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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good morning. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on March 8, the committee will resume its study on the federal government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

Appearing before us today are Dr. Randall Croutze and Kevin Desjardins of the Canadian Dental Association. Welcome. We have Carolyn Davies of Catholic Crosscultural Services. Welcome as well. We also have Salahudin Khan and Mirza Hakeem Baig of the Islamic Foundation of Toronto, who are both appearing by video conference.

Witnesses are reminded that you have seven minutes for each grouping of panellists.

We'll begin with Dr. Croutze. You have seven minutes, please.

Dr. Randall Croutze (President, Canadian Dental Association): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee.

My name is Dr. Randall Croutze, and I am president of the Canadian Dental Association. Here with me today is Mr. Kevin Desjardins, the director of public affairs at the association.

I want to thank you for inviting the CDA to appear before you on behalf of the dental profession to speak to you on this important issue. We had the chance to meet with some of you earlier this month, and we appreciate the opportunity for furthering the discussion.

The CDA is the national voice of dentistry dedicated to the promotion of optimal oral health, which is an essential component of general health. We represent the provincial dental associations, which represent over 18,000 practising dentists.

We are here to speak on the issue of dental care within the interim federal health program for Syrian refugees. With Canada welcoming 25,000 Syrian refugees in recent months, and 10,000 more to come, there is greater focus on the state of our refugee health care system.

As you may be aware, refugees who arrive in Canada are covered for a year under the IFHP, the interim federal health program, which covers the basic health needs. For dental care, this is limited to emergency or urgent care. This program currently covers emergency examinations; some diagnostic radiography; pre-approved restora-

tions for severely affected teeth; extractions, with more complicated extractions requiring approval; emergency prescriptions; and anaesthesia.

To be clear, these are the most basic levels of dental care.

This recent significant influx of refugees has pressure-tested the interim federal health program, and we have heard from dentists across the country that the program has been unable to hold up to the test. Our members, the provincial associations, have been vocal about their concerns.

The limited manner in which oral health is covered under the IFHP creates challenges for patients and for health care providers. We have heard from dental offices that have been strained by the added effort that is required to work with the program, and the strict limitations of the program are not in line with the accepted best practices of care.

Among the issues identified to us are the requirement to receive pre-authorization for fillings. No other dental benefits program requires this. The criteria for having such a request approved are unknown and unavailable, which adds an unnecessary administrative burden. Even after having a procedure pre-authorized, there is a requirement to call to reconfirm eligibility for the program when the patient returns to the office.

Beyond the fact there should be no eligibility issues with this cohort of refugees, as they have been pre-screened and declared permanent residents, the time it takes to verify what should be evident can be as long as an hour on the day of the appointment.

That coverage does not always align with the generally accepted standards of care. For instance, large fillings are covered, but stainless steel crowns, which are roughly the same cost, are not. Stainless steel crowns are the standard of care for restoring two or more surfaces on baby teeth in high-risk children.

With regard to X-rays, there is no coverage for bitewing films unless they are part of a full mouth series of films, which may not be necessary. Bitewing films are necessary for diagnosis of cavities and should be covered as a stand-alone code.

There is no post-approval for surgical extractions of teeth. It is impossible to tell before you begin an extraction if it's going to be a simple extraction or a more complex surgical extraction.

I would note that in recent weeks, and in the time since we visited with some of you on the Hill, the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has issued a bulletin that updates the list of services that can be offered, along with criteria and limitations. We have reviewed this bulletin and we see there have been some areas of improvement to the program.

We still believe it is necessary to consult with the dental profession if any changes are made to the policy to ensure they'll align with accepted practices of care.

Administration of the program should not drive patient care. Refugees, especially children who have been lacking consistent dental treatment, preventive care, or fluoridated water have a host of problems that may require further treatment beyond what the IFHP affords. Access to provincial social services programs is in most cases not immediate, and delays in treatment can exacerbate these health issues.

Moreover, public health and volunteer initiatives have been strained beyond limits in their attempts to deal with these issues.

Before I conclude, I would be remiss if I didn't take a moment to recognize the dentists from across the country who have stepped forward to help these new refugees. This includes providing free screenings and providing pro bono care.

However, relying exclusively on pro bono work is not sufficient to address the oral health needs of this cohort of new arrivals. As health care professionals, Canadian dentists are concerned with patient quality of life and optimal oral health for all refugees.

We urge the government to further examine the dental policies of the interim federal health program so that it can be assessed and improved to ensure that refugees can have immediate access to basic dental care.

I thank the committee for their time and attention and I look forward to your questions.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Croutze.

Go ahead, Ms. Davis. You have seven minutes.

Ms. Carolyn Davis (Executive Director, Catholic Crosscultural Services): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today regarding the government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

My name is Carolyn Davis, and I am the executive director of Catholic Crosscultural Services, a settlement agency operating in Scarborough in the east part of Toronto and in Peel region in the communities of Mississauga and Brampton.

For over 55 years we have been providing a wide range of settlement services that assist over 30,000 newcomers annually to settle and integrate into life in Canada. Contrary to our name, we serve everyone, regardless of their country of origin, their religion, or their background.

We provide language classes, orientation, and employment programs. We have seven offices. We are in 50 different schools and 10 community locations.

In addition to being a settlement agency, we're also involved in the private sponsorship of refugees program. We administered the sponsorship agreement for the Toronto Catholic archdiocese until 2008, and for the past nine years have been delivering the refugee sponsorship training program, or RSTP, which provides training, information, and support to sponsoring groups across Canada.

Prior to the Syrian initiative, we focused primarily on supporting sponsorship agreement holders, but with the explosion in the general public's interest in sponsoring refugees, we've been overwhelmed with requests for training and support from new sponsoring groups. We were fortunate to receive additional funds from IRCC, the Province of Ontario, and the City of Toronto to hire additional staff, but we continue to struggle to meet needs.

We also administer the blended visa office-referred program, or BVOR, matching BVOR cases with sponsoring groups. This program has such a high demand that when a new group of cases becomes available, they are claimed within minutes. They're released by email and are claimed within minutes. In January we matched 500 BVOR cases, which is actually a year's worth of work, generally.

Since more often than not it's easy to run out of time in one of these presentations, I will move to some conclusions and recommendations and then circle back a bit to some of the background.

I want to stress three key points today.

One, the private sponsorship of refugees program is incredibly important. It augments the government's commitment to aid refugees and allows for the average Canadian to become involved in a life-changing humanitarian effort. The refugee sponsorship training program has a vital role in supporting Canadians' participation as sponsors in our refugee resettlement program.

Two, the Syrian refugee initiative identified gaps in the RSTP and in the private sponsorship program and clearly demonstrated the need for increased funds to meet the training, information, and support needs of these explosively expanding sponsorship groups.

Three, the settlement sector plays a vital role in supporting both the long- and short-term resettlement of Syrian refugees. For government-assisted refugees, the settlement sector is the primary source of support. For privately sponsored refugees, they have a role in working with sponsors to ensure that the refugees receive the settlement services they need.

The sector's role in supporting Syrian refugees applies from their first days in Canada through to month 13 and beyond. Attention needs to be paid to a better connection between the settlement sector and the sponsorship community so that they can best collaborate. The settlement sector requires immediate and targeted funding to support the needs of the Syrian refugees.

To put these recommendations into context, the private sponsorship program has been bringing refugees to Canada for more than 35 years. The refugee sponsorship training program has been providing private sponsors with training on everything from how to complete forms to how to understand the process to how to settle refugees in their new life.

Until recently RSTP has been working with sponsorship agreement holders, groups of five, and community sponsors only if they've had their applications rejected. We have no way of getting to them otherwise. This work was limited only by the funding and staff resources allocated to the program. Since the Syrian refugee resettlement initiative, RSTP has been attempting to respond to the demands of sponsors, old and new, in all categories, but it has been a bit overwhelming.

Settlement agencies across the country have a long history of supporting the settlement of refugees who have arrived as a result of war and forced migration, circumstances similar to those of the Syrian refugees. As a sector, we have the skills and experience to meet their needs.

Is the system perfect? No, but we are a skilled, resourceful, and committed sector able and willing to do the work.

• (1115)

Syrian refugees, like those before them, need language, information, education, training, and employment supports. What marks the Syrian refugees resettlement initiative as different from other resettlement initiatives is the large number of refugees arriving in a very short period of time, placing an extraordinary demand on the system. Unfortunately, the refugees and their sponsors are looking for supports and resources from a system that has experienced funding cuts every year for the past five years at least. We don't need to reinvent or recreate the sponsorship or settlement sector to meet the needs of Syrian refugees, but the government does need to fully fund the existing services so they can ramp up enough to meet the needs of this group, which is unprecedentedly large.

