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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

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•(1100)

[English]

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

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 is Sandra Berman, representing the Or Shalom Syrian Refugee Initiative.

Good morning.

We have Aris Babikian, chair of the Levant Settlement Centre, and El Hafed Ezzabour, newcomer outreach worker from Maison Internationale de la Rive-Sud.

Witnesses are reminded that they have seven minutes for their presentations.

We begin with Ms. Berman.

You have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Sandy Berman (Steering Committee Member, Or Shalom Syrian Refugee Initiative): Thank you.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am a member of a private sponsorship group, the Or Shalom Syrian Refugee Initiative. Our sponsorship agreement holder is the United Church of Canada. We have raised \$158,000, and the contributions have come from 185 donor households. We have also received significant donations in kind, to the extent that we will be able to fully equip four apartments. We have more than 100 volunteers committed to the resettlement of the families we are sponsoring.

As Canadians, some of whom immigrated to Canada under difficult circumstances, we feel that private sponsorship is a meaningful way of giving back and a very Canadian thing to do. In the past, our synagogue and community have also sponsored Bosnian refugees and are currently involved in the sponsorship of Tibetan refugees.

At the invitation of the government, in the fall of 2015 we embarked on the sponsorship of four families. None of our sponsored families has yet arrived in Canada. We are sponsoring a family of four, a family of five, and a family of six. They are Syrian Kurdish families, two of whom are living in a refugee camp in northern Iraq in the Erbil area. The family of six lives in a refugee camp in Turkey. The families were selected because they are connected to our region—that's British Columbia—as they have

family members already settled in the Vancouver area. We are also sponsoring an Iraqi LGBT couple currently living in Beirut under immediate threat of persecution.

We are linked to eight other private sponsorship groups in B.C. who are sponsoring over 100 Syrian Kurdish refugee families who have been approved to come to Canada but cannot proceed with final processing because they are living in northern Iraq. These families are waiting for security checks, interviews, and medical examinations.

We are all ready to receive these refugee families; everything is in place. We have made donations in good faith, believing that the donations would help to resettle refugees soon, and now the money is sitting idle. We have also been receiving conflicting information from our inquiries about the status of our families, including information that despite these people having been born in Syria, for all intents and purposes the immigration department is now considering them to be Iraqi refugees. This has left us very confused.

We appreciate the government's recent decision to send additional staff to the Middle East to speed up the processing of private sponsorship applications. The government has also indicated that these officers will be sent to northern Iraq in the fall to conduct interviews.

While we are relieved to hear this, we are very concerned about the delay, as our families are experiencing extreme hardship. As in all such issues, the children suffer the most, with lost schooling, poor nutrition, and health and growth issues, which will lead to lifelong consequences and more challenges with settlement and integration. We therefore ask the government to expedite their applications by sending personnel into the area now or authorizing representatives from the International Organization for Migration or the UNHCR, which are already in the area, to conduct the interviews.

We have worked closely with MOSAIC, an immigrant settlement agency in Vancouver, to select the families through family reunification and to provide assistance with the application process and with education and support around settlement. Having this resource available to us has been very important, and we hope that organizations like MOSAIC will receive ongoing funding to continue this support. Privately sponsored refugees have a huge advantage over government-sponsored refugees, as we have many people committed to supporting their settlement and integration and are not reliant on settlement services alone.

• (1105)

The families will also have the support of their family members already living in the area. Research has shown that families with these connections have an easier time integrating into the community.

Nevertheless, we are facing a number of challenges with regard to settlement. One is access to affordable housing in the Lower Mainland. The amount that the government has recommended for rent is too low, and we have had to raise additional dollars to be able to rent apartments. Government-sponsored refugees cannot find affordable housing, and that is why many of them remain in hotels.

For the language instruction for newcomers to Canada program, the LINC program, access is very limited at the lower levels, in particular those that include child care. This is a huge barrier to settlement and integration. While additional funds will help address the long wait-lists, supplementary options need to be developed to enable refugees to begin learning English in the interim.

As well, we believe it is unfair to expect refugees who have experienced so much hardship and loss to start out their new lives with a debt to repay, which in some cases can be as high as \$10,000. The loan repayment program creates stress and hinders refugees' ability to pay for basic necessities, such as food, clothing, and housing.

We are also deeply concerned about the inequity of airfare being covered for some refugees but not for others—

The Chair: Ms. Berman, you have 20 seconds, please.

Ms. Sandy Berman: That is for those before November 4, 2015, and those after February 28, 2016.

Thank you for your consideration.

The Chair: Mr. Ezzabour, you have seven minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mr. El Hafed Ezzabour (Newcomer Outreach Worker , Maison Internationale de la Rive-Sud): Mr. Chair, committee members, thank you.

The Maison internationale de la Rive-Sud and I are pleased and honoured to appear today before the committee studying the Syrian refugee issue.

The Maison internationale de la Rive-Sud is a community organization that helps welcome newcomers, especially refugees. We have been welcoming newcomers since 1975, and we have experience and even considerable expertise in that area. We therefore

have 41 years of experience on the South Shore, near Montreal. Our headquarters is in Brossard.

I don't want to go into detail. I only want to give you a timeline of what has happened since the beginning. I think the challenges are the same for all organizations. I am more of a front-line and field outreach worker than a theorist.

We first went through a period of uncertainty, of course, after the announcement that 25,000 Syrian refugees would be brought to Canada. The information concerning the refugees' arrival then caused confusion. After the announcement, the mandate of the ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité et de l'Inclusion, or MIDI, was delayed. We waited for the mandate in an atmosphere of uncertainty and concern, but we received a request from the municipality of Longueuil to implement the planned systems. The mayor of Longueuil, Caroline St-Hilaire, met with all the city's government institutions, namely, health and education representatives, including the Maison internationale de la Rive-Sud.

After that period, decisions were made too quickly for us. This negatively affected our preparations, despite our experience. The uncertainty also affected the welcome process, systems, and location. We were told the refugees needed to be picked up from barracks, hospitals, welcome centres, and hotels. This uncertainty caused some confusion.

The Maison internationale's mandate started 48 hours before the arrival on January 9 of the first family, whom I personally welcomed. I went to pick them up at the airport.

There was also a misunderstanding or poor coordination between the ministry and the Red Cross when preparing the welcome centre, which provides basic services such as registration and the distribution of winter clothing. This took time to sort out, which affected our settlement process.

During the first phase, the welcome process, we picked up the refugees from the welcome centre. During the second phase, the Red Cross transported the refugees to our headquarters in Brossard.

We were responsible for the refugees from January to April. We looked after all the administrative procedures, including housing, the health check in the first 72 hours, entry into the school system, and francization. I must also mention the contribution of volunteers, whom I would like to commend. They worked hard to help us with the settlement process.

By April 24, 2016, we had welcomed 86 people, or 14 families. Based on our mandate, we will have welcomed 130 refugees by December 31, 2016, so we're already 66% of the way there.

•(1110)

Of course, to handle the situation, we followed the Réussir l'intégration program, PRint, provided by Quebec's ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité et de l'Inclusion. We also received an additional grant from the ministry.

I want to mention a few difficulties. First, there was a delay in terms of francization, which had psychological effects on the Syrian refugees, such as distress or culture shock. You must bear in mind they arrived in winter, which also had an effect. It would have been more practical and effective to organize the francization of Syrian refugees by adopting a schedule outside the program. This option is always available.

I also want to discuss the privately sponsored Syrian refugees in our region. They are left to their own devices by their sponsors. That's not the case for all of them, but it is the case for most of them. We did not receive information on them that would make it possible for us to become involved. To date, we have welcomed 44 people and seen 13 families. We don't have any numbers or information regarding these families.

We also encountered a major problem, namely, the organization of what we call national solidarity. We don't have the expertise or capacity to manage the stock. Citizens want to help, but nobody has volunteered to organize the national solidarity. This discourages people.

The Chair: Mr. Ezzabour, you have 20 seconds left.

Mr. El Hafed Ezzabour: Let's move on to our recommendation.

Quebec is the only Canadian province that has an immigration ministry, which creates an extra level for special operations. This results in a delay in communicating information and, in the end, in making decisions. Consequently, it would be a good idea to adjust the response and information procedures to make them more effective.

