policy decisions around it. On the one hand, we have tried to make it more streamlined to give employers the certainty of getting their LMAs approved, and on the other hand we have been trying to make sure that workers are protected and employers know very clearly their obligations.

Like anyone, temporary foreign workers coming into the country have to have a mandatory 14-day isolation period. There are protocols in place for the period around that. As for what is expected of employers, we have beefed up regulations—and when I say "we", I mean IRCC—so that there are significant consequences to employ-

ers if they fail to comply with these beefed-up compliance conditions, including monetary penalties—if I'm not wrong—of up to \$1 million.

We're trying to make it easier for temporary foreign workers to move between jobs. We're trying to make it easier for LMAs to get approved. We've waived the minimum recruitment requirements. We're prioritizing certain kinds of LMAs.

Graham, I don't know if you have anything else to add. The list is quite significant.

Mr. Graham Flack (Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): No, I think you've covered it, Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

We've also extended the period of—I have a list in my head, Mr. Chair, of a whole bunch of things. I apologize. I'm happy to answer more questions.

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, please proceed.

[Translation]

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Madam Minister, continuing on the subject of temporary foreign workers, what kind of results do you see? What are the gaps that need to be filled? What do Canadians need to know about the arrival and presence of temporary foreign workers? What could Canadians do to help fill the gap?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Those are really important questions. Thank you.

As I said in my opening remarks, there are jobs that are not being filled by temporary foreign workers as they have been filled historically, and —

The Chair: Madame Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt, but your audio level is quite low. I'm not sure if you're speaking away from your phone, but could you increase the volume somehow?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I sure can. I haven't moved, but I will try to use my coaching voice.

We've taken a number of steps to both help employers get the temporary foreign workers they need and to—

The Chair: Minister Qualtrough, again, the audio level is extremely low. I'm not sure if our technicians can help, but if you could try speaking directly into the microphone, that hopefully will solve the problem.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Chair, it works for me. The sound is fine for me.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll do my best. I feel like I'm almost eating the telephone. I'm trying very hard to speak right into it.

As I said, what we've done in Canada is a call to action. It's called "Step up to the plate—Help feed Canadians". We're looking for Canadians as they did in France, to fill jobs that haven't been filled this year by temporary foreign workers with Canadians who are looking to work.

We're looking to get a domestic supply, but we're also trying to make it as easy as possible for a foreign supply of workers to also come in while maintaining the public health priority of ensuring that everybody is kept safe in the process.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll now go to Madame Vignola.

[*Translation*]

You have five minutes, Madam.

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

Madam Minister, thank you for being here today.

How do the Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada communicate with each other to ensure that benefits are not duplicated? I have received a couple of emails saying that people in my riding are receiving not only the CERB but employment insurance benefits as well. What are you doing to ensure that these errors do not happen again?

● (1530)

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I thank you for your question.

We have been working very closely between Service Canada and CRA from the beginning. Despite our best efforts in messaging and explaining to Canadians that they didn't have to —

Mrs. Kelly Block: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: I am sorry. I know that this is important testimony that we want to hear. We definitely value the time that we get with the ministers to answer the questions we have, but with the technical difficulties we are experiencing, I am having a very difficult time hearing the minister's response to Madame Vignola's question.

It's a little incomprehensible to me that one of our ministers is not set up very well to do this virtual committee meeting and that we're having these kinds of difficulties. It's not doing justice to this committee meeting today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Block.

Minister, I concur with Mrs. Block. As I've mentioned a couple of times in my interventions, I personally—I'm not sure about the rest of the committee—are having extreme difficulty with the audio levels. I'm not sure, Mr. Clerk or Madam Minister, if there's anything we can do, but I wish that we could somehow increase that audio level to allow our committee members to hear the minister's responses.

Mr. Matthew Green: Mr. Chair, I don't know if this is a point of order or a point of information. I've been switching on and off between English and Off on the interpretations. I find that when the

minister is set to Off, it's fine, but then I have to switch interpretation back on for Madame Vignola.

I don't know if that is helpful, but I would also like to suggest to this committee that we move a motion at the appropriate time to invite the minister back when the proper equipment is in place to do a video conference, which by now should most certainly be commonplace.

