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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Good morning. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on March 8, the committee will resume its study on the federal government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

Appearing before us today are Imadeddin Sawaf and Eman Allhalaq, as individuals.

Sharing the spot by video conference from Calgary are Joy Bowen-Eyre and Jeannie Everett, both from the Calgary Board of Education; and Cheryl Low and Anne-Marie Hagel from the Calgary Catholic School District.

Finally, from the Peel District School Board, by video conference from Toronto, are Louise Clayton and Zaiba Beg.

Welcome to all.

Each grouping of panellists will have seven minutes for their opening presentations.

We will begin with Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf and Ms. Eman Allhalaq for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf (As an Individual): Hello, everyone. Just to touch base, we're going to cut it in half.

As a witness through this whole Syrian refugees experience, the only problem that we see is through the service agencies. We know that the funding is there, so there's no lack of funding; it's the lack of manpower and people qualified to help the Syrian refugees.

I've been dealing with the Syrian refugees for two years now. The newest batch that came in don't have enough support. Housing was the major issue at the beginning. Half of the housing was found by individuals themselves, not by the actual service agencies. Then, once they're out of the hotels, they've been just left alone. There's not enough support for everyone, literally. It's not only this witness; there are tons of witnesses just being left in their houses not knowing what to do.

We try to attend as volunteers. I do this on a voluntary basis. I'm not getting paid for this, and I've helped more than 50 Syrian families. It's just that it's exhausting just to know there is funding and there are people out there, but they're not helping. There's no one there. It's literally empty. I know people who have been left in their house for a month not knowing what to do, just waiting. Then, when they try to get in contact with people, they tell them, "Give us a call."

They call, and they hear, "Leave a message." They leave a message and they hear, "Your message has been deleted."

The line is being cut off somewhere by not getting the services that are out there to them. Yes, it's there on paper, 100%. On paper, it's fully there. There are services for language, interpreters, settlement helpers, settlement workers, family workers. It's all there on paper, but in reality, practically, there's nothing there. It's not hard to see. It's very easy to see. All you have to do is just go out there and see the people and exactly what's happening.

Again, it's not a lack of funding; it's a lack of actually giving it or hiring the right people for it.

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have another four minutes and 40 seconds.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: The other thing is employment. Employment is very important, and I know the government's aim, obviously after they settle, is employment. They don't want to rely on the government all their life for funding. There is none.

I had this idea of employment pods, Syrian pods. Thank God, it worked, as in mass hiring. That was taken away. I tried to get Arabic employers to hire Syrians, because most of them have a lot of industrial trades. They didn't find a lot of support there. I try to teach them on my own sometimes, when I am free. That is the employment side.

The Chair: Thank you.

There is another three minutes and 45 seconds for Ms. Allhalaq.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (As an Individual): [*Witness speaks in Arabic*]

The Chair: If you could wait one moment as the translation is not functioning.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): First of all, I would like to thank the Canadians who have welcomed us. I would like to thank the Canadian government for having given us the opportunity to come here and to change our lives.

We were in a situation that was extremely difficult, but thanks to God, we were able to come to Canada. Now our situation is greatly improved, and we live in safety. We are, of course, very happy to be here in Canada, and we are happy for the excellent help we have received from the Canadian government.

However, allow me to make some comments. Those who are supposed to be helping us are not necessarily doing so. Whenever I need to go to the hospital, there is nobody to go with me. I have a young daughter. I have to leave her at home. I can't leave her with my husband. I have to put my daughter in a child care centre so that we can study, and that is not always possible.

All the people who have come here hope to be able to work, hope to be able to help Canada with the work they do, with their experience. We would like to be able to work. These jobs are jobs we can do well, do properly. We want to do this work according to our skills. We are not here to benefit from charity. We want to use our skills.

I want to thank you for having listened to us here this morning. I hope the organizations don't feel that I am trying to take advantage of the situation.

We are told we have to go and enrol in different places. I have an appointment for a mammogram, for example, so I asked to have an interpreter. I am told there are no interpreters and it is up to the hospital to get an interpreter. When I go to the hospital, they say to me, "You don't have anybody with you, so we are going to have to put off your appointment to another time. Find yourself an interpreter, and then come back."