•(1115)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Babikian, you'll have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Aris Babikian (Chair, Levant Settlement Centre): Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to appear at this hearing and relay to you our experience in Toronto.

In the last eight months, the Levant Settlement Centre has been involved 24/7 with the settlement of refugees, in addition to sometimes matching sponsors with refugees in Toronto.

Our organization has helped 200 families so far, over 600 people, in their resettlement efforts. Whatever experiences we have had we are going to relay to you. These are first-hand experiences. It is important, and we are glad that you have given us the opportunity for you to hear these concerns.

Our presentation is divided into two sections. The first section is issues, challenges, and disparities. That section follows the structure of the committee's recommendations and guidelines of March 8. After that there is the second section, which contains the recommendations. I'm not going to dwell too much on the issues because, unfortunately, we don't have too much time. I'm going to

summarize my first section, but I want to read all the recommendations to you.

I have already provided an English version of all the materials that I have here to the clerk and I am sure that after translation to French you will get that.

In regard to some of the issues and challenges that we and the refugees faced, the first are employment counselling agencies and job opportunities in Toronto. Unfortunately, we found that the federally funded services available in Toronto are not very helpful. They are just referral agencies.

The other thing of concern about this process is that all these referral agencies are competing with each other, because they are receiving federal funding. As an example, if a refugee is registered with one organization, that person is not allowed to register with other organizations, and if you take one set of refugees to one organization, the first thing they ask is whether you are registered with any agency. If you tell them yes, they will tell you to please go and de-register so that they can take you.

This is quite an obstacle for the refugee, and it creates frustration and anger. Many of them abandon the process completely and are on their own now, trying to find employment on their own.

Concerning lack of affordable housing, in the GTA a two-bedroom apartment averages \$1,450 plus cable, plus Internet, plus hydro. This is unaffordable for the refugees, especially the privately sponsored refugees, as they are on their own. It is true that they have sponsors and co-sponsors, but because of the large influx of refugees who came to Toronto, all these people were overwhelmed. In some cases the co-sponsorship broke down, because either the co-sponsor lost his job and he could not afford to look after his refugees or, in some cases, he is outside the community where these refugees are living. For example, when refugees arrive in Toronto and their sponsors are in Montreal or Cambridge or St. Catharines, that creates a problem. These refugees are in very bad need of some kind of assistance from the government regarding subsidized housing.

English language assessment is also a complication. Some of them are facing a problem, especially the highly educated or the university students. Some of them interrupted their university studies when they came, and they need to upgrade their academic level of English. We're not talking about ESL or LINC classes. Some of them just graduated from universities, but they need to upgrade. To take the Canadian Academic English Language test or IELTS or TOEFL is quite expensive for these refugees. Many of the refugees, unfortunately, fail the first time, so they have to take the test again and pay again, and that's another problem.

•(1120)

Another important issue for these refugees is the two-tier system created regarding the loans. All of us know that the refugees who came before November 4 have to pay for their own tickets. They got a loan and they have to pay it back.

After three months following their arrival in Toronto, some of them received letters from the government asking them to repay the money, and after one month some of them even received letters from collection agencies asking for payment. This is unfair, and the irony is that within the same family, some of them who came before November 4 and others who came after November 4 have a free ride. This is creating conflict and stress in their families, because many of the families are still unable to find a job. In the best-case scenario, one person in the family is working, but with rent and other expenses, it is quite a burden for these people to repay the loans. That's another issue.

There are a couple of issues related to overseas operations, and one of them is that, unfortunately, some of our offices overseas are giving the refugees conflicting decisions—

The Chair: Mr. Babikian, you have 20 seconds, please.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Okay. I will skip and go to the recommendations.

For employment counselling, people should be able to register in as many places as they want.

The government should provide refugees with subsidized housing.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Babikian.

We have your submission, and once it's translated into French, we will circulate it. Thank you.

Mr. Chen, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much to all of the witnesses for appearing today and for providing your input to the committee.

My first couple of questions will be to Mr. Babikian, about the work you're doing. When we met we had an opportunity to discuss the work of the Levant Settlement Centre. It's a tremendous task, since out of the almost 9,000 privately sponsored refugees in Toronto, 1,800 have been supported through your group and the Armenian community.

There's a quote from your centre in your discussion with Public Radio of Armenia saying:

We have a long road ahead of us to provide, to care, and to look after our brothers and sisters. Our most urgent need is to find employment to the newly arrived.

In your comments today you talked about federal services. It's very difficult for any newcomer coming to Canada, whether or not the person is a refugee, to find employment, to settle, and to get their feet planted firmly in their new home. Do you believe that the refugees are facing particular discrimination, or how much of it is a part of the normal process of coming to a new country?

Mr. Aris Babikian: Well, it is true that every newcomer to Canada will face difficulties, and the refugees are no exception, but we have to realize that these refugees have gone through a very difficult four and a half to five years. All of them suffer from trauma, and when they arrive, they need a supporting hand.

First of all, concerning discrimination, when you take a refugee to an employment place, the first thing they ask is whether they have Canadian experience. These people just arrived. How do you expect them to have Canadian experience?

The second thing is that some of the employers are taking advantage of these refugees. They are making them work in very difficult circumstances. I know cases in which people have not been paid for a month or two by the owner.

I mentioned another problem earlier, about the competing settlement agencies and employment. There's another layer of bureaucracy created there, and it is making those refugees more frustrated than the normal permanent resident who arrives in Canada.

• (1125)

Mr. Shaun Chen: In that same article, your centre goes on to state, "The refugees are hardworking, highly educated, and proud individuals who do not want to be a burden on anyone." Unfortunately, we have learned through the media about incidents in certain places across the country where refugees have been made to feel that they don't belong. There has been racist rhetoric, and discriminatory statements have been made towards them.

What do you feel that we can do to bring out the message your centre has been putting out and to tell the stories of the refugees you have encountered who really want to make it and to do so without being a burden to anyone?

Mr. Aris Babikian: To be honest with you, your observation is correct. Unfortunately, there are some bigoted people in our society, but not all Canadians are bigoted. I've had so many positive experiences with Canadians. It is true that there were some instances of people being taken advantage of, but in other cases, there were also very positive and fulfilling experiences. The media have already reflected some of these experiences.

The issue is that the most difficult part is the highly educated people. We have doctors, dentists, pharmacists, interior designers, and engineers. These people are quite proud, and they are not asking for any kind of support. They don't want to be dependent on any other person. They just want the lifting hand at the beginning of this transitional period for them.

For example, some of them need to upgrade their credentials. It is our role, the government's role, and the role of the professional associations that regulate these professions to create programs so that we will be able to benefit from these highly educated professional people. We complain all the time in our country that we suffer from brain drain. This is the reverse. This is a brain gain for us.

It is a shame to leave these people to go to work on assembly lines at minimum wage when we can give them a hand for six months or a year to upgrade their credentials so they can practise their own profession. Even if they cannot practise their own profession, what they are telling me is that anything close to their profession would be satisfactory to them. Those who are doctors say that they cannot practise medicine in Canada, but if they can work as a nurse in a hospital, for example, or as a pharmacy assistant or helper, they are willing to do that. Unfortunately, we don't have the programs to give these people the kind of hand they need.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Speaking of which, the provinces generally are responsible for training and post-secondary education. There are also professional bodies that are responsible for governing the professions. What role do you think the federal government can play in terms of ensuring that highly skilled and highly educated professionals can get the Canadian experience?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Aris Babikian: I think the federal and provincial governments can create a joint task force to address this issue. I think it is very doable.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Shaun Chen: If I may, Mr. Chair, I have one quick question.

You briefly mentioned that overseas offices are giving conflicting information to refugees. Can you elaborate?

The Chair: Five seconds, please.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Yes. There is a very disturbing trend whereby some of our officers are politicizing the interview process. The line of questioning is very disturbing.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Babikian.

Ms. Rempel is next.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you. I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Saroya.

A Syrian refugee spoke to us in Arabic at our committee meeting earlier this week and said:

...one of the main problems we are facing...is learning ESL, or English as a second language. ... 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.

He expressed great frustration with not being able to learn English. He also talked about housing and said:

We are a family of seven—five kids and the two of us, husband and wife—but we live in a two-bedroom apartment.... Apart from that, these smaller...units are... infested. There are bugs. From time to time we have to use bug spray....