The Clerk: If I may, Mr. Chair, following up on what Mr. Green said, I've noticed the same thing. When there is no interpretation, which is essentially the floor channel, I can hear the minister clearly. Unfortunately, for some reason on the English channel there seems to be a sound issue, so when, for example, somebody is listening to the interpretation, there is a bit of an issue there.

I've asked our technicians to see if there is anything they can do. I will let you know as soon as I get a response from them.

The Chair: Thank you.

Perhaps in the interim, then, Mrs. Block, you can go to the floor channel and we'll see if that helps.

Minister, could you please continue your testimony, and hopefully we'll have the audio levels corrected.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

I apologize, Mr. Chair, I have what I thought was a very good set-up here. The reason I'm not participating by video conference is that my enlarging software on my computer, due to my visual impairment, is not compatible with having a whole bunch of things going on, so I requested to participate by phone.

I can certainly try by video conference in the future, but I can't guarantee I'll have.... It's just proven very difficult in the virtual Parliament and other settings for me to give a thoughtful answer without being able to see the screen to toggle buttons and toggle interpretation and what have you.

I apologize and I will—

The Chair: No apologies are necessary, Minister. I can assure you that, from my side, and I see Mrs. Block nodding as well, when committee members are on the floor channel, your audio levels are quite good.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

I must confess that I have lost track of the question. Could someone please repeat it for me?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: That's okay.

Mr. Lukiwski, has the clock been stopped so that I can get my full five minutes?

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister Qualtrough, were you able to hear the question from Madame Vignola?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I apologize. I thought the question was whether she could have her five minutes back.

The Chair: Yes. I have not docked her any time for that.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Okay, thank you.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Ms. Vignola.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: I'll put things in context. In my riding, people have received double CERB payments. In addition, they have received employment insurance.

How are the Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada working together to ensure that this type of error does not happen again? Could you give me a short answer, please?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: At the beginning, this was happening. Despite our best efforts, people were being double-paid. We now have a much more streamlined process where this is not happening. People are not receiving any double payments. We are not penalizing anybody if they did. We are working with them to remedy the situation, and CRA and Service Canada are working in lockstep to ensure this isn't happening anymore.

• (1535)

[Translation]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you very much.

How many public servants are currently working on delivering emergency benefits?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Go ahead, Graham.

[Translation]

Mr. Graham Flack: For us, it's 5,000 employees.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: All right. You have 5,000 employees assigned to this, but in total, how many are there?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We can get you the CRA numbers. We just have ESDC's.

Graham, do you have the CRA numbers as well?

[Translation]

Mr. Graham Flack: I think there are an additional 4,000 people. We can check that out and send the data to the committee.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Fine.

Has the advice to use the network outside of peak hours caused people to work outside of normal working hours? Did it involve overtime, even though you increased the number of people working on the benefits?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I understand there are some people choosing.... We're not making people work overtime, obviously, but there are people working overtime.

Graham, do you have further information?

[Translation]

Mr. Graham Flack: Many of our employees chose to work overtime, but we didn't force people to do so. Many of them work in the call centres, but it also affects the employees who process requests, and the computer technicians. Many employees work all the time, but it's all on a voluntary basis.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Currently, is it possible to estimate the cost of overtime that goes into ensuring that Quebecers and Canadians receive their benefits quickly?

Mr. Graham Flack: We can try to calculate it, but we don't have that data right now. Our first goal was to get as many people as possible to handle this mind-boggling volume of calls. We put all kinds of people on it. We earmarked the money to do it, but we're going to do the math at the end of the month.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you.

The Service Canada offices were closed fairly quickly, in late March or early April, if my memory serves me correctly. This created a lot of concern, particularly for people who have physical, visual or hearing difficulties and who were worried they would not be able to manage on the telephone, or did not have an Internet connection.

How did you respond to these people?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question. It's very important.

We have been working with national disability organizations and other service providers to make sure that everybody, regardless of any barrier they face, has the information they need to both apply for and understand the different benefits that are available to them. In addition, of course, at Service Canada we have an online presence. We have augmented our call service capacity, but we have been working through our disability advisory committee and other means to make sure that the information is widely disseminated across the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Green for five minutes, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much.