With respect to the private sponsorship program and RSTP supports, the demand for information, supports, and matching to available refugees increased so fast it was impossible to keep up with the demand. Without exaggeration, each of our RSTP workers was receiving somewhere in the vicinity of 150 to 200 emails a day with questions, requests for workshops, and detailed process questions. It was next to impossible to keep up. We did receive the additional funding to double the staff, but the requests were also increasing at about the same rate or more. We don't expect that this will drop off as the refugees arrive and the sponsors, especially new ones, begin to deal with the reality of their sponsorship responsibilities. There are a high number of new sponsors who are connected to some very complex cases, and they will need support over the next while.

To give IRCC credit where it is due, we were contacted a couple of weeks ago and asked to submit our ideas for an expanded and reimagined sponsorship support service. They were clear that there was a commitment to building the program to better serve the needs of sponsors. Our plan will be submitted to them today, and we expect to hear from them in the near future.

An important change to the refugee program that would make a huge difference to Syrian refugees would be an increase to GARA, the government-assisted refugee allowance.

The Chair: Ms. Davis, your time is almost up.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Okay.

It is based on provincial welfare rates, and it also sets the financial support scale for the private sponsors. It is completely inadequate in this time period.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Davis.

Mr. Baig, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig (Joint Secretary, Islamic Foundation of Toronto): I would like to thank you for inviting us to this session.

The Islamic Foundation of Toronto has been in existence as a SAH, a sponsorship agreement holder, for the past 15 years, but we have aggressively worked on the private sponsorship of Syrian refugees and the BVOR categories since January 2016. Until March 31, when there were no restrictions on how many applications we could submit, we submitted around 187 applications for 187 families, and that is approximately 8,500 persons, with a financial commitment from outside of \$6 million. Without government support, without the IRCC, and without our bureaucrats, this would not have been possible.

The other category is BVOR, whereby the government supports each of the families for six months. We have sponsored approximately 27 families. As part of the continuation of the process, there are some family members who remain there for whom we have to apply. Other families have been divided, with some left in Turkey, Jordan, or other countries.

We have a challenge, because we have been allocated only six people for the rest of the year, from March 31 onwards, and we're not able to meet the demand of our congregations. Our congregations are ready with the money in addition to the \$6 million we have committed, and we have more than 67 families who are waiting in line to sponsor their near and dear ones, with their financial commitments in place. We are taking it up with different levels of the government and taking it up with IRCC, but unfortunately we are not getting any help on that.

We would like to be part of this process to help the government and to reduce the financial commitment of the government. We would like to pitch in with money. However, we need the IRCC to look into the issue of the allocations. If we have submitted applications for 8,500 people from January until March 31—in three months—we should get a fair distribution of the allocation for the rest of the year, and this has not happened. For this reason we request that the private sponsorship of refugee allocations be revamped in terms of how the number of people to be sponsored by each of these SAHs is allocated.

Also, when there is a process of BVOR allocation and a communication is sent to all the SAHs, we respond within three, four, or five minutes' time. Sometimes we'll get one family and sometimes we don't get any. Something has to be looked into. What is the problem? If there are 25 families, why would we not get at least one family? That has to be revamped.

We have a complete settlement process in place. We ensure that the families who are coming in don't just do some odd jobs. We train them. We take them for training first. There is a group of five or six people working with each of the family members. They plan for the whole year. They have one year to see that this family gets settled in Canada and doesn't go on welfare. We work hard.

For this reason the government should also consider giving some secondary funding to the SAHs that are doing the settlement activity. Without a complete comprehensive action plan, we cannot settle these families. We have to ensure that the family members—the kids and all—are settled in life here in Canada. We say each time—and we don't have to repeat it here—that we feel proud that our country has taken up this challenge and has done this great job.

Thank you.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Baig.

Ms. Zahid, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all our witnesses for all the work they are doing in helping to settle these Syrian refugee families here in Canada and for joining us today.

My first question is for Ms. Davis.

Previously in the committee we have heard that the integration of newcomers who are teenagers can be particularly challenging. It is a difficult time for any teenager, let alone for one adapting to a new country and culture. I understand that your organization has been engaged a lot in this area and you have a lot of offices in schools.

Can you discuss the challenges this age group is facing and how we can help? What can we do?

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Thank you for that question.

We are involved in quite a number of high schools in Scarborough and are very involved with the newcomer community in the secondary schools. There are a number of issues with that particular group. Some of it is simply that it's difficult enough being a teenager, with all it includes, let alone in a new country and a new language, and maybe not even necessarily wanting to be here.

On top of that, you have no way to communicate with your peer group, and you may have been out of school for a while. Imagine all of those factors piled together, with an 18-year-old sitting in a classroom with 14-year-olds and not necessarily feeling like they belong. Our grave concern is that we need to provide these Syrian youth with a sense of belonging outside that classroom, which is challenging.

Through group activities.... We have a plan out with IRCC that hasn't been approved yet for a matching program. It would potentially match Syrian youth with youth who have gone through the settlement process but have been here for a while, who would bring them along and give them a sense that there is life after some of the more difficult initial stages.

We also are looking at providing some academic enrichment to help this particular youth cohort catch up on their academics, given that they may well have missed a number of years of school.

• (1125)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I understand that some of the services provide are counselling, referral, and filling out paperwork for the families. How important are some of these softer skills to helping Syrian newcomers integrate successfully in Canada?

Ms. Carolyn Davis: They're incredibly important. Even just filling out paperwork and explaining how systems work and connecting them with other resources is really the heart and soul of settlement, in that it helps with everyday living. It's the ability to get things done in your life. It is to help the refugees have a sense of a plan for themselves and a sense of how to accomplish that plan in order to settle, and it's to work with them along the way while they experience good moments and bad moments as they work their way through a settlement plan. We provide the backdrop for them to come back and ask further questions and we provide that support on an ongoing basis.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: You also provide targeted employment services and training for immigrants and refugees in the Scarborough area. Going back well before the current wave of Syrian newcomers, in your experience, what are the fundamental elements and supports that need to be in place for the newcomers to successfully integrate into the employment market?

Ms. Carolyn Davis: The program that you're referring to is a program that is called enhanced language training. It is for internationally trained medical professionals to help them bridge into the medical technology fields and use their training and background.

A couple of the elements that make that program so successful are that there is a lot of language training to help them use professional language and translate what they know into English so that they can get through interviews and operate in the workplace.

It also provides a volunteer work placement in order to help people connect with the realities of the work world in Canada. They may be familiar with what it's like to work in a hospital in their home country, but it may be significantly different in Canada. It's important, therefore, to give people a sense of a volunteer placement. We'd like to be able to pay them for that placement, but we don't have the funds to do that. This is probably one of the most important elements of that program.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: My next question is for Mr. Khan or Mr. Baig.

As we know, youth can face some of the biggest challenges when it comes to integration, although in time they can also be the most successful, serving as a generational bridge between their family and the new Canadian society. I know your group offers free tutoring, life skills lessons, and Quranic school classes, all specifically catering to youth.

How have these programs assisted in ensuring that Syrian children are able to enter the educational system and successfully integrate into Canadian society, all while retaining their cultural and religious heritage?

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig: Simultaneously with the ESL classes, we have activities for the youth and the children at IFT every weekend. It's not specific to the Syrian kids; they sit with the other kids, who are from different backgrounds, different ethnicities. The diversity of Canada is represented in each of those classes. It helps them to be comfortable in interacting, in knowing how to interact.

There are some challenges with the language, and those things are going on simultaneously. We have resources at hand for Arabic. In the classes, they speak English. Slowly, we see dramatic improvement in the kids. They were very shy, they were not talking to other kids, and now they are.

It's a slow process. It will take some time for them to get used to Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, take seven minutes, please.

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank you all for coming. I particularly thank the Islamic Foundation for your generosity in helping these people.

I have a few questions for the dentists.

Dr. Croutze, I met you several weeks ago, of course, when the dentists arrived on Parliament Hill, and I have a special interest. My late daddy was a dentist, and so I understand some of your concerns.

You talked about the list of services being inadequate. I'd like you to elaborate on that. You said some services aren't covered. Is there a liability concern of dentists? What happens when something has to be done that is not covered in this list?

• (1130)

Dr. Randall Croutze: Thank you very much. I appreciated your attendance at our function, and thank you so much for the comments.

Absolutely, when we take a look at the list of services that are provided, we see that it is the bare minimum. It falls outside of what we would consider good care. You're absolutely right. When I take a look at a cavity on a tooth and there's no coverage for it, it would be like a medical doctor taking a look at some cancer and saying, "Well, that cancer is not quite big enough for me to operate on. I'm going to have to wait until it gets bigger." That's the dilemma we face all the time in dealing with these sorts of situations.

The situations we face are life and death. These people are coming with incredible loads of disease—things we don't see in Canada—because of the poor nutrition, the poor preventative care they've had.