We're also hearing about food bank usage. The minister even implied that this is a "cultural" issue. We've heard from school boards across the country that they're having challenges in integrating Syrian students who have had disruption in their education due to obvious circumstances.

The Mount Pleasant centre is going to be presenting in the second half of the committee today. They're saying they received notice on February 24 that their funding had been cut. They are a settlement services agency. At the same time, we're hearing from private sponsor groups that they have apartments ready that are sitting vacant and they're not able to match their families with the money they've raised in these sponsorship groups.

I'm just wondering, to all of the witness groups... I appreciate Canada's willingness to help. I think we all want to help here. My issue as a parliamentarian right now is that in a year this situation is going to get a lot worse, I think, because I feel that the government is glossing over the fact that refugee settlement services agencies are facing a lot of strain in dealing with these situations. At the same time, the private sponsor groups are saying they're ready and willing to help, but there's this exceptionally siloed approach between

government-sponsored refugees and privately sponsoring refugee groups, in that they're just not talking to each other.

Can you talk about what the impact will be on Syrian refugees who are in Canada right now if the government doesn't address some of these situations?

• (1130)

The Chair: Ms. Rempel, whom would you like to ask first?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'll ask Mr. Babikian if he'd like to start, and then we can go to the teleconference.

Mr. Aris Babikian: This is a very serious issue. We have to address this issue according to the two programs that we have right now, the government-sponsored one and the privately sponsored program. Most of the government-sponsored refugees who came have large families, and it is true that they are facing difficulties. The privately sponsored refugees are in a different situation because the family units are smaller and it's much easier to find apartments for them.

One year from now, when the government assistance stops, we are going to face problems, because some of these families, especially the government-sponsored ones, will not be able to afford the rent, and they will be on welfare.

There's also another issue. The confusion with regard to the SAHs is that on March 30 a circular from the department stated that all the SAHs should submit their applications by March 31. Suddenly the SAHs were caught off guard. Whatever applications they had, they had to submit them within 24 hours. They submitted the applications, but they still have other applications behind that. They need to submit those, but suddenly, after March 31, there was a freeze. There was no quota. There were no additional submissions. It took a month and a half, I believe, until the quotas started coming out, and now the quotas are very limited.

What has happened with the SAHs and the sponsor groups is that they have applications from the old system and now they have applications under the new SAHs, so where do they go? That's where the confusion is and where the frustration with regard to the private sponsors is happening, because they are sponsoring.... I have been meeting many church groups in Toronto, and school boards, etc., who are sponsors. They complain about the same thing: when will their refugees come? I mean, probably—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Babikian.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If my colleague will allow me...?

Yes, we've talked very much about process in this study so far, but for the first time this week we had a refugee come to committee and really talk about what it means to not have availability of language training services. You talk about the clock ticking in terms of your arrivals and the pride of these refugees in not wanting to be on social assistance and wanting to have a job. What does it mean for refugees if the government can't address some of these issues in a short period of time?

Perhaps I'll go to our colleagues on the video conference.

•(1135)

The Chair: Ms. Berman, go ahead.

Ms. Sandy Berman: There are a couple of things I wanted to add. We are very frustrated. We are ready to support, but we are also trying to be innovative. We have approached people who would donate apartments in the interim as a way of addressing the housing issue. All our refugees who are privately sponsored, even the family of six, are not going to get their housing needs met, because we cannot afford to support them in the apartments they need to be living in, which are three- or four-bedroom apartments. We recognize that they are going to have to make a compromise about where they live.

In terms of English language training access, I really support your concern. Getting access to English or French is of critical importance in getting employment. There are refugees, for example, who are working for Arabic-speaking construction companies here, but many people do not and cannot rely on Arabic-speaking people within an employment situation to help them through the process. Access to English and French is of critical importance.

The Chair: Thank you.

I am sorry. The time is up.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That's okay. Next time.

The Chair: 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 for their presentations.

I am going to ask a series of questions.

First, I think all the presenters raised the issue of affordability of housing. The reality is that on income assistance, at that rate, whether you are privately sponsored or government-sponsored, you can't afford to get housing. I wonder whether you have any suggestions as to what needs to be done.

Aside from the housing side, on affordability, we have received information from government officials who tell us that in Toronto and Vancouver, for example, by the time a family of four get the rate they are allotted and spend that money on their housing, they are already in the red. That is to say, they have no money to actually support their families, no money for food and other needs. The pressure is even more significant on those refugee families who are faced with the transportation loan debt.

I wonder whether you have any specific suggestions as to what the government can do about this. For example, because income assistance is a provincial program, should the federal government convene a federal table with the provincial and territorial partners to address this issue of income assistance rates?

I will go to you first, Ms. Berman, and then I will come to you, Mr. Babikian.

Ms. Sandy Berman: We definitely support some kind of intervention. I am sure this issue is particular to Toronto and the Lower Mainland.

We have been lobbying the provincial government here, but not with a lot of success. Some initiative from the federal end would

really help to allow for some discussion, and not just about the challenges that refugees are facing. I think there are larger implications for the community.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Babikian, go ahead.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Housing is a serious problem. We discussed it earlier.

I should mention that unfortunately some landlords in Toronto are gouging refugees. We had cases where the landlord asked the refugee to pay one year's advance rent. Even though this is against the law, they are asking. There are many cases like that.

I have two concrete recommendations.

First of all, encourage private corporations to donate more money. Recently we heard that three corporations donated \$750,000 toward subsidized housing.

The second suggestion I would put on the table is to bring forward some kind of incentive or tax break for privately sponsored refugees to individuals and to the churches. That way, the Canadians who are sponsoring a refugee can get some kind of tax break. They can contribute more and participate more. More Canadians can become involved in this refugee sponsorship process or in supporting the refugees.

Right now all the sponsors, whatever they are doing, are putting in from their own pockets. They are doing it because they are truly heroes. They are Canadians, and according to tradition, they are doing it.

•(1140)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that.

Those are good suggestions, although I will note that the challenge, of course, is that private sponsoring, which is what the minister has said we will rely on up until this point, so far hasn't met the need. I don't know whether or not that really is a long-term solution.

With respect to landlords coming forward, that too poses a problem, because at the 13th month both the privately sponsored and the government-sponsored refugees are on income assistance and on their own. What happens to them after that? Those are important issues that we need to try to figure out as well.

I want to turn to this issue around the long wait for the private sponsors, and particularly those in the northern Iraq area. It's my understanding in speaking with you and others who have been working hard on this, Ms. Berman, that the government doesn't even have processing centres there in those communities. Hence, the processing of these 100 families who are waiting to come, with sponsors ready to receive them, is even further delayed and very much uncertain. Am I correct in that understanding?

Ms. Sandy Berman: All of the files have been sent to Amman, Jordan. There is a huge backlog, we've been told. While I'm sure these extra visa officers will help clear it up, at this point we have no indication exactly when these officers would go to northern Iraq. We're very concerned. We keep hearing from the refugees that they have had no contact from anybody. This is true not just for our families; it's been true for the other people we've been liaising with.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The suggestion was to have the IOM or the UNHCR, which already have people overseas, help process this. This has been suggested to the government, and I certainly have brought it to the government's attention and to the minister's attention, but so far no action has been taken. That opportunity is not really fully facilitated. Is that correct?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Sandy Berman: That's correct. In fact, the UNHCR has been interviewing people in some of the camps, but it's about resettlement elsewhere. They already have that responsibility for other countries.

The Chair: You have five seconds—oh, sorry, my mistake: you have one minute and five seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: One minute and five seconds? Oh, my God, I just hit the jackpot.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With regard to that 13th month, Amer, the Syrian refugee who came and presented to us on Tuesday, indicated the challenge. He's still, after one year, not able to get into a language training program from the government. He's still waiting. I'm wondering about the extensiveness of that problem. If you can't get language, you can't get employment. That's happening in British Columbia, in Surrey more particularly, in the Lower Mainland. I'm wondering if it's happening in your neck of the woods.

Mr. Babikian, can you respond to that?

Mr. Aris Babikian: We are facing that language problem also in Toronto. It's a catch-22 situation, especially with the privately sponsored refugees. From the first day they arrive, the privately sponsored refugees want to start working in order to support their families. They don't want to be a burden on their sponsor or the SAHs. What happens sometimes, unfortunately, is that even though they have very poor English, they drop out of school to go and find a minimum labour job to support their families.