In picking up on that, if a person were to apply for CERB through Service Canada, are they required to undertake more reporting requirements than if they had applied through the CRA? If so, why? Has this slowed down the delivery of the benefits?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: The very quick answer is no. It is one portal at the beginning, and it does not in any way slow down the benefits. Just confirm that, please, Graham. My understanding is that the back-end processing, how it's directed, does not impact that at all.

Mr. Graham Flack: The speed of benefits isn't affected, but we do ask additional questions for people coming in on the EI side. The reason is that those people will ultimately transition back to employment insurance. We don't want to create a gap or require those people to come back in and reapply for employment insurance. On the EI side, that's the reason we triage them at the front end. If they come in on the EI side, we collect that additional information, which doesn't slow down the processing, so that, when they eventually move back to EI, we won't be required to go back to them.

• (1540)

Mr. Matthew Green: It just seems that in my constituency we're receiving calls and talking about service standards between departments. Once the word gets out that it's easier just to apply through CRA, what would stop the public from doing that and avoiding Service Canada altogether?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Well, because it's a portal, the first page that you go to basically triages and sends people to a different set of questions depending on whether they are eligible for EI or not.

I suppose what you're saying is that somebody who might be eligible would choose to say they were not so they could just apply for the CERB without any other questions asked of them. Is that what you're asking, sir?

Mr. Matthew Green: Yes, generally, that is correct.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I think that is happening, but then we know, based on SINs, who is EI-eligible. When we port them back into the system at the back end, it will be along the same vein as if they had attested that they were EI-eligible. It just won't be as streamlined at the end.

Mr. Matthew Green: Sure, and I can certainly appreciate the need for having these portholes that triage. Certainly, the front lines in both departments are doing whatever they possibly can, but we're also hearing many stories about CERB applicants who have had to try for days to speak to a real person at Service Canada. Even if they get through, the phone system hangs up on them when they're supposed to be transferred to a person. Do we have enough staff to manage the call volume?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: From the beginning, the message we've been reluctantly conveying is one of patience. It has been very difficult for people to get a hold of someone, despite the fact that we have thousands of people. We have rallied volunteers. We've rallied retired public servants to come and be part of our call centres to answer Canadians' questions. With millions and millions of applicants—as somebody said earlier, almost eight million—the reality is that it has proven to be quite difficult. Despite our best effort, it still takes a long time to get through to Service Canada.

Graham, would you have anything to add?

Mr. Matthew Green: Before you jump in, Graham, would you please let us know what the current call centre standards are for the general Service Canada phone line?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen (Acting Chief Operating Officer, Service Canada, Department of Employment and Social Development): This is Cliff Groen from Service Canada. There are a number of points I would raise. Certainly we do know there have been challenges in accessing our EI call centre. There have been a number of measures we have put into place, one of which has been significantly automating our technology.

We had been having issues back in April in which a number of callers were being blocked at the automated level. In our EI call centre, lots of clients can actually self-serve and report on a bi-weekly basis using that automated system, but because of the number of calls we were receiving, we had lots of callers who were being blocked. We've actually adjusted that technology, and since last week we're now in a situation in which no callers are being blocked at the automated response level, which has actually dramatically improved service for those Canadians.

Second, we are in the process of continuing to hire lots of different call centre agents. We stood up a new 1,500-agent call centre for the CERB, and that's in addition to our existing 1,000-member—

Mr. Matthew Green: Respectfully, what is the actual service standard for the phone line versus the online portal? I can tell you that our constituency offices are an extension of the public service. When the phone gets dropped at your line, they're calling our offices, and I can share with you that even when we try to get through, we're having significant problems.

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Yes, and we are—

Mr. Matthew Green: We want to make sure we're working together here and that we have service standards that are clear and predictable, particularly in responding to MP offices.

The Chair: Sir, I'll have to get you to provide that answer in writing to our clerk, because we're completely out of time. If you could do that, I would appreciate it greatly.

We'll now go to our four-minute round of questions, starting with Mrs. Block.

Mr. Matthew Green: I have a quick point of order, as it relates to the writing, and I do apologize, Mr. Chair. Do we give the witnesses a time frame in which they're to reply? It's a good thing to say, but I wonder what the actual requirement is for them to reply in writing.