They've had no fluoridated water. They have rampant cavities that infect nerves and cause abscesses in the tissues around.

The liabilities are more than just a case of someone coming in with a chipped crown. These are people who, if we don't treat them, are going to end up in the hospital. People die of dental infection. We don't realize that in this country, but in the countries these people come from, it's a common enough occurrence. Absolutely we can't let these people exit our offices without providing them treatment.

It's inappropriate to have to pre-authorize for a surgical extraction for someone coming in with a facial abscess. The kinds of things we're looking at are open-and-drain, and there's a fee code for that, but it's not covered here. That's a basic minimum service. If someone comes with a facial abscess, we want to be able to get them out of it. Giving them an antibiotic and a painkiller and sending them out is not good treatment. It is something our regulators would look at poorly and it goes beyond what our ethics would dictate.

We need to provide better care than what is provided here, and that care is being provided. Dentists are providing it at no cost, which makes it sound as though we're not making money. The fact of the matter is that the overhead in our office is about 70%. What ends up happening is that if it's \$1,000 worth of work, we've paid \$700 towards that and done it for free, so we're losing money.

It's something that dentists do all the time. We generally don't complain about it, but when the load is increased to this extent, it's beyond our capacity to accept those sorts of numbers.

Mr. David Tilson: Is there a language issue?

Dr. Randall Croutze: Absolutely. Fortunately, we have either staff or dentists who are capable and able to speak. Yes, the language issue is significant. People will come with interpreters; that does happen. It is a bit of a barrier, but it's not the most significant barrier.

Mr. David Tilson: How long does it take to get payment from the government?

Dr. Randall Croutze: First you have to examine the person; then you'd have to pre-authorize for the work. That process is going to take four weeks. You take a look at the patient coming in with an abscess, in pain, and you send off a request to do some work. Then you sit back and wait for four weeks; then the patient presents. At that time, you get on the phone and re-verify their participation in this and then do the work and submit for it. It's going to be about four weeks before you are paid.

We're not concerned about that. We want to make sure that we're providing good service.

Mr. David Tilson: I'd like to ask this question of all witnesses, starting with Dr. Croutze. It is on the issue that has cropped up with previous witnesses, the issue of the 13th month. In other words, after a year the government assistance stops. I remember asking a question of the minister, and the minister's answer was, well, there's social service, there's social assistance.

I'll start off with you and then move to Ms. Davis as to how this will affect the work you're doing, when all of a sudden there is no more financial assistance from the government.

Dr. Randall Croutze: As was indicated, I am hopeful that these individuals.... They are very talented, incredible, resourceful people. I think they are going to be on their feet by that time. If you ask me, I think they are going to be able to integrate very well. They are going to have good-paying jobs, skilled jobs, and they will have dental insurance and those sorts of things. My hope is that they achieve that level of support.

Moving forward, I would hope for that outcome, but for those people who aren't able to do that, the provincial dental associations take a look at assisting people in getting access to some of the specific programs available under social services. Those programs are incrementally better than the present interim federal health program, so the level of care they would receive at that point is meeting a certain standard that would be acceptable. At that point, most of these people would perhaps have a possibility of being covered, depending on their income situation.

• (1135)

Mr. David Tilson: That is good to hear.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Many of the government-assisted refugees have a very low level of English language skills, and there is a fair bit of illiteracy in their own language. There are issues around employment and whether or not there are skills that are transferable to an urban life in Canada.

I am not as optimistic as my fellow witness as to the GARs being self-sufficient after a year. This is a group that will probably require more than a year's worth of support. It is certainly another one of my recommendations that this be considered.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: It is not going to have a huge impact on our work, in that we are going to be working with the GARs as soon as they get into their own housing and all the way through.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Davis—

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Month 13 is difficult for them, not us.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses.

I would like to follow up on that, Ms. Davis. In your presentation, you mentioned two issues. One was funding cuts that have been made in the last five years, and perhaps more. I wonder if you can elaborate on the funding cuts and what needs to be in place.

In another presentation, other witnesses in Ontario advised that they have lost funding. There was the LINC program funding cut, for example. In this year's budget, while they didn't lose funding in that stream, they didn't get an increase either, and their workload has increased by more than three times. I wonder if you can elaborate on that.

With respect to month 13 and the impacts around it, you mentioned the issue of the GAR allowance, which follows the provincial allowance, being deficient. I wonder what suggestions you have in terms of a remedy for that. Should the minister, for example, convene a provincial-territorial ministerial table to talk

about increasing welfare rates for all people, whether they are refugees or otherwise?

I would love to hear your comments on these issues.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: I will tackle month 13, because that was actually one of my suggestions.

The rates are set by the province, not by the federal government, but I think everybody has some skin in the game in improving the ability of both those on social assistance and the refugees to have an allowance that allows them to live a reasonable lifestyle. I think this would be a good suggestion, as a start. Certainly considering the extension of GAR support for refugees beyond the year would be another suggestion that might merit consideration.

With regard to funding cuts, I can't speak for everyone across the country, but in Ontario we have had reduced funding. As an organization, over the last five years we have probably lost somewhere in the vicinity of \$800,000 to \$900,000 worth of funding.

We have five contracts with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, or IRCC, three of them for direct service and two for indirect. In our direct service, we have had either a status quo budget or a reduction. For example, this year in our settlement services in Toronto we lost \$210,000. In the Toronto area, we have seen 437 Syrian refugees turn up at our door in the last number of months. We had a funding cut, but we are also seeing quite a number of Syrian refugees.

We didn't get a funding cut in our Peel region contracts, but we were status quo. We are seeing an influx. We are not just maintaining the services we provide to the entire newcomer community, but we are also seeing quite a number of new Syrian refugees.

• (1140)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I know that time is limited. I wonder if you could provide an additional submission to this committee with some details around these cuts and the implications of the increase in the demand for the services.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It would be very useful and helpful if that could be submitted to us, so thank you for that.

I want to touch on the question to Mr. Croutze about dental services. In our meeting and in your presentation today, you mentioned that patients have to come in, and then you have to go through the process to re-verify their approval, which often takes up to an hour in terms of staff time. I wonder if you could touch on that issue quickly, and what needs to be done to eradicate this challenge.

Dr. Randall Croutze: I think eliminating the requirement for pre-authorizing routine dental work is a start. It's an unnecessary administrative burden. It doesn't occur with any other dental provider. Removing it would be a cost savings not only for the provider but also the dental office, and it would increase access to care. It's a barrier right now that has an easy fix. I think of eliminating the requirement for pre-authorizing a filling. I don't think there are too many dentists out there who are looking for more work. I spent thirteen hours yesterday working on teeth, and I'll be doing that tomorrow. There are a lot of holes out there to fill.

I can let you know right now that dentists are very ethical people. There's no requirement in any other benefits program to do that, and it's unfair to have to do it. Removing that requirement from the very beginning would eliminate having to wait four weeks to provide absolutely necessary and perhaps life-saving treatment. It would decrease the burden in the office and improve access to care.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

To Mr. Baig, via video conferencing, I think that in your presentation you talked about the need for settlement funding. Does your organization have access to government funding?

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig: No, we do not have access to government funding that I have seen, but we are requesting it. For all resources, actually, there is an element of settlement activity we do on a daily basis. We have families coming into our organization every day. We need funding for additional staff that we need. We do most of the funding and we are fairly okay with that, but we need some government funding to take care of some professional equipment for counselling and to provide help for PTSD and so on.

We do get some resources, but we need funding for those areas, because if the families are Muslim, they are more comfortable coming into an Islamic institution than going to a church. If we had some funding, it would play into the resources. It would be helpful to us.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, you have 10 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'll address this invitation to all of the presenters in my last 10 seconds. If you have additional information that was not touched on, detailed information about specific recommendations or issues or problems that you see in the community, please send that submission to this committee so that we can review it. Because of time, we're not able to get into all of those details. Thank you for that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is to the Islamic Foundation of Toronto.

It's such a wonderful pleasure to hear you talk about the incredible support that you have managed to gather in the community, raising \$6 million to support refugee families. You talked about having a group of people there to support refugee families throughout their settlement process. You talked about five or six people, a team of people who would help a family. Could you tell us a bit more about that? Who are those folks? What do they do and how do they get involved with your initiative?

• (1145)

Mr. Salahudin Khan (Vice-President, Islamic Foundation of Toronto): They are all volunteers. We have a list of almost 300 volunteers who are helping us. Even when we are filling out the application forms, everything is done by volunteers. We have the applications, which we have already submitted. We have people who can speak the Arabic language. This assignment of five people to each family is to look after taking them to the doctors, showing them how they can use the transit system, and all of those things. We also

try to see where we can fit them for jobs, where the school district for their children is, and so on.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Excellent.