This is the sort of problem we are all facing. This isn't just a problem that I myself face. It is a difficult one.

When we enrol our children in schools, we are in hotels. First of all, we have to find a house. We have to wait. Somebody came to visit the Syrian refugees, and then we tried to register our children in schools. We are told where we have to go and register the children. This person who came to us, Ahmed.... The schools are relying on this volunteer to help us, but we need to get the children registered. We can't rely on volunteers forever.

I am enrolled at S.U.C.C.E.S.S., and I am studying. I need to make appointments with the doctor, but I can't make an appointment during school hours. Obviously, the problem is that I don't speak English or French, but I still have to go to the doctor.

•(1110)

The Chair: Ms. Allhalaq, you have 15 seconds.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): On several occasions, we have asked the government organizations for support. I have said, for example, that we have this particular problem. My health is vulnerable. I need support. Can I have a family member brought over to Canada? I am told that is not possible.

The Chair: Ms. Bowen-Eyre, you have seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre (Chair, School District 19, Calgary Board of Education): Thank you for the invitation to speak to your committee today. We would like to share our school board's experience welcoming refugees from Syria, and some information on how many students we have received to date, our process for accepting and integrating them into our school system, and our next steps.

The Calgary Board of Education is the largest school board in western Canada and the third largest in Canada. The CBE is one school system educating more than 117,000 students in over 220

schools with over 13,000 staff. We work together to provide learning as unique as every student.

Since January 4, 2016, the Calgary Board of Education has received 414 Syrian refugee students. The CBE has also welcomed 57 students with refugee status from other countries since January of this past year. The Calgary Board of Education has an established process for registering and settling students into our system, regardless of their country of origin.

In a typical year, our Kingsland Centre registers over 4,000 foreign-born and refugee students. The CBE has a diverse student population. More than 25% of our students identify as English-language learners. We have a robust strategy to support their needs, both through an inclusive model and through English as a second language classes.

•(1115)

Ms. Jeannie Everett (Superintendent, Learning, School District 19, Calgary Board of Education): We're certainly pleased to work with a multi-agency team in Calgary through Margaret Chisholm Resettlement Centre. Our students would probably come to us a couple of weeks after they arrived in Calgary and would be assessed at our Kingsland Centre. We have a program option available called LEAD, which stands for our literacy, English, and academic development program. It provides specialized support to our refugee students with limited English proficiency who may have experienced interrupted schooling, or who have experienced traumatic life events.

We have staff who have had the ability to train with specialized understanding of English-language development as well as trauma. Our LEAD model is very short term. It's intensive support with a goal of supporting our students and their families as they transition to mainstream classrooms and ESL courses. Most of our students would stay in LEAD up to two years and then they would begin to transition to regular programs.

However, each student is assessed when they come to us. We have the benefit of interpreters and understanding each child's story. Approximately 80% of our Syrian refugees have been supported through our LEAD program; 20% have had sufficient English and a history of schooling that has allowed them to go into mainstream classrooms with English-language support. Sixteen of those refugees have come to us with extremely complex learning needs. They needed to access specialized programming. Some have included students who are deaf and hard of hearing, some with limited vision, others with mild to very severe cognitive delays, and some with very severe medical needs as well.

Since January we've added 20 classrooms. LEAD classrooms have a teacher and an English-language learning assistant. They are supported as well by psychologists who specialize in trauma. We've added 20 teachers in the Calgary board in total. We've added 17 English-language learning assistants. We have diversity support workers; two full-time psychologists, again specializing in children with trauma and refugee experiences; and we've also hired eight certified Arabic interpreters who are on call as needed to support our students and their families. We have also paid for the transportation of those students. As they are getting settled into their new homes we provide transportation with no cost to the family.

Overall, our current anticipated costs for this year are about \$2.6 million, and under the Alberta education framework for funding, full funding is only received for students as of September 30. As you know, our Syrian refugees arrived after January. Therefore, we've received no additional funding for these students.

As well, in our framework we received an additional \$5,200 for each student identified as a refugee, and unfortunately should this designation change, we will not receive those dollars either. Again, \$2.6 million—

The Chair: I understand you're sharing your slot with the Catholic School District, so perhaps we could allow the Catholic School District to say a few words, and I'll be somewhat lenient with the time.