The Chair: I have never given a definitive timeline to reply. We're just saying as soon as possible.

Mrs. Block, you have four minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister and departmental staff, for joining us today.

So far, we have 7.59 million CERB applicants and 11 million applications. I'm wondering if you could tell us what percentage of applicants from the first month have reapplied for each of the next two periods. What percentage of applicants have not reapplied for any subsequent period?

• (1545)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: In fact, I've been asking those exact same questions.

Graham, can you give us any preliminary answers?

Mr. Graham Flack: We're running those specific numbers, Minister, but the evidence is that virtually all the individuals applying in the initial period have applied in the second period.

I guess the key interaction that we can't give you right now is the interaction with the wage subsidy. As you know, when that came in, it was retroactive and there was an expectation that people would leave the CERB as their companies brought them back on the wage subsidy. We cannot do that matching up front because employers have not been asked to provide the SINs for the people getting the wage subsidy up front. We can't make that matching with the wage subsidy on an individual client-by-client basis until employers eventually provide those numbers.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay, so maybe I'll ask a broader question. Is the individual utilization of CERB increasing or decreasing since it first opened in early April?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Graham?

Mr. Cliff C. Groen: Hi, sorry about that.... We have seen a slight downward trend in terms of the number of new applicants coming in over the last few weeks, although it is very difficult to have definitive trends because things are moving very quickly.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you for that.

This will be my last question.

Minister, in your response to my colleague's questions earlier, you acknowledged or referenced the added layer of the provinces in some of the decision-making and some of the policies that you've contemplated. As the provinces begin to safely open up their economies and get them back up and running, have you had any discussions with your colleagues, or within your department, about any changes to the programs that you are overseeing?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you. That's a really important question, and I am working very closely with my provincial and territorial colleagues, ministers of employment and on the disability side as well, because it's very important for us to understand where the puck is going, for lack of a better analogy.

What I can tell you is that our focus is on supporting workers, and, quite frankly, as the emphasis shifts to primarily supporting businesses—because, of course, more people in their jobs is better than people being sidelined by the pandemic—we have to ensure that we complement what the provinces are doing and that we don't put in any roadblocks or disincentives to get back to work.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Drouin, you have four minutes, please.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Thank you, Mr. Chair

Thank you, Minister, for taking the time to provide your voice to this committee.

On Friday, I heard a lot from expectant mothers with regard to those who would qualify for EI. Some were put on EI early, and some were put on the CERB, and they were afraid they would be impacted by this because they wouldn't be accumulating insurable hours.

Can you explain to this committee what changes have been made to maternity and parental benefits?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: What happened through our system, as we just discussed in the EI stream, is that expectant mothers who were answering "yes" to the question "Are you pregnant?" despite having applied for the CERB and more appropriately getting the CERB, were getting the regular EI benefits.

I had committed to addressing this, and I had also committed that no woman who was on the CERB would in any way have her entitlement to EI maternity or parental benefits impacted. As of last Friday, expectant mothers who should have been receiving the CERB will have their claims converted retroactively.

Just for precision, this means that, if a woman was receiving less than \$500, she would get a top-up to \$500. If she had been receiving more than \$500, she will not have that money clawed back. In addition, the weeks during which she had been collecting the CERB will not impact the number of weeks. If weeks need to be put back into her personal entitlement, that will happen as well.

We wanted to make sure that nobody was in any way detrimentally or adversely impacted by this system challenge we were facing, so it has been solved.

• (1550)

Mr. Francis Drouin: I know this is something that was important. I didn't receive thousands of emails, but I certainly received emails from those who, unfortunately, had lost their jobs and were put on employment insurance. They were wondering whether or not this would impact their overall parental leave, so I think that's great news. Thank you for listening to those expectant mothers.

The other issue I'm hearing locally is with regard to how disabilities and those who are impacted by disabilities are getting treated with regard to the pandemic. I know that a disability advisory group was put together. Can you explain to this committee what this disability advisory group is discussing? One of the issues was greater access to health care. Can you explain to this committee what the disability advisory group is doing with regard to that?

The Chair: You have slightly less than a minute, Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: My goodness, I could talk about this one forever. Thank you for your really important question.