I gather that you are working with local employers. How do you go about finding the jobs and being able to match families and individuals looking for work with the opportunities that are out there for employment?

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig: All of these teams that we have are varied, with different skill sets. There are project managers. There are officials working in each of those groups. They manage their own teams, actually, and the work, so they take care of this.

They have one year. The refugee families have been told that they have one year to work with the group and co-operate with it, and the group is also told they have one year to work and see that the family is settled.

There is budget planning. There is skill-set training. If there is a truck driver, how does he get his credentials here? How does he get his licences? But first it's the ESL part, and then the licences. They are all hard workers that we are seeing. There are farmers, there are construction workers, so it's fairly easy.

However, in the case of professionals who are coming under various sponsorships, we are attaching the doctors and dentists to a group that has a doctor who could help them in at least getting them into the same field in some other job.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Great. Thank you very much.

My next question is to Ms. Davis.

Your organization runs the refugee sponsorship training program. It is quite a unique program funded through IRCC. Outside of Quebec, it's the only program in Canada that is working to support private sponsors.

What are some of the biggest challenges you have encountered with private sponsors in the work they're trying to carry out, and how have you tackled those challenges?

Mr. Chair, I'll be sharing my time with Mr. Sarai.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Yes, we are the only people who provide the refugee sponsorship training program across Canada. We had four people providing service to the entire country prior to additional funding, so you get a sense of how very quickly four people get overwhelmed.

Probably the biggest challenge with the sponsors at this point is that there are a large number of new sponsors who responded to the call for sponsorship and who decided that they were going to take this on. It is a very complicated, complex, and responsible position they've put themselves in. It's important that they understand that going in.

Now that refugee families are beginning to arrive in Canada, there's also the complication that the family is here and now they have to begin to actually fulfill their responsibilities. As I said to somebody at a meeting last week, it's like planning for a baby and bringing baby home. It is a completely different ball game. Most people can seem to get the analogy.

When the refugee family gets here, a lot of the sponsors are looking for very practical, hands-on support. We are trying, in a couple of places, to bring private sponsors together to begin to hopefully develop some self-support groups—"We solved this problem this way" or "You solved that problem the other way"—because we can't be there for everyone, certainly. We do webinars to try to get information out to a broad spectrum of people regardless of where they're located.

We do have two staff located outside of our core group. One is in Vancouver and one is in Halifax, and it's a model that we would like to replicate with additional funding down the road to have people more on the ground to do more of that sponsor support work, which is turning out, I think, to be the bulk of our work right now, and it will be the same moving forward. It's going to be a lot more of the sponsor support as they work with their refugees when they get here.

• (1150)

The Chair: Mr. Sarai, you have one minute.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): My question is to Mr. Croutze.

Do you guys have a brief or a document that would perhaps make it much easier for the approval process that you could forward to us afterwards? We can perhaps give that to the department.

It seems that the services are covered, but the problem is the process by which you get approved. As opposed to normal insurance programs or benefits under which certain items are already pre-approved up to a certain limit, you have this overlay that requires you to pre-examine, send it in, and come back. I think that probably costs the department extra money as well.

If there is a briefing note or a document you could give us to suggest how we can make this federal health program much more efficient, specifically for the dental program, we would really appreciate it.

Dr. Randall Croutze: Thank you very much. I appreciate that. We will certainly take care of that. We don't have a document like that, because for us it's self-evident, but we'll certainly delineate the differences between the programs so that you can look at it in terms of gaining efficiencies.

I think that's what we're looking for. We want to make this efficient. We appreciate the investment that's being made—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Croutze.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming out and giving us some of your insight.

Dr. Croutze, I hear the same question all the time with regard to the Syrian refugees. Is this additional money we're looking at? Is the problem that we have something, but we're looking for additional money, or is it just the approval that is the issue?

Dr. Randall Croutze: Certainly I think we want to be efficient. What we're looking at is taking care of some of the administrative

burden to allow for access to care. Some of the stuff we're looking at will not be a big investment. We want to make sure it's efficient.

We talked about administrative controls. These are things like allowing for bitewings. It's interesting that they'll cover for a full mouth series, which is 16 periapical films, and two bitewings, but I just need the two bitewings to determine if there are cavities. The other ones don't really help me. They'll pay for the whole envelope of it, and they just don't understand that those are the ones I need. It would actually decrease costs by having that as a stand-alone fee.

The issue with stainless steel crowns, which have a very similar cost to a large amalgam filling, doesn't make sense. It's not the standard of care that we would do that. It would be something we would find unacceptable in any other cohort. We just wouldn't do it, and the cost is the same.

To sum up, we're looking at efficiencies, I guess, not a big envelope of money.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely. This is good to know. Hopefully we can work on it and make it right.

My next question is for you, Mr. Baig, up in Scarborough in Toronto.

It looks like you're frustrated up there, where you're doing all that good work. You had 187 families sponsoring 8,500 people, which is much better than the government-sponsored refugees. Is there anything that we can do, or that the government should do? What should be improved from our side?

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig: Thank you for the question.

Basically what had happened in the three-month period when we sponsored 8,500 people was that before that there were no allocations for Syria and Iraq. The SAHs, the sponsorship agreement holders, could apply for as many as we could, and we did that. We took advantage of that. However, after that, as of March 31, the allocations were minimum, based on how many we did before that, in 2015. We did not do anything in 2015, because the crisis started in 2016. The chances to apply and the procedures were clear enough for us to start in January of 2016.

We did that, and found that now, after March 31, we got an allocation from IRCC for six people only. We have more than 67 families in line now and we have stopped taking in applications. We have already in line 67 families who we sponsored, and now we cannot. The applications are being returned to us. Today we got a communication that six of the applications will be returned to us. We already had the funding in place. We have to go back to the congregation and tell them that we cannot help, and that they have to take back the money.

This is a challenge. I mean, when the government was coming up with an allocation formula, they should have taken into consideration how many families, how many people, were sponsored from January to March 31. Based on that, they should have come up with an allocation formula. They didn't, and that's a frustration.

• (1155)

Mr. Bob Saroya: How is it finding jobs for these refugees? Did you find some jobs for the people who are here?

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig: We have different concerned groups working with us—for example, in Milton there is a gentleman called Jim Estill. They have jobs already there for the families coming in.

These are not just odd jobs, but ones based on their qualifications. The project managers from each of the groups who work with me see that they get good jobs. They're trained. Odd jobs are there, so they can get those jobs too, but we are not focusing on them. We are ensuring that after the one-year period, they don't go back on welfare. The money they get from their jobs should be sufficient for them to sustain themselves. If they're only doing odd jobs, it's very difficult for them to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Baig.

Mr. Ehsassi is next. You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to start by thanking everyone. All the information we've received today has been helpful, and I look forward to going over the transcript from today's meeting.

I'll start with Ms. Davis. Ms. Davis, I noted that previously you worked with St. Christopher House for six years. Is that correct?

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That said, at one point during your testimony you said that insofar as Syrian youth are concerned, we should be focused on tending to their needs outside of the class.

Given your experience in this field, would you care to elaborate on that, and what you would envision to be the best approach to this issue?

Ms. Carolyn Davis: I'm not sure I have all the answers on that one, because it's a difficult conundrum.

If the Syrian youth are in school and we can provide some supports outside of school in the times when other kids would be doing clubs or other activities in order to give the youth a safe place to connect with other kids who are going through the same thing or who have gone through a similar experience, then that would be helpful in making them feel that there was a light at the end of the tunnel and they were not alone in this situation.

That may keep youth in school, and I see that as being the main goal—to try to keep them in school even though they are facing some significant obstacles to feeling like they belong. It really is about feeling like you belong.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

You noted at some point that you were going to be making submissions to IRCC today. I was wondering if our committee could also receive a copy of those submissions.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: It's a funding application that we will present to them. I guess....

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That's if you think it would be helpful—

Ms. Carolyn Davis: Yes—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: —to what we're doing.

Ms. Carolyn Davis: I may edit it a bit because there are things that are specific to them, but, yes. I don't think there is anything

highly secretive in there. It's just some of our suggestions about moving forward.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Absolutely. Thank you.

Now I have a couple of questions for Mr. Baig.

First of all, I'm incredibly impressed by how you have managed to galvanize the community to come out, to volunteer, and to give up their time.

You said that on weekends you have classes for young Syrian children. You said it was not dedicated, and all the children who come to your centre get to interact with the Syrian children.

Do you think that's the better approach, or would you rather have dedicated activities for children?

● (1200)

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig: Absolutely, that's a better approach we have seen with the immigrants, and not just Syrians, but the other immigrants also. As long as they interact with the diverse population of Canada, the diversity we have in Canada, and as long as we are in that setting, it's good. It's very helpful. It opens things up, basically.