It is a catch-22. How do we stop it? There are solutions for it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all for coming here. We really appreciate your taking the time and informing this committee of the great work you're doing.

First, Mr. Ezzabour, I'm wondering if you could talk about some of the unexpected challenges your group has successfully overcome. You said you had 48 hours before your first mandate, and I know we campaigned on 25,000 refugees, so there was a heavy influx. Can you tell us about some of the success stories you've seen?

[*Translation*]

Mr. El Hafed Ezzabour: Thank you.

As an organization in Brossard, we have taken on the challenge of settling the refugees. We haven't had any problems with housing, because we are already experienced in dealing with property owners. They are understanding. To resolve the crisis, we think housing must be addressed first. If the refugees have housing, we can take on all the challenges, and housing is the first challenge.

Our second challenge concerns health, specifically the application for the interim federal health program. Syrians have problems when it comes to the services of dentists and optometrists, who say the government will not reimburse them for the treatments they provide. That's why there are now many cases of people with dental health issues. Dentists are recommending only that teeth be pulled, rather than providing other treatments. The interim federal health program doesn't give Syrian refugees the opportunity to have their teeth cared for properly. That's a problem. We have welcomed vulnerable Syrian refugees, large families from villages who have six or seven children. They need support, especially in relation to health.

The third challenge is interpretation in hospitals. If the refugees need to go to the emergency room at or after midnight, they would have trouble communicating with hospital staff. This raises major issues. We recommend that a toll-free number be arranged or that interpreters be hired.

Currently, our major challenges regarding the refugees concern health and, above all, interpretation.

Francization is also a challenge. All the refugees we have welcomed have little education, not even at the primary level. It could even be described as illiteracy, among the children as well. It's a major challenge for us. However, with the school boards, we have set up many committees to guide and support children who have psychological and language difficulties.

For the time being, our two biggest challenges are the children's integration into school and health.

• (1145)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

[*English*]

You mentioned also the interim federal health program. The previous government cut that. If that was still not in place right now, how would that have hindered your organization from helping the Syrian refugees?

[*Translation*]

Mr. El Hafed Ezzabour: It's true. It's very frustrating for Syrians, especially for families. Some people even talking about returning to Lebanon or Turkey because they are having a hard time and they are frustrated about not finding anyone to help them, especially with dental and eye care. This causes many problems.

We are currently trying to solve this major problem, and we are looking for ways to get them dental care. We are looking for someone to help them cope with the frustration. It's a real challenge.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

[English]

My other question is to Ms. Berman.

You mentioned in your testimony the challenge of raising children and caring for children. What measures would you recommend to ensure that all women have access to language training? Would you recommend child services programs, and have you seen any challenges with women accessing language training?

• (1150)

Ms. Sandy Berman: We've definitely seen a lot of challenges. There are long wait-lists for English classes for women with young children. Particularly for those with babies, there are very limited spaces. Targeting classes for women who have children would be a plus. Increased funding for that would be beneficial.

We are also looking into a partnership with a company to look at developing a platform to deliver micro English language classes on a cellphone as an interim measure to help immigrant and refugee women access some English classes while they're waiting to get into the in-person classes. We're looking at alternatives to support moving forward.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have five minutes, please.

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

A lot of time has been spent in this committee talking about the existing problems we have, whether they involve health care, education, language, housing, or other kinds of things. The question I've been asking some of the witnesses over time has been about this issue of the 13th month, which I think Ms. Kwan referred to, when the funding expires. There's no funding. It's all over.

I asked this of the minister, and the minister said, "Oh well, they'll have to go on social assistance." I have no idea what effect that's going to have on the provincial assistance programs.

We'll start off with Ms. Berman.

Could you comment as to how serious you think this issue is, and whether you're aware of the percentage of refugees who will be forced to go on welfare? Specifically in the case of private sponsors, there will be a moral issue, and of course they'll feel obligated to help, but on the other hand, they may have resources for only 12 months. What are your thoughts on what will happen when the funding expires?

Ms. Sandy Berman: You're right that as private sponsors, we see ourselves being obligated to support the family for way beyond one year. We have very much committed to a long-term relationship. I really want to emphasize that.

We have been debating about raising extra money in order to afford accommodation, because the family will be faced with a dilemma at the end, since a welfare rate will not cover the extra amount for rent that we have raised.

We are very concerned and we see this as a real ethical challenge for us. We're still going ahead, but we are also looking to find resources to support them to find employment so that they won't

necessarily have to end up on welfare. It is documented that many families are on welfare, and one of the biggest problems goes back to the fact that they haven't been able to access enough English language classes in order to find employment, so we keep going around in circles.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Babikian, perhaps you could comment on this as well.

Has there been any talk of the federal government extending this 13-month rule? Also, can you provide your comments on where we're all going to be at the end of 12 months, which isn't far away?

Mr. Aris Babikian: I personally haven't heard about any kind of suggestion to extend that one-year timeline.

Coming back to the issue of housing, we are addressing two different problems. Our experience in Toronto has been that it is difficult and unaffordable for the refugees, but the privately sponsored refugees are better adapted to solving this problem because all of them are immediately trying to work. They are not in ideal working conditions, and they are not getting the best money they can. Some families are working at two jobs, or the breadwinner in the family as well as the children are working. I personally don't see long-term problems with the privately sponsored refugees, but the government-sponsored refugees are quite a concern. No one can forecast what the ramifications will be when the 13th month comes.

• (1155)

Mr. David Tilson: Do you have any quick recommendations, because there are going to be more government-sponsored refugees coming? Do you have any recommendations to the government on this issue of funding?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Aris Babikian: As I said earlier, encourage more corporations to come in and especially try to open channels with landlords in various cities and give incentives to landlords so that they bring some kind of special arrangement for these refugees to help them move in.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Babikian.

Mr. Sarai, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you for coming.

One of the things I'm noticing here is that the challenges we're talking about are the challenges that actually every newcomer has. I come from the metro Vancouver region, and rents are high and housing is in tight demand. Whether you're on social services or you're a new immigrant, you're facing those challenges.

We have to be cognizant that ravel loans have been waived, I think, for government-sponsored refugees and privately sponsored refugees who applied by March of 2016. The government has introduced an interim health plan to cover their dental and extended benefits, though we have heard, as you and other speakers said earlier, that there are problems with getting the claims in.

What we think is that a lot of dentists, optometrists, and other specialists don't like doing the extra work, and it is cumbersome. We've heard about it and we've actually asked for recommendations to see how we can streamline it so that an optometrist just doesn't say no but is able to do it as with any other medical benefit extended plan, under which you just send in a memo and in a few minutes you get approval and you can do the dental work or optometry work.

We understand it's a frustrating system and that some doctors may not want to do it just because of the cumbersome process, but the money is there and the program is there.

Another thing I'm noticing and bringing to your attention is that 10,000 privately sponsored refugees did arrive by March and they did get settled. What we're noticing now is a result of the overwhelming response of privately sponsored families. People want to bring them in, and they've been excited. They're all thinking that refugees are going to move in, but because 10,000 have already arrived, the timeline is perhaps a little slow.

My point now—and I'm going to ask you if you can answer a question on it—is that the government commitment is to give government-sponsored refugees the same amount of money as one would get on social services in that province. In Ontario it may be more or less, in B.C. it may be more or less, but it will be the same as in that province. How can you see it justifiable for the federal government to give more money than what a Canadian welfare or social service recipient is getting? We can only match it. We cannot give more to somebody who's coming now. How can you overcome that?

This is a two-part question. First perhaps Mr. Babikian or Ms. Berman can elaborate on it. How can we justify that?

Second, if a PSR is given a commitment that he or she or that family will be given the same amount of money as a government-sponsored refugee, which is roughly the same amount that social services will cover, then there should be no pressure on that family to go and get a job. During the 12 months, they have the ability to get their skills upgraded, to get language training, and to do other things. Maybe we have a problem with the privately sponsored families, who are saying they will give those resources but are not doing it. Is that the issue, or is it a compulsion that the families themselves are feeling they must abide by?

Mr. Babikian, you can start.