People with disabilities in our country have faced significant barriers to accessing the health care system over the course of the pandemic, whether being impacted by visitor policies that don't let them have a communications support person with them, or by triage practices that basically discriminate on the ground of disability.

The Minister of Health and I are both working with our P/T colleagues, because, as you know, health is a provincial jurisdiction, to make sure that this isn't happening and that people's right to health care and medical treatment is upheld. That's one of the main priorities of our disability advisory group, which is a diverse group of disability experts, people with lived experience and parents from across the country, who have said that the number one thing they are worried about is health.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We will now go to Mr. Aboueltaif for four minutes, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboueltaif: Thank you.

Minister, you said that you have received a legal opinion on the CERB legislation that gave you broad powers to interpret the law. Will you be able to table that legal opinion so we may properly scrutinize these expanded legislative powers that you have given yourself?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: As I said, we were advised that under a broad interpretation of the initial CERB legislation, we have the authority to.... You're talking specifically about putting in the capability for CERB recipients to earn \$1,000, I assume. With a broad interpretation of the act, we were given the advice that it was possible to do this, and that is the course we took, quite frankly, to respond to what we were being asked to do by other parties, and to give more Canadians access to the benefit.

Mr. Ziad Aboueltaif: That is the story, but the question is, will you be able to table that power that you've given yourself with the committee, yes or no?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm in the position of advising the committee that I basically made the decision that a broad interpretation of this law allows us to create a threshold of income under which Canadians can still receive the benefit. As I've said in the past—

Mr. Ziad Aboueltaif: Sorry, Minister, but my time is very limited here. It's a straightforward question. Please, will you be able to table this power that you gave yourself with the committee, yes or no?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Are you looking to find out the particular section of the act under which we exercise the authority?

Mr. Ziad Aboueltaif: Well, I'm reading from your speech, Minister, and going from what you said. I'm not making up any stories here. I'm just going from what you said.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Right. There is regulatory authority in the first CERB legislation that allows the minister to create a class of income under which people can still receive the CERB. It was under that particular section of the act that a broad interpretation allowed us—

• (1555)

Mr. Ziad Aboueltaif: Minister, I'm not asking about the shape of the oranges. All I'm saying is that the question is very straightforward. Would you be able to provide that authority that you gave yourself to the committee, or table it? I think we have the right to ask that, and I think we deserve an answer.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Sir, I apologize. I'm not trying to evade; I'm trying to explain the authority under which we took the decision to create an income threshold of \$1,000 for the CERB. I've also committed publicly that I am prepared for the purpose of certainty at the first possible opportunity to legislate that threshold, if that makes everyone more comfortable. It was a decision that I took based on a broad interpretation—

Mr. Ziad Aboueltaif: That's no answer, Minister.

How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have less than 30 seconds.

Mr. Ziad Aboueltaif: Thirty seconds....

Sorry, Minister, but that is not an answer. I was expecting an answer, and you've been trying to describe what you have said. It's clear what you said. I was expecting an answer, and we deserve an answer from you. Unfortunately, we did not get it. I hope you will reconsider and provide what we have asked for down the road.

Thank you for now.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go to Mr. MacKinnon for four minutes, please.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I'm going to hit the toggle.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Minister, thank you very much.

I think we're running out of time. We could use a lot more time. I wanted to give you an opportunity to tell us about this emergency benefit that was provided in a hurry. It was quite a feat; we've seen a lot of comments about it in the media.

Could you tell us what you thought of the choice between using the employment insurance system or creating a parallel system?

It allowed you to put much-needed money into the hands of Canadians very quickly at the outset of this crisis.

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: In mid-March, two things were happening at the same time. The first was that we were getting an unprecedented level of EI applications. Very quickly, within days, it became apparent that our EI system couldn't respond as nimbly as we needed it to. People would have to wait 12 to 18 months if we were processing millions and millions of EI claims. At the same time, we recognized that there were a lot of people who weren't falling within the EI system whom we needed to help.