We also run a soup kitchen every Saturday morning. It's just like a restaurant. We do that on Saturdays. The kids come in, they sit together, and they socialize. Everyone is there. It's not just open to Muslims. Everyone comes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Excellent.

I understand a lot of people are contacting your organization. Do you hear from employers as well, people who potentially would be interested in hiring some of the families that have come to Toronto?

Mr. Mirza Hakeem Baig: We do. We do that, but we leave it to the volunteers who are working with us to ensure that they get good jobs and that they are paid well. We make sure they don't go into odd jobs.

We also ensure they go into the same job they had been doing previously. If someone is a baker, we ensure that he gets some training in that. If he's a truck driver, he gets training in that. If he is an auto mechanic, we see that he is trained. We see that he gets some certification, rather than going to a workshop and working directly.

There's planning involved in that. We are taking that route.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to thank all of today's presenters for appearing before our committee. Thank you for all of the incredible work you're doing in helping to settle the Syrian refugees here in Canada, and thank you for all of the information you have provided. It will help us in determining ways we can do better in settling these Syrian refugees. Thank you.

We'll now suspend for two minutes to allow the next panel to appear. Thank you.

● (1200)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (1205)

The Chair: Good afternoon.

Our second panel today consists of Paul Clarke and Emily Woods, both from Action Réfugiés Montréal; Thomas Vincent, from the Collingwood Syrian Sponsorship Committee; and from Child Aid International, Nouri Haidar Al Hassani, accompanied by Amer Alhendawi, who is appearing as an individual.

I'd like to note that Mr. Alhendawi solely speaks Arabic, so we'll have the presence of Yohannes Sawassi as an interpreter. Because we don't have simultaneous translation, if there are questions to Mr. Alhendawi, we will be stopping the clock during the translation to make sure we have seven minutes for each round, notwithstanding the non-simultaneous translation.

Go ahead, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Chair, could I also clarify that point? When Mr. Alhendawi presents as well, presumably he will need to translate into English for the committee members so the committee members can understand and so it can also be recorded on the committee *Hansard*. Would that time also not come out of their seven minutes?

The Chair: That's what I was referring to. For that time for translation, the clock would be suspended so that each round has seven minutes, notwithstanding the fact that we don't have that simultaneous translation. That will not come out of the time of whoever is asking the questions.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. That's for questions, but is it the same for the presentation?

The Chair: Yes, it's for the presentation as well.

● (1210)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to remind all the panellists that each group has seven minutes to present.

We will begin with Ms. Woods, please, for seven minutes.

Ms. Emily Woods (Sponsorship Program Officer, Action Réfugiés Montréal): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon everyone.

On behalf of Action Réfugiés Montréal, thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences with you today.

[*English*]

Action Réfugiés Montréal is a non-profit organization that has been funded by churches, individuals, and foundations for over 20 years.

We offer three programs, one of which is focused on private refugee sponsorship in the name of the Anglican Diocese of Montreal and also The Presbyterian Church in Canada. In that program, we work closely with people in the Montreal region to sponsor their own family members living in a refugee situation overseas, and we work closely with them after the arrival of their family members as well.

First I would like to commend the federal government for their commitment to resettling 25,000 Syrian refugees, a job, however, that we all know is not yet complete. These families and other resettled families will need different forms of support throughout the coming years. It is essential that organizations working with this population have the tools and resources necessary to do so. This is also an important learning opportunity for the country.

At ARM, we were overwhelmed by the positive response within the community to help refugees. Managing this goodwill proved to be challenging for small organizations like ours in attempting to mobilize the large influx of offers of support and donations while continuing to carry out our jobs. We continue to receive interesting offers of support from Canadian residents wanting to help refugees on a daily basis.

In Quebec, a large proportion of funding was allocated towards government-assisted refugees. However, the province received five times the number of privately sponsored refugees than it did of government-assisted refugees. Various families we work with were unexpectedly tasked with welcoming multiple family units over the holidays after submitting applications with various organizations. These are families who had, of course, expected to welcome family members over the course of one or two years instead of a few weeks. Such unexpected time frames were emotionally challenging for some and created obstacles in relation to housing, finding furniture, and access to certain language courses, for instance.

Proximity to family in Canada has not been a concern for our organization. However, we have seen cases of secondary migration, either into or out of Quebec, which have been problematic due to the different immigration systems and a lack of accurate information. Families are not fully informed of their rights and freedoms, and service providers receiving these families need to have more accessible information to better support these individuals, particularly in cases of potential sponsorship breakdown.

Sponsorship breakdowns, wherein the sponsor stops supporting or supports the refugee only partially, are a real concern for families who have been sponsored by family members or organizations that are not fully prepared to financially support them. Some were tasked to support many families at once. It is not enough to tell sponsored families to apply for welfare in cases of sponsorship breakdown.

Families often feel indebted to their sponsors and family members. They fear placing a bigger burden on them and often prefer to attempt to find other ways to be independent without signalling a breakdown, which could of course have consequences for the sponsor.

Many Syrian families that we have been working with are highly educated. We are working with many highly skilled professionals who are working evening or night shifts right now while taking French courses in order to one day be able to complete their equivalencies and work in their field. Community loan programs have been an interesting option for some individuals wanting to complete their equivalencies. However, we need to be considering other options as well.

Those trying to access employment counselling services in the Montreal region are often redirected to language training if they are not proficient enough in French. We need to think creatively to help those who are interested in finding employment right away.

Although the overall housing experience, from what we have seen, has been quite positive, some families have faced challenges when meeting with landlords or were left with no housing at the last minute after landlords signed multiple leases with families for the same housing unit. In one particular case, a family was asked to pay for a full year of rent up front. The family understood that this, of course, was illegal, but after a difficult housing search, they felt that it would offer them some security and stability to know that they would have housing for one year.

From our experience at ARM, access to educational programs has been done relatively smoothly within the school system, with short waiting periods to get appointments within the school board. Families have also received additional support within the school system. That said, seeing as we also work with non-Syrian families, we have been disappointed to hear that some non-Syrian families have been receiving less support within the school system due to reallocation of resources within schools to prioritize Syrian families.

From what we have seen, families have been able to receive adequate medical support and follow-up as needed. We are also relieved to know that all the families we serve, no matter their country of origin, will have access to supplemental health coverage through the IFH program.

In terms of travel loans, assuming the cost of transportation loans for resettlement Syrians eliminated a large burden on said families. However, the programs put in place involved some unjust technicalities for some. For example, some Syrian families who arrived in Canada after November 4 on non-chartered flights had their transportation costs covered if they came from Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey, while Syrians arriving from other countries within those same time frames are tasked with repaying their transportation loans. We feel that these abstract circumstances create unfairness within the system.

At ARM, we have a few non-Syrian families who will be able to benefit from the one-year window program. That said, we have a significant number of Syrian families who have recently arrived who are hoping to sponsor additional family members of their own who are not eligible within the one-year window.

At ARM, our waiting list included 150 names at the end of 2014. In December 2015, it was over 600 names. It is clear that the need for private sponsorship is great. With this in mind, we are pleased that reflections such as these are happening on multiple levels in order to improve future responses. There is no doubt that the Syrian crisis has created an increased awareness of refugee populations and allowed us to bear witness to a truly incredible response and flexibility within the sponsorship system to facilitate the resettlement of Syrian families.

We hope that this desire to help continues to grow in order to promote greater fairness, compassion, and justice towards all refugees.

Thank you.

●(1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Woods.

Mr. Vincent, take seven minutes, please.

Mr. Thomas Vincent (Founder and Co-Chair, Collingwood Syrian Sponsorship Committee): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to present today. My name is Thomas Vincent, and I'm co-chair of the Collingwood Syrian family sponsorship group.

While Canadians across the country are very supportive of the federal government in its initiative and resettlement program for Syrian refugees, from the perspective of small-town Canada, which we probably represent in Collingwood, and of sponsorship groups across the country it has been a disaster. Canadian sponsorship groups have gone from excitement to frustration to anger at the absence of consistent or any communication, the lack of transparency, and the excessive wait times for the arrival of Syrian families.

From a historical perspective, obviously the previous Conservative government decided that they were going to bring in 10,000 Syrian refugees, and the newly elected Liberal government increased the target to 25,000.

The government created unrealistic deadlines to bring in 25,000 Syrian refugees and for some unknown reason decided it was critical to meet these unrealistic target dates regardless of the lack of resources and infrastructure in place to process and help relocate the refugees into our Canadian culture.

The result is the perception and then the reality of confusion, lack of organization, and poor communication. It seemed to Canadians that empathy for the plight of the Syrian refugee crisis was turning into a convenient publicity photo op for officials of the federal government.