Mr. Aris Babikian: We are discussing this today because, of course, we want to discuss the shortfalls, to tweak the program and make it the best system available and to make this program a model for the rest of the world. There are positive signs, but there are also some shortfalls in the program.

The issue is the speed with which all these refugees came, the mass airlift between December 10 and February 29. That was one of the critical issues that created some of these difficulties. For example, some sponsors sponsored more than one family.

The people who came before December 4 came through commercial airlines, 30 or 35 families a week in the Toronto region, and it was much easier to handle and to resettle these people. However, the mass air arrival of 10,000 people in two months created a situation that the agencies, the SAHs, and the private

sponsors suddenly found out they could not handle it all at once. That's why we have some of these difficulties.

• (1200)

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, please.

Mr. Aris Babikian: Again, the privately sponsored refugees don't want to be a burden. If we can provide them with a proper working situation, they will be completely satisfied. They will be off the program and they will not be a burden on anyone.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Babikian.

I would like to thank all the panellists who appeared before us today for the important insights they are providing to the committee. I know I speak on behalf of the whole committee when I express our gratitude for all the work that you personally, and your organizations, are doing in helping to settle Syrian refugees.

We will now suspend for two minutes to allow the next panel to arrive.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Good afternoon.

Our second panel today consists of Shahan Mirakian, government relations coordinator for the Armenian Community Centre; Mario Calla, the executive director of COSTI Immigrant Services; Gini Bonner, executive director, and Sanja Sladojevic, early years refugee program manager, both from the Mount Pleasant Family Centre Society, sharing a slot; and finally Karen Shortt, president of the Vancouver Community College Faculty Association.

I would like to remind witnesses that they have seven minutes for their presentations.

We begin with Mr. Mirakian.

Mr. Shahan Mirakian (Government Relations Coordinator, Armenian Community Centre SAH): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I could go in one of two directions with my presentation. I have written up both.

I think I won't use my entire seven minutes and will speak more briefly, because I noticed in the previous session that there were questions asked. I think I can elucidate from my other presentation through the questions.

The Chair: You can submit your second report, and we will make sure it is circulated.

Please proceed.

Mr. Shahan Mirakian: I will send that electronically to the clerk afterwards as well. Thank you.

Good afternoon. My name is Shahan Mirakian. For today's purposes, I have been designated—or, more properly, I've designated myself—as the government relations coordinator for the Armenian Community Centre sponsorship agreement holder. In reality, I'm serving as a proxy for our entire organization, but more precisely, I'm serving as a proxy for my father, Apkar Mirakian, whom some of you may know, and who has been much more closely involved in the resettlement efforts than I have. I speak in part for him, in the sense that he's provided me with the information I'm providing today, although I am personally familiar with much of the information as well.

I should say—and it's not a matter of false modesty but an absolute truth—that my own personal contribution to this effort has been rather modest. “Next to nothing” is probably more accurate. I take absolutely no individual credit for anything that the ACC sponsorship agreement holder has accomplished. I only regret that my father is under the weather this week, because he's in a better position to be able to speak to some of these issues from a first-hand basis, but also, if there are any accolades or blame to be given, he's in a better position to receive them.

As Canadians of Armenian descent, we were immediately drawn to Canada's effort to resettle Syrian and Iraqi refugees. One could not help but see the historical parallels between this effort and Canada's first international humanitarian effort in 1923, when 109 boys orphaned by the Armenian genocide were brought to live on a farm in Georgetown, Ontario, through the efforts of both the Canadian government and ordinary Canadians.

Motivated by a desire to do our fair share, we set an ambitious goal and opened our doors widely. With the Canadian government's expedited target, we found ourselves nearly overwhelmed by the scope of our ambition. It was only through the tireless work by our volunteers and by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada staff that we were able to succeed.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the staff at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, here and abroad, who worked to make the recent Syrian refugee project such a success.

We are particularly grateful to Mr. Wally Boxhill, who was our link to IRCC and worked closely with us during the busiest days to coordinate the arrival and transportation of over 1,500 privately sponsored refugees. It would not be an exaggeration to say that without Mr. Boxhill's help there would have been no way that we could have kept up with the pace of arrivals. We particularly appreciate Mr. Boxhill's willingness to travel to Toronto, often on very short notice, to meet with us and to observe the situation first-hand. Especially in the late days of December, when we were stretched to our maximum, Mr. Boxhill's visit to the ACC was especially important in creating a lasting communication between our sponsorship agreement holder and the IRCC staff.

We are also thankful to Ms. Deborah Tunis, who was the first person from IRCC to open lines of communication—again in those dark days of December—and who made herself available day and night to answer all of our questions. Mr. Richard Lecours was the first person from IRCC to visit the Armenian Community Centre in December and remains an important part of the team to this very day.

Mr. Michael O'Byrne provided vital support for our resettlement effort from IRCC's Toronto office, along with his colleagues Mr. Ryan Shadford and Ms. Teresa Wu, who were the eyes and ears on the ground and worked with us, particularly in February when the numbers were especially high, in making sure that all the PSRs got onto the right buses and were in the right hotels, and in making sure that we picked up everyone and their luggage and delivered them to the right places.

In the Beirut visa office, we would like thank Ms. Heather Michaud, who worked with us to ensure a seamless process from the initial interview to the final settlement in Canada, and who continues to work with us. My father visited Ms. Michaud in Beirut just two Fridays ago through IRCC's facilitation. She was happy to see him, and they had a very cordial conversation.

Of course, there are numerous other IRCC staff members whose work is still not visible to us, but who no doubt made it possible for us to accept so many refugees in such a short period of time. Possibly not of direct relevance to the scope of this committee's review is the contribution made by the Ontario government, particularly the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade and the Office of the Premier, particularly the refugee settlement coordinating committee.

I should add that although the mandate of the Ontario government is focused on settlement as opposed to resettlement, the efforts of the MCIIT and the Office of the Premier also assisted us in being able to do resettlement efforts as well. They contributed to the resettlement effort and they continue to contribute so that we are able to do the settlement effort.

● (1210)

I see that Mr. Calla is present with us—virtually—and I should say that COSTI has also been extremely helpful in the settlement and resettlement efforts. They may not feel they've been important in the resettlement effort, but I want to tell Mr. Calla that we appreciate everything COSTI has done with us and for us.

Finally, I think I would be ungrateful if I were not to thank the various immigration ministers who worked with the ACC SAH and took the opportunity to visit our community centre. Minister John McCallum, Minister Chris Alexander, and Minister Jason Kenney all took a special interest in our work and made our success a specific priority. All three of them visited the community centre during these times, and all three met with recently arrived PSRs.

I should say that we were extremely ambitious in our efforts to resettle nearly 2,000 privately sponsored Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Canada. I should also add that I have written the number 2,000 here, but in a recent event we had, Minister Chan said that they had counted up our numbers, and it was closer to 2,300, so let me correct myself and say that there are 2,300 privately sponsored Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

● (1215)

The Chair: You have 15 seconds left.

Mr. Shahan Mirakian: We were so fortunate that our ambition was shared by the Canadian government, and particularly IRCC staff. With their guidance, assistance, and support, we were able to reach our goals.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mirakian.

Now we have Mr. Calla for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Mario Calla (Executive Director, COSTI Immigrant Services): Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, everyone. My apologies for not being able to join you today in person.

My name is Mario Calla. I'm the executive director of COSTI Immigrant Services.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about what has been a historic and ambitious initiative by the federal government to accept 25,000 refugees in a short period of time.

COSTI Immigrant Services is a charitable organization providing settlement and integration services to immigrants in the greater Toronto area for the past 64 years. It serves about 39,000 immigrants per year. COSTI operates out of 17 locations in the greater Toronto area, providing English language training, employment counselling, accommodation for refugees, family and mental health counselling, and settlement counselling programs, to name a few. COSTI is the federal government's service delivery agent in Toronto for the resettlement of government-assisted Syrian refugees. We have resettled more than 1,800 Syrian refugees since last December. The last family of this cohort of refugees moved out of temporary accommodations just two weeks ago.

We learned many things through this intense initiative, but I would like to take this opportunity to briefly highlight three things that stood out for us and that have policy implications for the federal government.