Thank you.

Ms. Cheryl Low (Chair of the Board of Trustees, Calgary Catholic School District): Thank you very much.

The Calgary Catholic School District is the largest Catholic school district in Alberta. We serve more than 54,000 students in 105 schools, and we have an additional 10 schools opening in the next three years.

Our district is rich in linguistic and cultural diversity, with over 15,000, or 29%, of our students identifying as English-language learners. We register between 2,500 and 3,000 students born outside of Canada each year, and 21% of our schools have an ESL population of between 50% and 80%. We currently have 1,344 refugee students who have arrived from 70 different countries.

Since the federal government announced the plan to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees, the Calgary Catholic School District collaborated with the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society and other organizations to ensure supports and services would be in place for these newly arrived students and families. We registered and welcomed 109 Syrian students. At the district level, we ensured that our reception centre staff were prepared to register students as they arrived. New language interpreters were trained in Syrian languages. In-school settlement practitioners were added to support schools with large populations of refugee students. The Calgary Catholic School District team was ready to support mental health and trauma-related concerns, as well as assist families with cultural adaptation needs.

Additional teachers were added to schools where there was a significant increase of refugee students. ESL consultants provided ongoing professional development and resources to teachers and educational assistants. We recognize that many immigrant students

come with complex needs in addition to language acquisition. Gaps in education, limited literacy skills, trauma-related issues, cultural adaptation challenges, ongoing settlement needs, and mental health issues all impact the students' abilities to learn. To ensure the successful integration within our inclusive education model, the district provides ongoing learning opportunities embedding best practices for multicultural classrooms.

Explicit teaching of language development, addressing trauma and gaps in learning, creating welcoming environments, and providing appropriate programs for students assist our schools with successful integration. With the increasing number of immigrant students registering each year, the demand for our services continues to grow. Additional funding from the government is required to ensure the successful integration of immigrant students and families. We must be able to continue to support these complex needs that place a significant strain on and tax the financial resources of the district.

As these needs are not short term, but often last many years after initial settlement and become more prevalent once sponsorship ends, consistent and sustainable funding is critical. We are committed to working collaboratively with the federal, provincial, and municipal governments to ensure the successful settlement and education of refugee students and their families in our district.

Thank you.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Clayton and Ms. Beg, for seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Louise Clayton (Coordinator, We Welcome the World Centres, Peel District School Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and committee members for inviting us here today. My name is Louise Clayton. I am the coordinator of the Peel District School Board's We Welcome the World Centres.

Ms. Zaiba Beg (Instructional Coordinator, English Language Learners, Peel District School Board): My name is Zaiba Beg, and I'm the instructional coordinator for English as a second language and English literacy development programs for K to 12.

We would like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation.

Mrs. Louise Clayton: The Peel board is the second largest board in Canada within the municipalities of Mississauga, Brampton, and Caledon. It serves a diverse student population of over 152,000 students, of which 93,000 speak a language other than English or French as their first language. Arabic ranks among the top six languages spoken by Peel students.

In 2009, the Peel board created three We Welcome the World Centres with the assistance of funding from the federal government. All students new to Peel visit these centres before attending school. Students are registered, receive an assessment of their English and mathematics skills, and share family and educational background to assist with placement and orientation.

Family members receive a complete settlement needs assessment and orientation to the education system. Email alerts and reports are forwarded to staff at the receiving school so they begin to implement support programs before the family arrives. Students with special needs are identified and consultants are deployed to assist with appropriate placement. In 2016, we welcomed 10,215 clients at our three centres, of which 530 are Syrian students, in addition to another 200 refugee students from all over the world.

At the Peel board, we take a comprehensive approach to the settlement of our families. Settlement needs assessments are conducted by one of our Peel board settlement workers at our welcome centres, thus ensuring that no family is missed. We have a formal settlement workers in schools partnership, MSEP, the Multicultural Education and Settlement Partnership, with five agencies in Peel. An additional 40 settlement workers are assigned to 118 of our 250 schools. Once processed at our centres, information is sent to our partner agencies for additional follow-up at the schools by our SWIS workers. Peel board settlement workers provide itinerant services as required.