Although the federal government attained its goal of bringing 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada, it did so with 10,000 under private sponsorship and 15,000 under the GAR program.

In Collingwood, representing small-town Canada and with a population of only 19,500, we raised more than \$90,000 in a few months to sponsor two Syrian families. We submitted our BVOR application through AURA, and it was approved in January of 2015.

Our sponsorship committee has organized countless volunteers, who have been ready for months. We have established an organizing committee of co-chairs, a secretary, a welcoming committee, a housing committee, an ESL committee, a transportation committee, an IT web services committee, as well as committees for furniture and clothing, professionals, education, and computer services. All these committees have created all the resources we require to sponsor and immediately accommodate two Syrian families.

We then sit and we wait, and we wait, and we wait, with no communication from the government on its plan to work with private, BVOR, or community-sponsored groups. On March 31, to our surprise, we finally received word that we could receive the only family that was awarded to AURA for all of its sponsorship groups. We were fortunate to have the one family awarded to our group in Collingwood.

I'm going to move on to a couple of recommendations, because I know I only have seven minutes, and we're ticking.

From our perspective, problems for small-town Canada with the Syrian refugee resettlement plan and the leadership of the government include there being literally no communication from the government through the sponsorship agreement holders, such as AURA. We are told that the families are being processed, that they are being screened for health and security by government resources, but no other information at all is forthcoming in regard to the number of families in the pipeline. In Barrie, Ontario, they were notified of their family acceptance nearly four months ago, and they're still waiting for the arrival of their family. It's totally unacceptable, when Mr. John McCallum has been quoted saying several times, "We're going all out to meet the demand."

John Sewell, former mayor of Toronto, has formed an organization that is coordinating information among sponsorship groups. He said they're doing it on a private basis, and his is called Canada4refugees.org. We would recommend that the federal government work with this group to communicate to the sponsorship groups as an official entity and provide the communication that we require.

There is no understanding of the number of sponsorship groups across Canada and therefore of the number of families that could be accommodated by sponsorship groups across the country. I have estimated myself that there are more than 2,000 sponsorship groups across Canada and have seen projections as high as 8,000 or 9,000. Nobody knows what the number is, and too many have not received any notification of a family under private, BVOR, or community sponsorships. Would it not be a simple process to poll the sponsorship holders, find out the number of sponsorship groups in existence across Canada, and then extrapolate the number of Syrian and other refugees we can allocate?

Staffing for processing refugee allocations I think has been touched on, but after the government announced that it had processed its target of 25,000, the government pulled back its staffing from Jordan and Turkey, etc., and in Winnipeg, thereby stopping the process and the supply of refugees.

We've heard this morning already that it has dried up. Where are the families? We have thousands of groups across the country that are ready and waiting.

Knowing the existing number of sponsorship groups across the country and their capacity for refugee families and equating the staffing with demand would assist the immigration department in understanding the staffing required and the budgets that are needed.

• (1220)

We need to find a way to fast-track current refugee applications. We need a more streamlined and flexible approval process, as well as

additional processing staff for the applications. The federal government rushed to bring in 15,000 GARs and house them in hotels with per diems, etc. Why wouldn't the government look to the privately sponsored or BVORs, which would not cost any money, or less money than the GARs, and simply offer the families to these sponsorship groups? We were just told that this is too complicated. I don't know what's complicated about having us, in the country, waiting for groups while the government is paying for people to stay in hotels. It doesn't make any sense whatsoever.

We've heard stories of Syrian GARs using food banks for assistance. This would never happen with a private, BVOR, or community-sponsored group. We would be embarrassed if we found that our families were going to food banks. We need to understand the capacity of the sponsorship groups in Canada and start an immediate allotment of refugees to private, BVOR, and community-sponsored groups.

As for critical information, there's no blueprint for refugee assistance for small-town Canada. In rural Canada, sponsorship groups are duplicating refugee assistance programs, and spending and wasting precious resources and time to create programs. We seem to be reinventing the wheel and working in silos instead of sharing information and resources. How do rural Canada's sponsorships obtain information on resettlement services available in larger urban communities?

The Chair: Mr. Vincent, you have 30 seconds.

Mr. Thomas Vincent: Okay.

We would all agree that teaching new refugees English is a top priority. What ESL services are available to rural Canada? How do we know if local families have the same cultural background or extended related...?

We need to create a resource-based information file and allow the chairs of sponsorship committees to contact each other about the refugee programs. We need to create formal connections with resettlement services, and we need to extend the information base and create an all-inclusive manual, a template, for sponsorship groups.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vincent.

Mr. Al Hassani is next. You have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Nouri Haidar Al Hassani (Founder, Child Aid International): Thank you. Is that seven minutes for me or...?

The Chair: You'll will be sharing your time?

Mr. Nouri Haidar Al Hassani: Okay. I will take three and a half. Thank you.

My name is Nouri Al Hassani. I'm the founder of Child Aid International. I have very good experience with refugees. I was a refugee for six and a half years before I came to Canada in 1996.

Our involvement with Child Aid International with the Syrian refugee crisis is that we were able to help. Our focus is with helping the families in the Vancouver area in B.C., and in Surrey, and in all those areas.

We are from a centre that does speak Arabic, so we are able to help and become the backbone for two other centres in that area, which are the Az-Zahraa Islamic Centre and the Al-Kawthar Islamic Centre. Whenever they needed help from Arabic speakers, our volunteers were able to provide that help. Through Child Aid International, I was able to help lots of families in finding a house to rent and to establish themselves, as well as go to the doctor. All these things could be small services, but to be honest it's a major problem for the families, especially with the language as well as with the culture.

I'll keep the rest of my time for my friend.

Thank you.

•(1225)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Alhendawi.

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (As an Individual)(Interpretation): Request number one is that one of the main problems we are facing, as Syrian refugees in Vancouver, is learning ESL, or English as a second language. We have been here, as a family, for almost a year, but up to now, none of us has attended English class. Every time I go, they say there is no chance and to come back in two to three months. If I go after that, they still tell us the same thing.

Request number two is that I ask the Canadian government if they can waive or exempt us from the transportation costs, which, for us as a family, are \$7,040. Most of the Syrian refugees coming as a family have these transportation costs, which are between \$6,000 and \$7,000, or even more, because of the size of the family.

The third request is that, if possible, we ask the government to help us with housing. We are a family of seven—five kids and the two of us, husband and wife—but we live in a two-bedroom apartment. I am asking, if possible, that we be able to access or have a chance to get subsidized housing, because this private market is very expensive. Apart from that, these smaller two-bedroom units are also unsafe. They are infested. There are bugs. From time to time we have to use bug spray, but it doesn't work.

Another point I would like to enlighten the government about is that sometimes we sense there are issues if you have to apply for subsidized housing. It is not very easy for you to get it, because there is a kind of intermediary or broker. You need to know someone who can act on your behalf to access that subsidized housing.

Thank you so much. This is all I can say or ask for.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the guests for having me here.

I am going to speak a little bit in Arabic for Amer here, and I will translate myself.

[Member speaks in Arabic]

What I said was that everyone here in the Canadian government is very happy that we have brought in the Syrian refugees and that they have come here to a peaceful country.

I will speak in English now.

In your case, in British Columbia, just so we put this out there, that is one of the most expensive cities in the country, actually. It is unfortunate that this is happening and that you have faced certain circumstances, but there have been overwhelming support and a lot of great things in different regions. For example, in my region, a lot of people have been settled and have been getting English language training.

What has been the difficulty? Have you tried maybe going to...? Maybe they were not able to take you in at one school, but were there other schools you went to at different times that were able to provide that language training?

I will say it to him in Arabic.

[Member speaks in Arabic]

•(1230)

Mr. Amer Alhendawi: *[Witness speaks in Arabic]*

The Chair: Let me interrupt for one second.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): I have a point of order.

The Chair: We can't have a conversation going back and forth.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'm so sorry about that.

The Chair: I would suggest, for clarity, that there be one translator. Giving greetings is one thing, but please present your questions in one of the two official languages, and Mr. Sawassi will do the translation.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: That's no problem.

I'll ask again in English.

The Chair: Mr. Sawassi, you could translate the question that was presented.

Mr. Yohannes Sawassi (Interpreter, Cultural Interpretation Services for Our Communities): To Amer only?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Yohannes Sawassi: Okay.

[Witness speaks in Arabic]

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): In my case, I went to a different centre, and again they told me that it was full, that I had to wait. When I told them that I am a newcomer and that I wanted to register for ESL classes, they told me: "That's good, but again, we don't have any vacancy now. We don't have any seat for you. Can you go and come back?"

Why? It's because, they tell me, there is a very big number of Syrians, the newcomers, and that's why all the classes are full. Apart from that, there are some immigrants who had been living there before the coming of the Syrian refugees, and now these immigrants also have started going back to ESL classes. This has created a different situation to ours.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My next question would be to Mr. Clarke and Ms. Woods.