Our initial solution was the creation of two new benefits that would parallel the EI regular benefits and EI sickness benefits. What then happened, again within a day or two, was that we realized that having four benefits out there was proving difficult and complicated for Canadians. With those two things happening at the same time, we got together and said that we needed to do something drastic, something different, outside of EI. We needed one benefit for everyone. We couldn't spend our time, and Canadians didn't need us to spend our time, trying to explain which stream.

We basically pivoted, within probably 48 hours, from announcing those two first benefits to consolidating into one benefit all four streams: people who are EI-eligible and EI sickness-eligible, and the same two for non-EI people. We worked very quickly to find a solution within our existing systems. We found CRA and Service Canada to be the solution to that, because of their proven track records in delivering for Canadians, and Canadians' trust, particularly in CRA. They get their GST, their tax refund, and their Canada child benefit, so they're used to getting payments from CRA.

We knew that we had to automate. We knew it had to be a flat payment; that's what the system would allow us to do. Within probably a week of the initial consolidation conversations, we had figured out the solution, designed the system, put legislation in front of Parliament and received royal assent.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Colleagues, it is now 4 p.m. However, I would very much like to complete our entire round. We have two more interventions: one from Mr. Barsalou-Duval and one from Mr. Green, two minutes each.

Minister, I hope you can stick around for another four minutes.

• (1600)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I sure can. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We can just let the technicians know that we will be going slightly over time.

Now we'll go to Monsieur Barsalou-Duval for two minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My question is for the minister, and it concerns my constituency office, but I am sure it is a case like many others. Citizens often call constituency offices for help with the Canada emergency benefit or employment insurance. Most of the time they do so as a last resort. Calling their MP's office is not their first instinct. Unfortunately, when constituency office employees want to help citizens, they have to wait two days before they get a call back from a Service Canada employee. That is still quite a long time. The files are piling up. It takes time.

In the case of CERB, it's even worse, because there is no dedicated line for constituency offices. So it's impossible for us to get in touch with someone to help our constituents.

What does the government intend to do to solve this problem?

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: As I said before, it has been very challenging for Service Canada personnel to respond in a timely manner. As Cliff said, we've tried to automate the response system as much as possible to get people the information without a human intervention.

I completely appreciate that it is not satisfactory. We are pulling out all the stops to have as many people as possible answering the phones and to have as much information as possible available on the web for people to have so they can avoid calling in. We're looking at any solutions.

Any solutions you have, we would be open to, but at the end of the day, with eight million people having applied and millions more with questions, it is an exercise of patience and, admittedly, frustration, which we are working really hard every day to address.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our final two-minute intervention will be from Mr. Green, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much.

Part 18 of Bill C-13 amended the Employment Insurance Act to allow the Minister of Employment and Social Development, with the consent of the Minister of Finance, to make interim orders to mitigate the economic effects of COVID-19 until September 30. Through these orders, you are able to adapt existing provisions and add provisions for new benefits to the act.

What amendments have been made to date to the Employment Insurance Act to mitigate the economic effects of COVID-19? How many Canadians have benefited?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: That's a really important question. Mr. Chair, I'm happy to give a thorough answer to it in writing, just because I don't want to miss any.

With this legislation, whatever we want to do on the CERB side, we want to do on the EI side. If we want to allow people to earn \$1,000, we have to make changes to both the CERB legislation and to existing EI systems. We want to allow seasonal workers and EI exhaustees to access the CERB. We basically have to make parallel changes along the CERB stream and the EI stream.

Graham, do you have a list with you? I don't want to miss any, but as I said, I'd almost feel more comfortable giving you this in writing to make sure I haven't missed any.

Mr. Graham Flack: There are four interim orders published under the regulatory authority, and we will forward those to the committee. They cover, for example, seasonal workers and [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. Matthew Green: Okay, thank you.

I appreciate, Mr. Chair, your making that exception for us.

The Chair: You're very welcome.

Minister, thank you for your attendance here today. We look forward to perhaps speaking with you again sometime in the near future. We thank you and all of your officials once again for being here.

We apologize for the technical difficulties during the virtual meetings. We're all experiencing some of these technical difficulties from time to time, so I appreciate your patience, as well as that of your officials and all the committee members.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will endeavour to get you your answers very quickly to your three questions.

The Chair: That would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Colleagues, once again, we will be meeting on Friday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. Thank you for your attendance today.

We are adjourned.

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