First, the most challenging part of this initiative was finding affordable housing for the newcomers. It took an average of five and a half weeks to move the newcomers from temporary accommodations into their own homes. More significantly, the rental costs are in excess of 50% of their income. It is generally accepted that for housing to be affordable, it should consume less than 30% of a person's income. It is clear from COSTI's broader housing services that the availability of affordable housing is a challenge for all Canadians of limited economic means. The Syrian refugee project has focused the lens on how serious a problem this is. We urge the Canadian government to develop a national housing strategy that can begin to address the unavailability of affordable housing in major centres in Canada.

Second, the Syrian refugee project has unleashed in Canadians a level of generosity and volunteerism that has rarely been seen.

COSTI worked with 13 mosques, two churches, and three community groups that befriended 150 Syrian families and helped them with household start-up kits and ongoing support.

Another 30 community organizations organized children's programs in the five hotels. Donations of clothing and toys were managed by another organization, which was formed spontaneously by a group of volunteers. Additionally, more than 300 volunteers provided interpretation in escorting people to medical appointments and housing searches. COSTI could not have effectively succeeded in resettling these 1,800 newcomers without this level of support from the community.

It is clear that a community that collectively cares for its vulnerable is a healthier and more cohesive community. The government should take care to promote through its policies the involvement and participation of civil society. The challenge going forward is in sustaining this level of community participation, both with government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees. We urge the government to support resettlement initiatives that directly involve civil society, and therefore we recommend the expeditious processing of private sponsorship applications to further promote the involvement of private sponsors.

Finally, we commend the government for eliminating the transportation loan for this group of refugees. Historically these loans have had a crushing impact on the ability of refugees to make ends meet from month to month. The loan amounts can run up to \$10,000. Canada's refugee program is based on and driven by humanitarian principles, and burdening refugees with a debt load is incompatible with these principles. We urge the government to extend the waiver of the loan program to all refugees.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon. I look forward to our discussion on the resettlement of Syrian refugees.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Calla.

Now I understand that Ms. Bonner and Ms. Sladojevic will be sharing three and a half minutes and Ms. Shortt will have three and a half minutes.

Go ahead, Ms. Bonner.

Ms. Gini Bonner (Executive Director, Mount Pleasant Family Centre Society): Thank you. Thank you for having us.

Mount Pleasant Family Centre Society is a provincially certified family resource program and early learning family support and parenting centre. We've served families in Vancouver for over 40 years, and since 2008 have delivered a specialized early years refugee program called Circles of Care and Connection. This program straddles the line between settlement and early childhood development and provides specialized support to young refugee children, their older siblings, and their parents.

Our services include activities that focus on information and orientation; community connections; and assessment and referrals related to family preservation, parenting, and child development. Our services play a critical role during the initial stages of settlement and have a positive impact on the newcomer child's early experience, recovery from trauma, and preparation for school.

The goals of our program include ensuring that newcomer families are not isolated in our community and that they feel welcomed and supported. We shorten the pathway and time between arrival and integration into our community. Our goals include a successful transition to mainstream early childhood education supports, and we ensure that refugee children achieve expected developmental milestones or receive appropriate referrals through other community organizations.

Challenges that face all refugee families and that are exacerbated by the Syrian refugee crisis will be covered by Sanja.

Ms. Sanja Sladojevic (Early Years Refugee Program Manager, Mount Pleasant Family Centre Society): What has happened in the meantime, actually, which I think was mentioned before, is that our agency lost quite a lot of funding, so now, at a time when there is more need than ever to help refugee families, our program has been reduced. We had another funder, but then they decided to change priorities, so we lost altogether somewhere around 30% of our funding.

Our big challenge is that now more families than ever are arriving. They need more support than ever, but we have had to reduce our staff, so we don't really have that much capacity to maintain the quality of our program.

We do home visits. We meet families when they come to Welcome House and we work with the children over there, but we also continue with the home visits just to ensure that all families are connected with services in the neighbourhood and that they are not feeling isolated. As we have heard quite a few times today, there are issues with housing. Some of our families have already said that they're in permanent housing, but they know they will have to move again by the end of the year. It's actually extremely stressful and traumatizing for families to have to move again and again.

Another thing we noticed was that it is a challenge to take English language lessons, especially for women, because of the issue of child care. It's almost impossible to find any spaces for moms.

Health care is also an issue because of reduced hours for interpretation. Food security and transportation are issues, and there's a need for community orientation as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Shortt, you have three and a half minutes.

Ms. Karen Shortt (President, Vancouver Community College Faculty Association): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Karen Shortt, and I represent the 650 faculty who teach at Vancouver Community College. Our student population is approximately 17,000.

Our faculty do the front-line English language teaching that is a direct result of this Parliament. Canada has well-intentioned policies and programs to assist refugees and immigrants. We do not want that intent to fail in the last stages after giving people so much hope and promise. Unfortunately, though, we're not doing as well as we should be.

Vancouver Community College provides assistance to new immigrants in three areas: English language training, credential

recognition, and Canadian work experience. Our faculty have a deep understanding of the unique nature of an immigrant's needs. We create pathways that lead to meaningful employment and credential recognition.

Vancouver Community College has an infrastructure in place that will help refugees transition into employment. We will be there for the long term, as their needs change and their children come through the K-to-12 sector. We have counsellors on site to meet with students in crisis and on an ongoing basis. We have well-equipped labs. We have learning centres with tutors, a library, and student associations. As well, each program has a program advisory committee.

The level of industry engagement is critical to our students' success. The added value is direct feedback from employers on how our graduates' customer service and interpersonal skills are transferring in the Canadian workplace.

Our class size is small, usually 20 per class, and this allows the instructors to have one-on-one interaction with the students. We offer a variety of programs that combine classroom instruction, hands-on training, and internships in industry. We have many heartwarming stories that are vitally important to our ESL programs and to our communities. We have people who come into our programs, take ESL, and go out and become nurses, dental hygienists, hospitality managers, and culinary arts chefs. They are involved in the automotive trades in apprenticeships.

I'd like to tell you just one VCC success story. We had a group of immigrants, all engineers, go through our ESL pathways program for engineers. After completing the program with a curriculum specific to engineering, they then went into our seven-month drafting program. After completing this, they all gained employment, because they were able to transfer the skills of being an engineer into a seven-month drafting program and go out and get a job rather quickly. We think this is something that is very important for new people to Canada: that they start working and are able to contribute back. In fact, 93% of our graduates are working in their field.

However, we are not fulfilling our promise to immigrants and refugees. We currently have over 800 students on the wait-list for English language courses. Because of funding cuts this year to our LINC program, we had to cancel classes for 220 ESL students who would have started in April of 2016.

●(1225)

The Chair: You have five seconds, please.

Ms. Karen Shortt: I understand that the government is working on this, but I leave you with this request: please restore funding to the level it was, and then add some more.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Shortt.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have seven minutes, please.

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

First of all, I want to thank every witness for being here and providing us with insights on the best pathways forward.

I'd like to start with you, Mr. Mirakian. I know full well, having visited your centre and having read various newspaper accounts, that your organization has been doing truly monumental and inspiring work. On behalf of myself and I'm sure many other Canadians, I want to thank you for all the incredible work you've done. It certainly is a whole lot more than what you refer to as the "fair share" for your community organization. On top of that, I should add that the nature of your collaboration with IRCC and with other settlement groups such as COSTI, as you pointed out, has been truly inspiring.

My first question is about the processes you have encountered.

As I understand it, your organization has really been at the forefront for about four or five years now. Can you give us a sense of the numbers you have been helping with over the course of the past four or five years? I understand that previously the focus was on people coming from Iraq. I understand that in the old days the numbers weren't very high and I presume that you were encountering huge challenges, but now, looking at everything over the past six months, the numbers have risen quite a bit. Perhaps you could provide us with a sense of those.

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: In late 2009 we applied to CIC, as it was then, and became a sponsorship agreement holder. We were accepted in 2010, and we began to accept our first privately sponsored refugees in 2010. At this time it was part of a government program to expedite a privately sponsored refugee process for Iraqi Christians, and we were working with a number of other organizations who were fundamental in that effort.

Beginning in late 2010, when our first family arrived, all the way to late 2014, the full number was just over 200 people. In late 2014 to mid-2015, again before the efforts started most recently, our numbers were about another 180 families, bringing us to a number of about 370. I know this number fairly precisely because we sent out invitations for a free Thanksgiving Day dinner and we had to send out 370-something invitations. Pardon me; there were a certain number of invitations, but we were keeping track of how many people had to be seated, so the invitations were sent by family, but we knew there were about 370.