I read here that as of May 9, 2016, you have sponsored 4,725 privately sponsored refugees. In contrast to that, there have only been 86 government-assisted refugees. That's remarkable work that has been going on in Montreal. Can you tell us some of the success stories that you've seen in Montreal?

Mr. Paul Clarke (Executive Director, Action Réfugiés Montréal): Just so it's clear, the 4,000 privately sponsored—

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Oh, those are the ones that haven't—

Mr. Paul Clarke: That's all the—

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'm sorry. Around 3,300 are privately sponsored, and then roughly 4,700 haven't arrived yet under private sponsorship.

Mr. Paul Clarke: So they're not all with Action Réfugiés Montréal. There are a number of different organizations that are helping refugees.

One needs to keep in mind that prior to the whole refugee situation with Syria, about 40% of Syrians in Canada lived in Montreal. There are a number of churches in Montreal that are full of people who, when the Syrian crisis emerged, wanted to sponsor multiple family members. It is thus no surprise that the game was being played in Montreal in terms of private sponsorship.

One thing the committee hopefully is aware of as well concerns the notion of caps that was brought up between 11:00 and 12:00. Caps do not exist in Quebec. Because we have a different immigration stream, each group has an allocation of spots based on assets and not on the number of files that IRCC is ready to open. The numbers may seem extremely high because there's a different way of allocating the number of files.

As for success, there's the fact that we got so many people through fairly quickly. Certainly at Action Réfugiés the crisis did not start in 2015. It did not start on September 2 last year but in May of 2013, when we started being overwhelmed with Syrian families coming to us wanting to help. There were delays, obviously, through 2013 and 2014. The success story is that many people have come. Most of our cases are family-linked; that is, someone living in Montreal said I have a brother, a cousin, a mother-in-law I want to sponsor. Our clientele at Action Réfugiés is that: someone taking on the responsibility for their family.

There are other groups in Montreal. There's a group called Hay Doun. I don't know whether they're going to appear before the committee. They're more of a community-based group. As I said, there are also many churches. I think the success is the fact that the community mobilized, and certainly since September the number of Quebec residents or Montreal residents who want to help and who continue to call wanting to help is quite amazing.

•(1235)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: There is one question I wanted to ask both of you again. I know there is a high proportion of Arabic speakers—Lebanese, Syrians—in Montreal. I think on the government side, and even on the opposition side, something we have to be cognisant of is language training in big cities like that. What tends to happen sometimes is there are certain speakers who flock to areas where there are native speakers of their language. Then they tend to leave some of their language training and they go to work right

away. They work with native Arabic speakers and they lose those essential skills right at the start when they should be learning the English or French language at a critical time so that they can get other opportunities.

Do you have plans in place to make sure individuals don't get lost in small clusters?

The Chair: You may have a 15-second response.

Ms. Emily Woods: In my case, I've been pleasantly surprised with the families we've received, who are prioritizing themselves with language training. Seeing as they have members there, it's communicated through their families that French is essential. A lot of them are eager and interested.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses. We listen to your side and it helps us to make some decisions.

I have a question for Mr. Amer Alhendawi. Obviously, you're going to find a couple of really sad situations. You're living with bugs, no space, a small two-bedroom apartment, English issues. You couldn't find ESL classes.

Did this affect finding a job? Are you working, as we speak, or could you not find a job?

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): No, I am not working. How can I work if I don't know the English to communicate?

Mr. Bob Saroya: I understand.

I'll go back to Mr. Vincent. I can see the frustration from top to bottom. People are living with bugs and they can't find housing and there are ESL issues. It's like a made-in-heaven deal if the government allowed the private sector to bring more people. That could help.

You were trying to finish up something earlier today. I will let you finish up what you were trying to say a couple of minutes back.

Mr. Thomas Vincent: Do I get another seven minutes?

Mr. Bob Saroya: You get a couple anyway.

Mr. Thomas Vincent: You put me on the spot here.

We're the only country in the world that's responded to the Syrian refugee crisis on a private citizen basis. We created private, BVOR, and community sponsorships across the country and raised millions of dollars of support. There's an opportunity there for the government: how can we use the infrastructure that is in place, the Canadian sponsorship groups, to put into effect a private/public sponsorship program that will help benefit the immigration department?

We need to create this private sponsorship sector to work with the immigration department and produce a national refugee policy with sponsorship groups across the country. We should not place the Syrian resettlement program under its existing immigration guidelines and cap, as this will slow the already burdened immigration process of Syrian families who are coming over.

The immigration department should not be in the relocation business. Government staffing should obviously maintain entrance qualifications for refugees, but once they arrive in Canada, if a sponsorship group is not available, then we would recommend the government source private relocation companies that can execute and support a private relocation in a positive environment.

The Canadian government embarked on a very ambitious and benevolent plan to show how compassionate Canadians are in this time of need. The intent was wonderful, but from the position of most sponsorship groups, the execution has been terrible. I'm sorry that you have to take that as criticism, but it's been terrible.

We responded to the government pleas for assistance to help the Syrian refugee plan, and the government has not communicated with the sponsorship groups and has pulled back the resources needed to make the resettlement plan a resounding success. The government has not recognized the value that has been created with willing and able sponsorship groups across the country. We need a short- and a long-term coherent immigration strategy to provide the thousands of waiting sponsorship groups with Syrian families. It's that simple.

I trust that you're listening to the recommendations that we've all made today and will take them into consideration.

Thank you.

•(1240)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Basically you're saying let us do the work and government shouldn't be getting government-sponsored refugees.

Mr. Thomas Vincent: Absolutely.

Mr. Bob Saroya: You raised \$90,000, and you have some places rented for these guys. Nobody has arrived yet, right?

Mr. Thomas Vincent: The first family is arriving tomorrow. We have no idea about the next. We have two other families that we're going to bring in. We have no idea. Small-town Canada has gone out and...in Barrie, Ontario, they've leased the property. They've had it leased for three months. They have no idea when the family is coming in.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Going back to the frustration, again and again it's the same thing, and the government can't make it right from any angle and every angle.

The next question is for Paul Clarke. Among the refugees you're bringing over here, what number of people are looking for a job? How many people have found a job over the last number of years?

Ms. Emily Woods: Do you mean over the number of years, or of the Syrians who have recently arrived?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Syrian refugees.

Ms. Emily Woods: For Syrian refugees, I don't have an exact number. There are some who are starting to find jobs while they're taking courses. A lot are working evenings and night shifts. Very few have found day shifts, as they're trying to take courses at the same time. Many have also gone back to school. They're taking English courses here and there, or trying to further their studies. There is still a large population that is looking for work.

Mr. Bob Saroya: If you had to pick one problem, what's the biggest problem out there that the government can help with?

Ms. Emily Woods: I think—

Mr. Bob Saroya: You can pick two if you want to pick two.

Ms. Emily Woods: There are plenty. As our other witness mentioned, transportation loans are a huge burden on families. It is putting them into an additionally vulnerable position upon their arrival. Right now there's a lot of injustice caused because of countries of origin, which to me is unjust and unfair. They do not choose which country they're coming from. If they're arriving in Canada, they need help no matter what their country of origin is. I hope that you can consider that.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Going back to Paul again, based on your experience, what changes would you like to see made to our current strategy and the future resettlement strategy? Do you have any recommendations?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, please.

•(1245)

Mr. Paul Clarke: What I would say—because Action Réfugiés has been around for 20 years, and we weren't invented with the Syrian refugee crisis—is to get people out of Islamabad before six years and get people out of Nairobi before four or five years. There is an injustice in how long people wait across the globe to have an interview with a visa officer.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much. Thank you to all the witnesses.

My question first is to Mr. Alhendawi. I'm going to ask short quick questions for short quick answers.

This is your 13th month here in British Columbia?

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): Yes, it has been around a year.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You're now on the regular income assistance support from the provincial government. After you pay your rent, how much money are you left with to support your family?

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): I am getting a welfare benefit of \$1,200. If I pay the rent and then I pay the transportation costs, we as a family are left with only with \$200.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You're paying \$102 each month for the transportation loan that you owe?

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): I pay \$103 a month.

This is the least I can pay. I am supposed to pay a minimum, but this is what I can afford.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How are you making ends meet, then, to support your family? Are you using food banks and the like?

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): Generally, we support the family with the Canada child tax benefit. Sometimes we go to the food bank.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You are in arrears, are you, with your payment for your transportation loan, about \$600 and some?

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): Yes, that's true. I'm supposed to pay \$720.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): I have a six-year time period. If I don't complete payment of the total amount, then there will be interest.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You've been here for 13 months. You can't get into language training because there's a wait-list.