At the centres, we also have many partnerships that allow us to offer employment counselling, dental screening, and mental health counselling at various times throughout the year. However, these services and supports are finite, and often we find ourselves without consistent service. In collaboration with our MSEP partners, we also offer parent sessions and the World of Welcome program, WOW. Secondary students and their families participate in a variety of orientation activities so that students are ready for school.

The arrival of our new Syrian families has been an exciting time for staff and students at the Peel board. Through our partnerships with community and faith-based organizations, we were able to provide backpacks to all our students. With the help of volunteers, we also opened two donation hubs, where we collected clothing, bedding, kitchenware, toys, and books.

Partnerships with the Region of Peel have also allowed us to provide computers, grocery vouchers, and transit tickets and to assist Syrian families in obtaining free programming offered by parks and recreation.

• (1125)

Ms. Zaiba Beg: Our board has worked diligently to mobilize efforts to serve Syrian newcomers and communicate across departments within our district through the development of the Inspire Hope action team. We meet frequently to give updates from areas such as special education, mental health, social work, teaching and learning, communications, and community and settlement services in order to take inventory of existing supports and services, identify potential needs or areas that require funding, ensure coordination of services, and reduce barriers for new families, such as, for example, the waiving of certain fees.

When the influx of newcomer students was at its peak, senior leadership met weekly as a contingency team to examine critical issues and determine supports. Their actions to meet these extraordinary needs are swift and supportive, thanks to the funding from the provincial government that has been made available in partnership from the federal government.

In Peel, we continue to provide vibrant academic programming using the available resources. However, it is still important to note that ESL programs in elementary schools historically have been underfunded due to a provincial funding formula that does not adequately meet the needs of English-language learners in our board.

The Peel board has tremendous expertise in working with children and families of various immigrant backgrounds. However, most of the new students from Syria have very different programming needs than English-language learners we have served in the last several years. Most of the students in grades 3 and up have large gaps in education due to limited prior schooling. As a result, they require more intensive programs in order to accelerate their learning. This reality presents new learning and new demands for classroom teachers, ESL teachers, and school administrators.

The students who are in grades 9 to 12 are being supported by our regional English literacy development programs, and these sites need long-term support to serve these students. Within these sites, there is a group of students at high risk: older youths from 17 to 21 years old. A strategy and subsequent funding is necessary to meet their unique needs, as many have to work to support their families. Dialogue with post-secondary institutions is required to develop apprenticeship learning and trades programs with an ESL component so that students are able to secure skilled employment.

Despite all of this infusion of support, Syrian newcomers have multiple complex needs, and given that most have beginner-level English literacy skills, we need additional supports to serve these families in a timely and effective manner.

Mrs. Louise Clayton: Federal government funding for We Welcome the World Centres has decreased 25% since inception, just by the 200% increase in clientele. Additional funds for settlement staff and child minding is essential to meet these needs.

Through our intake process, 30% of the families divulged that they had experienced or witnessed traumatic events. Immediate financial assistance to provide trauma counselling is fundamental to their successful integration. We encourage the government to continue funding SWIS programming, including our WOW orientation programs designed to help students connect with their peers.

In large Syrian families, mothers are particularly vulnerable, unable to access not only English-language classes but literacy classes, as many are illiterate in Arabic. They need services near their homes that also provide child minding for their young children. Financial infusion into this area is critical. Financial literacy is also imperative as many families do not have sufficient funds to feed their families.

Working with provincial counterparts, additional funds for specialty classes and breakfast programs are needed. Long-term solutions for employment, housing and transportation also need to be explored in the pricey GTA.

Zaiba and I thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ehsassi, for seven minutes, please.

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

Perhaps I could first ask Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf a question. I'm assuming you don't have any prepared remarks. Is that correct?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: I'm sorry, what do you ask?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Had you prepared remarks beforehand?

• (1130)

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: No.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay.