By the way, the very first family that was greeted by the Prime Minister in the airport was one of our privately sponsored families, and the very last family that arrived on February 29 was one of our

families as well, so we bookended the process. We're still accepting families now, but as part of the major process.

The precise number is difficult to get. We've tried our best to put our finger precisely on the number, but I believe the total number now would be somewhere around 2,300.

I can say that in the month of February we were very precise, because we had every plane charted, whether it was commercial or whether it was part of the government effort. We had a total of 670 people arrive in the month of February. That was a large number. The period between December 10 and December 31 was another large period. I can't say the precise number there, but I would say it was roughly 500.

●(1230)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That's incredible.

Thank you for that. I've actually visited ACC, and it was really was a beehive of activity, given all the logistical challenges.

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: Those were busy days in December, so thank you very much.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: It was incredible to watch, and very inspiring.

The second question I have is with respect to the provision of schooling. Do you have any special programs in place for the children that you're accommodating?

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: There are two separate streams for this. When they originally arrived, our goal was that they would come to our private school. The Armenian Community Centre is affiliated with the A.R.S Armenian School, which is a private school providing instruction following the Ontario curriculum in English, French, and Armenian. We accommodated a substantial number of students of the initial cohort. We did it for free, by the way. There's tuition to be paid for that school, but they weren't charged at all. We had to fundraise internally to do it. That was the first stream.

As the numbers became larger and we realized that our school was physically and educationally not capable of accommodating this number of new arrivals, we began to work with both the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board. We have had some feelers out to surrounding areas of the GTA as well, where some of our families are settled, but mainly we've worked with those two school boards.

We've actually found quite receptive boards who have worked with us very closely. We work also with our Catholic church to integrate people into the Catholic school board, which seems to be the more popular of the two options among some of these families. One of the things is that people find that it's cheaper to buy a child two uniforms than to buy a wardrobe that meets the minimum standard for being cool in Canada, I guess is the way I would put it. A lot of them gravitate toward the Catholic school board, so we've worked with the Armenian Catholic Church and their social services arm to help with that as well.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: What are the classes that your school offers?

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: We offer English as a second language, French as a second language, and classes to integrate, but most of the refugees who've arrived through the Syrian program have spent some time wanting to come to Canada. Obviously their parents haven't spent long enough to pick up the language, but I think for biological reasons or whatever, the skill of children in picking up a language is a little better than that of the parents.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: Therefore we haven't had the need for ESL that I thought we would have originally, but all the parents certainly do need it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, you have seven minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses in Vancouver as well as everybody here. We're listening to what you're teaching us and guiding us on what to do next. Thank you.

First, let me say thank you to Shahen and Aris, the previous Armenian witnesses, for taking 3,000 people in the last couple of months, which is approximately one-eighth of the total Syrian refugees who have arrived here. Thank you for doing a good job.

My first question is to the Mount Pleasant Family Centre Society. The organization received a notice on February 24 that the federal funding would be cut for the fiscal year starting April 1. Can you explain why this cut took place? How has this cut affected your ability to meet the needs of the refugee communities? What programs or services have you had to cut as a result? Have you had to make any cuts to staffing or anything else?

• (1235)

Ms. Gini Bonner: Definitely, the funding cut of 6% from the federal government has had an impact on our capacity to maintain the level of employment. We've reduced our full-time employees. We've laid off staff. We've reduced the number of hours we can provide for interpretation. We've reduced program hours. In fact, we've cut our program hours in half, not totally as a result of that 6%, but as a compounded result of the loss of funding.

We've really reduced our capacity to respond to the clients' crises. Regarding clients who are high risk and who are in crisis, we've reduced the clinical supervision and case management capacity of our organization and compromised some of the safety practices and protocols that we have had in place over the past years to support the staff doing this very difficult work.

Mr. Bob Saroya: In British Columbia we heard from a witness the other day, from Amer, who's living in a bug-infested two-bedroom apartment with seven people. He didn't get ESL and couldn't find any place to go to ESL, and after 13 long months he can't find a job. Do you have any suggestions or any comments on that, Mr. Calla?

Mr. Mario Calla: Did you mean in terms of ESL accessibility, Mr. Saroya?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Yes.

Mr. Mario Calla: In Toronto we've been fairly fortunate in that regard, in that most of the refugees are now in ESL programs. We have been following up with each family. We actually hired a Syrian refugee to make the calls.

There is one area where we are stretched, and that is with classes that provide child-minding support. That is basically the LINC program, because the provincial ESL programs do not provide child-minding support.

We are finding that we now have some long waiting lists for those programs, primarily for the women who need to access these classes. Making those classes accessible for them is a concern for us.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Again back in British Columbia, the funding for last year was \$4.6 million and the funding for this year is \$4.2 million, which is almost a 9% reduction in the total funding for LINC.

In addition, the B.C. Liberal government is taking \$680,000, which it is saying is needed for overhead expenses for this program. How will you manage for the upcoming year? In the meantime, the people from the previous year are still waiting to go to ESL classes. How will you manage for this coming year? Remember that there are no ESL classes, no English, and no jobs.

Mr. Mario Calla: Is the question again to me, Mr. Saroya?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Yes.

Mr. Mario Calla: In Toronto there were cuts also. I know your figures are for British Columbia, but the way we've managed it isn't a perfect solution either. Rather than cutting classes, we basically closed down for the summer. We have 27 LINC classes that, at the end of this month, will be closing down until the end of August or early September, denying people access to those classes over the summer months. That's how we're coping with those cuts.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Is this the right solution, or is it just that your hands are tied?

Mr. Mario Calla: Our hands are tied.

It's a compromise solution from the point of view that rather than cutting the 27 classes to 24, the decision was to actually have a pause over the summer months.

However, people need to learn English over those months. My concern is that many of the refugees want to work, but we encourage them to learn English first. They have 12 months of government support, during which time they should be making the most of that time. To then have a two-month pause really works against that.

We try to get them into some of the provincial ESL classes. We do workarounds to ensure they still have some access to programs, but, as I say, usually the women get cheated in that process because child-minding isn't available.

• (1240)

Mr. Bob Saroya: How is the housing situation? You mentioned that 50% of their income goes toward housing, and we still hear from a witness, Amer, who's living in bug-infested housing. There was only \$200 per month left for a family of seven.

Any comments?

Mr. Mario Calla: I do have some comments on that.

The Chair: You have five seconds, please.

Mr. Mario Calla: It's very worrisome.

What we've done to help people is gotten the mosques involved, which are providing food hampers and other supports until the third month, when the child tax benefit kicks in.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To all the witnesses, I want to get some clarity around the funding cut.

Earlier we had government officials who came to this table to say that the LINC program funding has not been cut. What we're hearing now is that it has been cut, in Ontario and in other jurisdictions.

Particularly for VCC, is it the case, Ms. Shortt, that there's been an 8.5% cut in the LINC program for VCC?

Ms. Karen Shortt: Yes, that's absolutely correct. We have an 8.5% cut.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The implication for that is that in addition to the cut, you have 800 people waiting to try to get into the program. Not only are they not getting into the program, but with the new influx of Syrian refugees, they have no hope of actually getting in, yet you have the capacity, if funding was available, to open up classrooms today and to have teachers in the classrooms today to accommodate the Syrian refugees and others who need English as a language programming.

Ms. Karen Shortt: That's correct.

We've been teaching English as a second language for over 40 years. We have the curriculum, we have the expertise, and we have the classrooms.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To be more specific, aside from early learning in terms of English, the beginner level, you also have programming that will cater to specific employment streams. That is in the area of professions that they might be coming in with and to have that a specific training to get them then into the workforce.

Ms. Karen Shortt: That's correct.

We have a pathways program that can be specific to the curriculum language needed for new immigrants. We offer combined skills. The students will go to school half the day to learn English

language, the other half of the day they'll be learning whatever course they are in, for example, culinary arts.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The only thing you need is funding to make that happen and to get the Syrian refugees learning English and getting them into the workforce.