Your wife, as I understand.... Can she get into language training? Can she even register for language training, and if not, what's the problem?

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): No, she didn't get a chance to go.

Her situation is worse than mine. I try my best to learn English on the streets through my friends or through some acquaintances. She doesn't have that chance, because she mainly stays at home with the kids.

It's a very difficult situation. If any of us can't learn English, it will be very difficult for us to find a job.

• (1250)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much for sharing that. I really appreciate it.

My next question is for Mr. Al Hassani.

Does your organization, Child Aid International, or any other organizations that you know have access to government funds, even though you have the resources and the capacity to provide support to the new arrivals?

Mr. Nouri Haidar Al Hassani: The short answer is no, we don't have any access. We don't receive any funding from the government, neither I nor Child Aid nor other organizations that I'm working with, the two organizations that I mentioned.

On the other side, yes, I think if we were to get help to cover some expenses, that would be very good. We could better help the Syrian refugee families and improve our volunteer work in this part of the job.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You've been doing a lot of volunteer work, I know, on your own time, you and volunteers who have the language capacity, who understand the culture, who are refugees themselves who have travelled this journey and have the knowledge base to assist the families, but you have zero support from the government to facilitate that work at this time.

Mr. Nouri Haidar Al Hassani: We have none at all.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Ms. Woods, you mentioned that in your communities there are others who are dealing with transportation loan issues. You were suggesting that all the refugees, regardless of country of origin or timing of their arrival, are dealing with these kinds of problems.

Can you elaborate on that? If you're calling for the government to address this issue, what's your suggestion? Should they waive the loan, irrespective of country of origin, as well as the timing? I mean for those from before November 4.

Ms. Emily Woods: Yes, and I have an example to give you. In one family we had, a Syrian family, the adult son had to go to

another country to study in order to ensure his safety while the application was going through. His family arrived on a chartered flight and had their transportation covered. He, however, was asked to pay for his flight, which was a few thousand dollars, if I remember correctly.

Of course we have Syrian families who arrived before November 4 who are paying large transportation fees. Ideally, it would be great if you were able to waive—and we would certainly recommend waiving—the transportation loan. As we have seen here, it's very difficult for families to have that additional monthly cost, and the loan can accumulate large interest after their one year without interest.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In terms of families trying to make ends meet, we have seen an example of people on income assistance not being able to make ends meet. Can you tell us what the experience is like for the people you are working with in your community, and the impact of that? What action can the government take? Should we call on the government to convene a provincial and territorial table to address the issue of income assistance rates, not just for refugees but for all people on income assistance who can't make ends meet? Do you have any suggestions or thoughts on that?

Ms. Emily Woods: Currently we are quite lucky with the families we are working with, because they have extra family support already in the community, so a lot of them are able to lean on them. However, for those who had multiple family members arriving at the same time, it was extremely challenging. They weren't prepared for that. Yes, unfortunately some families have to use food banks.

In terms of suggestions....

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, please.

Ms. Emily Woods: I don't know if you have any....

Mr. Paul Clarke: One needs to understand that privately sponsored refugees do not get income assistance of any kind. They are allowed to go to school, etc., so there might be a way.... The BVOR system, I guess, is a method to try to have the government help in some ways. If there was some way to have some funds allocated to a privately sponsored family, a certain amount per person to help in that way, it might—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clarke.

Mrs. Shanahan, you have seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): I am sharing my time with Mr. Virani.

• (1255)

The Chair: Mr. Virani, go ahead.

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Thank you.

Mr. Vincent, we can sense the emotion in your submission. Thank you for being involved in private sponsorship. It is a very critical part of the refugee resettlement.

I can only imagine how frustrated you must have been with the previous government in terms of the levels they had set, compared to the levels we have set. You yourself indicated that there was a 10,000-person target set by the previous government. The current government, just to clarify, has in fact brought in 27,200 Syrian refugees to date, and we will be settling 44,800 individuals as refugees in this country this year. That is pursuant to the levels that we announced on March 2.

I wanted to ask you, in terms of the costs.... If I understood you correctly, you indicated that you want faster processing, particularly of the PSRs from Syria, and I have three short questions.

One relates to refugees from other parts of the world, who, in my view, would be equally needy, so I want to know your perspective on them compared to the people just coming from Syria.

Second, as we have heard this repeatedly today, do you acknowledge that there are costs that relate to PSR sponsorship that exceed the first year, so that in years two, three, four, and five, there are settlement costs, health care costs, and education costs related to people who are in this country?

The third point is that if more money needs to be dedicated to the processing to make it faster, how much more money would you seek to have the government spend on this initiative?

Thank you.

Mr. Thomas Vincent: First of all, I guess we should go back and say that to my understanding, there are 60 million refugees in the world in 73 countries, so we have a huge problem for mankind. It just happens that with the Syrian refugee crisis, we decided as Canadians to jump on the bandwagon. It is very challenging to look and say, well, we are bringing in all these Syrians, yet we are ignoring the other refugees around the world.

I don't have the answer to that, because I can't play God. I would just say that everybody is equal. It is just that we have gone down this path of Syrian refugees.

The sustainability of our program is going to be critical. I have read some transcripts of past meetings, and obviously sustainability is coming up in what we are talking about today. We have this gentleman who is in his 12th or 13th month. There is a lot of action of bringing Syrians in—and gosh, that's great—but what planning has gone behind that in the long run? You take a look at informing people, educating people, the ESL crisis that was evident today, and then look at people after one year. It is going to be a huge problem.

This is the tip of the iceberg, from my perspective, because learning a language, understanding English, is going to take at least a year, and then people are going to be looking for employment and we are going to be supporting them on a socialized basis. Sustainability is critical.

Are we going to need more money? Well, it just never stops. We are going to need more money. We are fortunate, in our small-town Canada, to be able to go back to the residents, who have tremendous empathy for what is going on, and we will raise more money, but the other thing that is important, as I said, is that the government should recognize what we can do. You are not in the business of relocating people. Let us do it. We have all the resources set in place to take

families in. Why should we dismantle this program? There are thousands of small-town Canadas across the country that have put together programs like ours, and we can help the government with the resettlement, whether it is Syrians or people from any other countries around the world. Let's get our act together. Talk to us.

I am not frustrated—I'm sorry, I do get frustrated—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Shanahan is next, please.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: If you're frustrated, I think it is coming from a good place, because clearly your community built up a huge capacity to receive refugees, and you don't have them. There are refugees who need help, and they can't get the help. Over in Montreal, things are working relatively well, but I know that's because the organization has been in operation for 20 years, so you were able to ramp up a little more.

I would like to hear, maybe from each one of the witnesses, the most important thing that needs to happen now so that we can build that capacity and be ready to receive the next onslaught. If indeed it has to be an onslaught—if that is what we're about—let's be receiving people in an ongoing way, because of course we need people. People mean prosperity for all of us.

● (1300)

The Chair: With that question being thrown to everyone on the panel, we'll go in a row.

Go ahead, Mr. Alhendawi.

Mr. Amer Alhendawi (Interpretation): For me, as long as Canada accepts people, the most important thing is for the Government of Canada to provide, in a broader way, access to English as a second language, because this is essential to every newcomer who doesn't speak English. When they are able to speak English, life will be very easy. We as a family have been here for one year. It is very difficult. Whatever we want to do, we need English to communicate. If we have doctors' appointments, whether for me or for one of my family members, my wife, it is a very difficult for us to continue.

Again, it's very frustrating. I cannot keep on asking my friends or people I know to come and help me with appointments. If we have a telephone call and there is a voice message, I have to ask, "Can you come and translate it for us?" That's very difficult. Sometimes we are very hesitant even to answer our phone because we don't know what language the person on the other end is going to speak. If it's English, it's very difficult for us.

I ask the government to provide a broader way of accessing English as a second language for newcomers.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Vincent, if you could, in about 10 seconds....

Mr. Thomas Vincent: You all will be getting a copy of my little dissertation here, so that's great.

I do want to comment on the travel expenses issue. To my understanding, we're the only country in the world that charges refugees travel expenses.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vincent.

Ms. Woods or Mr. Clarke, would you comment?

Mr. Paul Clarke: I have five points and 20 seconds.

Number one is language training.

Number two would be the BVOR capacity. That's the frustration. People have all wanted to go, and there are not enough BVORs. I would avoid the yoyo, which was what happened for the community groups: they were told to wait and wait, and then all of a sudden thousands of people came, so they went out and rented apartments, and then this changed—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Paul Clarke: The last thing is the RSTP, to make sure Ms. Davis gets more money.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank the panel for appearing before us. Thank you for the tremendous work you are doing and trying to do. I would particularly like to thank Mr. Alhendawi for appearing and making such a poignant presentation.

All of your presentations will help us in our report and hopefully help us in doing a better job going forward. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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