Looking at your background, it's incredible that you have spent a lot of time volunteering. That certainly goes a long way in making sure that some of the refugees who are coming here can be guided and that there is some guidance as to how to secure employment, how to receive language training, things of that nature. I know your particular interest, and it makes eminent sense given your background, is to assist the refugees in obtaining employment. If I'm correct, I think you said in your statement that some of the refugees really do have good solid technical skills. However, recognizing that it is a big challenge, and you alluded to that as well, I was wondering if you could focus on instances in which you have been successful, so perhaps we can learn from your experience.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Successful in employment or in general?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: In general, in terms of linking refugees to employment opportunities.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: There are two paths.

The first path was the first proposal I made in my current job that I work at right now, which is the British Columbia Construction Association. It was to create pods. I find someone who actually speaks a little bit of English, connect them with the four or five permanent construction sites. That was perfect, but then I guess through their own funding programs, they're not allowed to employ them anymore, so that was stopped.

On the other one, I connected with other employers, a different sector in the trades industry, because they're more tradespeople. That was successful in a way, but we didn't find.... Most employers needed more contracts. They said, "You know, I don't have enough work to get your guys working." So on my own I tried to get them contracts in whichever field they're in, in construction, and once they

get the contract they hire the guys. So projects of three, four, or five months, whatever it is, they put our guys, and only our guys, on the project, not just because they're our guys, but because these are people who need to start work to help them financially as well.

Most of them have kids, but not everybody has kids to support, right? They needed that. They needed to get in the stream, or else the reality is they're going to drift off. If you're not going to put them on the right path, they're going to drift off. When they drift off we're going to say, "Why did you drift off? We've given you opportunity, and now you're drifting off." We don't want to see that. So putting them on the right path, I think, is the most important thing. Otherwise, the reality is they're being offered jobs under the table, "Let me pay you cash; I'll pay you \$9 an hour." It's happening. Regardless if we accept it or not, it is happening. I'm trying not to make it happen, not to do anything illegal.

Make it legal. They want to make it legal, but these are the options they're getting right now, and the word of mouth, "Oh, I think you should do this" is not something.... Let's hear from somebody with the power of authority, "This is what you should do; this is the path. I'm going to put you on the right path." This is what they're going to get into.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Based on those success stories, the ones who did actually possess the requisite skill set, were there language barriers, or is that, in this particular context, less of a challenge?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Yes, there were a lot of language barriers, but after I had found a foreman who speaks English and connected them with him, they performed perfectly. The people who worked with the Arabic employers performed even better. Because the training comes from the Arabic employer himself, it requires less investment to train them. In that sense it was an extreme success.

One of the older Syrian refugees, who I tried this pilot program on, is now working with a non-Arabic-speaking company. He's a professional painter. He knew nothing about painting and is getting paid \$20 and something an hour. There is success, if we actually focus on the employment sector.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Excellent.

In your experience, was there anyone who was employed but also had the opportunity to set aside some time for language training?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Absolutely.

I'm not taking all the credit myself. What I and other people did was to try to give them a little bit of a schedule. School is from 6 p.m. until 9 p.m.. It's almost impossible to get into these classes. If we're able to secure these classes, they get the 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. classes instead of the morning classes. Then, they actually attend work in the morning and are able to go to night school. That's exactly what a lot of them have been doing.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you ever so much.

If I could, I'd like to ask Ms. Low a question.

Thank you so much for your testimony. I understand that the Calgary Catholic School District has had 109 Syrian students so far. Is that correct?

Ms. Cheryl Low: That's correct, yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay.

I was doing some background reading in preparing for your appearance today. I found that in the media you had said that obviously, funding is very critical to the success of your programs. You had alluded to the fact that you had applied for provincial funding, but you hadn't heard anything back. Is that correct?

• (1135)

Ms. Cheryl Low: We had made a request to the federal government and the provincial government in December, following the initiative to bring in 25,000 Syrian refugees, to request that funding for education be considered as part of that initiative. We did not receive any federal or provincial funding for any of the students we received into our district, as our funding is defined as of the end of September of the school year.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That concludes my questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): I'll start by directing my questions to the Calgary Board of Education.

I know you had written to the Prime Minister, and have been in contact with the federal government to discuss some of the funding gaps created by having to provide services to many new refugee students with complex needs.