Ms. Karen Shortt: That's right. We are ready to go.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To Gini and Sanja, your organization provides support particularly for children under six and particularly for women so that they can get out of the home and not be isolated. You have also experienced a funding cut in this area to the tune of 6%. Is that correct?

Ms. Sanja Sladojevic: Yes. We did get a little bit of Syrian top-up, actually, but it's only for three months. We had another huge cut from another fund.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You received a 6% cut, then you got a three-month temporary top-up, and that three-month top-up is now over.

Ms. Sanja Sladojevic: That's correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then your funding is back to that 6% full cut again, and the need is still there and Syrian refugee families are still arriving. Families are living in isolation now because you're no longer able to make the family visits for these women and the children.

Ms. Gini Bonner: Definitely.

I believe that we need multi-year funding. Having a three-month temporary top-up for our programming is completely inappropriate. Our refugees—children and families—all need ongoing, stable support. To experience this on-again, off-again kind of support services is completely inappropriate.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You're not the only organization in the Lower Mainland that is providing these supports. There are others as well. Are they in the same situation as you are?

Ms. Sanja Sladojevic: We usually try to connect our families with other programs and services. Several programs that we know, such as community kitchens for Syrian families. There are classes for Syrian families that have started, but they will all have to be cut at the end of June because they all, most probably.... We don't know if the funding will continue. We still don't know, and it is already the beginning of June.

• (1245)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This has been brought to the minister's attention and his staff's attention at this committee and elsewhere. Even though they said that there has been more funding put in place, in reality, for the organizations on the ground, it has not actually materialized to date.

Ms. Gini Bonner: No, it has not.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In terms of the impact on women, at other committee meetings we've had people tell us that some women are experiencing issues of domestic violence. What are the implications if women are left in isolation, with no language opportunities and no ability to connect with the outside community for support? What are you seeing on the ground with families?

Ms. Sanja Sladojevic: We actually had a really big crisis in some refugee families that arrived earlier. It was really difficult to cope, because there was so much stress put on families, especially with repaying loans and working three jobs or something to be able to repay that loan. Sometimes in a stressful situation, you get stressed and things escalate. We had to help several moms go to safe housing.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Wouldn't you say, then, that it is critical for services like yours to reach out to those women so they are not living in isolation, and that with your program cut and the lack of funding, you are not able to do that work?

Ms. Sanja Sladojevic: Yes. We are trying now to concentrate on our Syrian families, but we still have lots of families we have to serve. We really cannot visit them and we cannot help them as much anymore.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All the families are in the same situation, and we have a major crisis brewing.

Mr. Calla, I am going to turn to you for a minute.

You mentioned that in Ontario you also have a lack of funding and particularly that you will not be providing LINC classes in the summer months for that reason. At this committee, we have had other people from Scarborough and other areas in Ontario come forward and say that they have received funding cuts in the LINC program, so this is an ongoing challenge.

As I understand it, the government bases its funding on the number of people who have come over the past three years. There are inadequacies in that, because it doesn't reflect the reality of today. I wonder whether you can comment on that.

Mr. Mario Calla: That is correct, Ms. Kwan.

That funding formula has worked against Ontario over the last number of years, as I guess proportionally more immigrants have moved west. That situation has meant that although we have the infrastructure and so on, and we have the instructors, we have to lay them off over the summer.

Having said that, I must balance it with the reality about the Syrian refugees. The IRCC has made funding available to meet the capacity demand, so the issues you were mentioning around family violence and so on.... Our client support services will be working with the refugees for up to a year—and beyond, if there are special needs—to ensure that they connect with the appropriate services and that those kinds of issues are addressed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Calla.

Mrs. Zahid, you have seven minutes, please.

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

I want to thank all of our witnesses for coming here and providing their input, and especially for all the work they are doing to settle the Syrian refugees in Canada.

My first question is for Mr. Mirakian.

First I would like to commend the Armenian Community Centre for all the work you are doing, specifically in regard to your commitment to helping Syrians resettle their lives here by pairing refugees and employers with community contacts who speak Arabic and Armenian, as it bridges the language barrier between refugees and employers.

Your organization was quoted in *Armenian Weekly* as saying that the jobs offered to Syrian refugees are “mostly minimum wage”. That is a great start to a path to good and stable employment, but could your organization tell me what initiatives you are taking to help refugees seek employment that is more relevant to their skills?

Mr. Shahen Mirakian: I certainly can, but I think we should start from the position that was already stated here, which is that for the one-year period in which the co-sponsor or sponsorship agreement holder is working with the privately sponsored refugee, many of the refugees shouldn't necessarily be seeking employment immediately. Some of them do, because it's helpful for their adaptation to Canada to become more comfortable with the country, but for many of them it's a period in which to acquire the appropriate credentials or skills in Canada or to decide what they're going to do with their career.

If somebody comes to Canada at the top of their profession in Syria, it's unlikely they're going to be at the top of their profession in Canada within the first six months of living here. It's not possible. If I were to move to Syria tomorrow, I doubt I would be at the minimum level there in the profession I am in right now here.

I think because there is this adaptation period, often having the initial job isn't a matter of getting the best possible job but a matter of just getting into the Canadian workforce and being comfortable doing something so that you get used to the patterns of Canadian work. You get used to what people expect from you, and you also get used to the language in a work environment. I think that is happening.

The second part is that many of the younger male privately sponsored refugees who have arrived seem to gravitate toward the construction industry, which, if you know the situation in Toronto, is doing very well these days, whether it's industrial or residential. They need to have certain courses in order to be safe in that environment. They need to have the workplace hazardous materials information system course, WHMIS, and they need to have the falls course, which is a course on how to work at heights, around ladders, and that sort of thing. We have been very helpful with these.

Both of those courses are offered through private providers, but a lot of times they are offered at places where the refugee can't go, so we have worked with some Armenian-Canadian construction companies and we have worked with the course providers to get them into the community centres or to provide those courses at special times, such as Saturday mornings or something like that. Those are some of the things we have done to get people into construction.

There's been less of a demand from older people to go into construction, and there's been less of a demand from women to go into construction.

On the women's side, I should say a lot of them who were quite qualified in Syria, or wherever they were in the interim, are not as qualified to do those jobs here. For instance, someone who was a teacher might find herself gravitating to the hospitality or service industries initially, and those do tend to pay a little bit less money. However, I believe that over time, if someone was very successful in their profession in Syria, they will be able to become a teacher or a financial adviser or a manager in a large company. I think that over time, as people work in a Canadian work environment and have the time to develop these skills, they will be applying for those jobs as well, but I think it will take a little longer to do that. The jobs right now are mostly at the lower end of the pay scale, but I believe they're creating the first step to much greater success.

• (1250)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: That's good.

My next question is for Mr. Calla.

I have read that your organization offers an art therapy program for refugee children. As I have previously mentioned and as some of the witnesses who have been here before the committee have discussed, youth are the most vulnerable subgroup of refugees, and they often find it difficult to settle and to adjust to life here in Canada. From what I understand, your program assists traumatized refugee children to begin to cope with the mental stress and other hardships that they have faced in their past.

Could you provide further information, more specifics, about this program and about how successful you are finding it, especially for youth?

Mr. Mario Calla: It's a program we have been running for a good 15 years without funding from anyone. Basically it doesn't seem to fit any government program, so we've been doing it through

fundraising. The impact is tremendous, because it allows children of any language to work with a trained art therapist to use art, whether it's painting or clay models and so on, and often what they express in their art is what's on their mind.

We had one dramatic situation involving a child who hadn't spoken in weeks, since he left home in the former Yugoslavia. He started to describe what he had drawn on his paper. It's basically an objective way of getting at those emotional traumas without any kind of judgment, so it's very effective.

• (1255)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: That's good.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: You also offer youth settlement services, such as employment-related services, housing help, mentoring in job skills, and physical fitness facilities. How are you finding these things useful in settling the Syrian refugees?

Mr. Mario Calla: They're incredibly helpful.

If we didn't have capacity as an organization.... As I mentioned, we have 17 locations and about 350 employees. As an example, we've had situations of family violence and mental health challenges. We've been able to call upon social workers from other programs in our family centre to work with the Syrian refugees.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank all the panellists for appearing today and providing their insights. Thank you for all the work you personally are doing in your organizations to settle Syrian refugees.

We will now suspend for one minute and move in camera to deal with some committee business.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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