We've been told by department officials that there won't be additional funding. I'm just wondering if you could set the record straight. Were you or any other school board, perhaps the Catholic school board, consulted by the federal government, in terms of service delivery, when the decision was made to increase our refugee intake in Canada by over 250%?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: Thank you for the question.

Like our colleagues at Calgary Catholic School District, we made a formal request to both the provincial government and the federal government for additional support for our Syrian refugee students. We have heard back directly from the provincial government, and the letter we received stated that no further funding would be allocated either to us or to any other school board within the province, because the Syrian refugee students arrived beyond the cut-off date of September 30.

We have not received anything formally in writing from the federal government, either granting our request or denying the request. We were not consulted by the federal government and asked if we were able to take additional Syrian refugee students into our school board. As a public school district in Calgary, we welcome each and every student who comes through our doors, regardless of situation, circumstance, country of origin, or language.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The results of this study will be a report that will present recommendations on how to improve the

government's response to the Syrian refugee initiative. Given what you have just said, would you be able to provide a concise recommendation, in terms of how to deal with some of the gaps and challenges you're facing in delivering services to Syrian refugees?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: We would be happy to provide any sort of documentation or report that this government needs. Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Excellent.

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: Our board has also contacted the Canadian Ministers of Education Council. We've asked them formally, that's all the provincial education ministers, to work with the federal government to look at ways that we could close the gap and look at ways that we could support all of the Syrian refugee students that have come to each school board within this country.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Excellent.

I'd like to beg the indulgence of some of our witnesses and my colleagues for a moment. We're nearing the end of the session and there's one piece of business that I need to take care of before that happens.

I move that, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee study options for Canada to expedite bringing Yazidi girls from Syria and Iraq to Canada as refugees; that this study be comprised of no less than two meetings to be held prior to October 1, 2016; that departmental officials be in attendance for at least two meetings; that the committee report its findings to the House; and that pursuant to Standing Order 109, the government table a comprehensive response thereto.

I'll just very briefly go through my rationale.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel, before the rationale, the notice period hasn't passed yet. It hasn't been 48 hours, so there will be an opportunity later this week.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On Thursday then.

The Chair: You may continue. You have three and a half minutes.

• (1140)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Continuing on with the Calgary Board of Education, in terms of recommendations, what we've heard is that there needs to be more of a coordinated response. I've had some feedback from colleagues saying the minister has indicated that education is a provincial matter.

While this is true, do you feel that, given the volume and complexity of meeting the needs of Syrian refugees, there might need to be an additional response provided or some sort of special programming in order for you to meet the needs of these students that are coming to Calgary?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: We believe that when the federal government makes a decision to bring in refugees, it needs to be a collaborative experience between not only the province but also the federal government. School boards are required to take students, but we need support.

While we open our doors to all of the students that have arrived, it is a significant financial burden on our system. We have identified it. It's \$2.6 million to date that we have had to adjust and make allowances within our own budget, so we can ensure that each one of these students is supported.

It's necessary for us to have a collaborative effort between all levels of government to ensure the success of these refugee students and all refugees when they enter our country.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: My final question would be, if I have time, for Mr. Sawaf.

You said in your opening remarks that these refugees are just being left alone. Can you or your colleague describe what that means to the community in terms of prospects for integration into the Canadian economy or any other challenges that refugees might be facing? What does being left alone mean in real terms?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: It means, literally, left alone. Basically, they're out of the hotel into their housing, and just being left alone. Basically, nobody is telling them what the next step would be. Do I register for school first? Do I look for a family doctor first? Do I get to know the area first? What do I do?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In terms of recommendations, because that's what we're really trying to derive out of the study, what would you recommend to bridge that gap? What could be done?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: To actually fund? Maybe new agencies. I don't want to discredit any other agency, but maybe give opportunity to people in the community to give back to the community; people that are qualified; people that can relate and can actually help them settle, and make the integration process easier and faster.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Are there any specific examples that you could think of, such as how the federal government could provide that type of service?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: By funding a new agency, because if they're going to keep funding the same thing over and over, you're going to keep having the same issues over and over.

I know most of the reasoning is going to be manpower, that we weren't expecting this many refugees, but I think that the funding is there. Perhaps giving it to more qualified people or people that can actually provide a service for these refugees. Maybe develop a program for Syrian refugees, a temporary program, I guess. If you provide a service for them, maybe make them more—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sawaf.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: You're welcome.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

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

Just to finish that thought, Mr. Sawaf, you mentioned funding new agencies. Are you suggesting, for example, individuals who are refugees themselves, who have travelled the journey, who are now volunteering, who are not attached to an agency the government has been funding, and who are therefore doing their work all on their own? Are you suggesting, then, that new organizations, which haven't received government funding before, access government funds to be able to coordinate and provide support to refugees?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: That's exactly what I mean.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, thank you.

Ms. Allhalaq, I want to get a better understanding of your story. I'll ask each question, step by step, so that we can get an understanding of what you're experiencing.

First of all, can you tell us how long you were in a hotel when you first arrived in Canada?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Two months.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Who helped you get into permanent housing?

• (1145)

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): The ISS was looking for it, but for two months they could not find it. Then we found it in the area. More than 10 families who lived in the same complex had the same situation.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Did a volunteer come and help you find the housing on your own, then?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): No. They were looking for people, but basically they told us, "You're on a waiting list; 40 families have come to the hotel, so just wait until your turn comes up." There was too much waiting. We wanted to register our kids at school and to utilize the time for learning, for the benefit of ourselves and our kids.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Imadeddin, sitting next to you, helped you find the housing.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You mentioned in your presentation that there were some issues around your health. Can you tell us what your health issues are and what your experience has been in trying to access health care?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): When I was in the hotel, I told them I had a condition and I needed to go and see the doctor. They sent me to the doctor. They provided a car. There was a translator present. For the second appointment, the ISS brought the interpreter, but they said to me that I would have to find my way back to the hotel. I told them that if I stepped outside of the building into the street, I couldn't go on my own, and asked them to please wait for me. Finally she accompanied me.

I go to different places on my own. Most of the time there are no interpreters. When I call the different organizations, like DIVERSE-city and those agencies that initially had the intake process for us, and say that I have a hospital appointment and need an interpreter, I'm told I have to give them one month's notice. The problem is that I know of the appointment just a couple of days ahead of time, so I cannot give them one month's notice. This is the kind of suffering I have to go through.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It is my understanding that you have been diagnosed with breast cancer. Is that correct?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How long did it take for you to receive that diagnosis, and what were the problems in the process of you getting that information?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): For four months I'd been going back and forth to the hospital for different tests and appointments. Two months after the mammogram was done, the doctor said there were cancer cells and I would have to go through some more testing. We don't know if I was called and did not get the message, but basically they said that it's the hospital that has to call me directly, and they won't answer anyone else who tries to call the hospital on my behalf.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Were the issues around translation or were the issues around just not being able to connect with the hospital to get the diagnosis?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Well, I call the hospital and sometimes I go to the hospital and there is no interpreter, so they are not able to communicate with me. Sometimes they call Mr. Imad to try to get the help, but they say no, there has to be somebody with me in the room itself to discuss the tests and then I was postponed for another week and then eventually the hospital is the one who brought the interpreter, but not the agency.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How much time had lapsed for you because of this back and forth, not being able to get the information because of language issues? Was it two or three weeks before you got your diagnosis?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Well, the first week I went, I had no interpreter. The second week I was called to go and get the results and again I went and there was no interpreter to advise me of the result. There was somebody else from Iraq who was there and I said I could not understand, so that person volunteered to help me. But I needed to have someone with me while I was receiving this kind of news because it was so traumatic. Again, I was given a ride home. Then I went to the hospital the following day, and for two hours I had lost consciousness.

•(1150)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Last, in terms of agency support, was it the case that Syrian refugees were offered a meeting in the library on a regular basis to connect up with their agency resettlement workers to get support? Tell us about that experience.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): They have offices. We go to their offices, but they are far away and it is not easy for us to get there. We did go the first time. The second time they said to us that there is an office at the library and perhaps we could come on Monday or a Tuesday. When we went, we found the office closed. In general, the people who are in the library were not sure what time the different workers would arrive actually.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Zahid, you have seven minutes.

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

Thanks to all the witnesses for providing your input.

My question is for the Calgary District School Board.

I know that Minister John McCallum has been in touch with his provincial counterparts to discuss how the federal government can

better support the provinces in welcoming the new Syrian refugees. I know the provinces were consulted in regard to the number of immigrants they can take out of the total of 25,000. While we must be mindful of the jurisdictional issues, is there support in terms of programs or best practices that the federal government can provide to assist with the integration of the newcomers to Canada?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: I'm not aware of a best practices approach, but I know our school board in particular has been approached by several school boards across the country, including Halifax and B.C., in terms of the LEAD program that we offer to all refugee students who come through our doors.

The LEAD program is a specialized program that looks specifically at when the students come to us through our reception centres. We identify their written and spoken literacy and how much formal education experience they have had. We then place these students in small school classrooms with a maximum of 15 students with one teacher and a support staff member. These staff have a lot of experience, professional development experience, with trauma and working with students who have experienced trauma, have witnessed trauma, and have some significant delays. Once those students have been in those classes, they are assessed on a very consistent basis to ensure that this is the best placement for them. Once it's determined that those students are able to transition into a community-based school, that's what we do. Sometimes our refugee students can spend up to two years in a LEAD class.

We know that other school boards have come to us to ask what we are doing that makes our students successful. Not to brag, but we are very proud of our school system and the way we work with our refugee students and their families to ensure that each and every one of them is successful.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Regarding this LEAD program, do you just develop their basic English skills, or for example, in terms of the high school kids, do you provide them with basic mathematics and science skills also? Is it just based on developing their English skills?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: No, it's a full comprehensive school experience, which also includes cultural awareness and integration into a Canadian city. Since our students come from early learners, kindergarten all the way through to grade 12, we look at each and every student as to what they need, and then we put the supports in place to ensure they can be successful.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

My next question is for any of the school board people.

Many newcomer students who may have been out of school for some time and forced to leave their homes and live in limbo will undoubtedly experience trauma. That would make it difficult for them to adjust to Canadian school life and succeed to the best of their abilities. Are you providing any kind of counselling services to work with the mental health of some of the traumatized students?

•(1155)

Ms. Anne-Marie Hagel (Supervisor, Diverse Learning, Calgary Catholic School District): Good morning, it's Calgary Catholic School District.

We do offer a program through what we call our intercultural team. We have two counselling psychologists as well as nine counsellors on the team who provide trauma counselling and mental health support.

We are seeing an increase in the number of referrals coming in each year. With the majority of the referrals that come into our team, half of them go to our mental health support. We try and support these families and these students. If they're long term, then we look for support outside of the district.

We also ensure that we have interpreters available and that these intercultural team members can support and work with the families directly, so there's the clear communication that is needed to support these families.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Further to this, I know that in addition to the classroom study the integration into social life outside classrooms through extracurricular activities is also important for the newcomers. We had the opportunity of listening to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada. They provided their input as to what they are doing in regard to their programs for newcomers.

Are you working with similar organizations to help provide extracurricular programming to newcomers and the other students?

Ms. Jeannie Everett: It's Calgary Public. Yes, certainly. We have a partnership with the Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth, as well as with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada. We look to enhance the extracurricular activities for students, and we enforce English acquisition in after school activities. It's a rich program that we have to offer in collaboration with our partners.

The Chair: Ms. Zahid, I believe the Peel board wanted to answer your previous question.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Okay. Yes, go ahead.

Mrs. Louise Clayton: In addition to our social workers who are providing counselling support to our Syrian students, we also have a partnership with the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture who come to our We Welcome the World Centres once a week and provide counselling services on site. They are based out of Toronto, and they come into Mississauga once a week. We are working to find other opportunities for increased services, because we are backlogged with that service.

Ms. Zaiba Beg: I could also add about the social extracurricular programs. During the summer, we're particularly focused on making sure that students who have had gaps in education have lots of opportunities in the summer. With some of our programs that already exist, such as Camp I Can and Camp SAIL, we are trying to target supporting the students who speak Arabic, and trying to get Arabic-speaking students to support the program Camp I Can.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for giving us your side of the story on how we can improve our system.

My first question is for Mr. Imad. Am I allowed to call you Mr. Imad?

Over and over and over, if I hear you correctly, you're saying we are paying money to the wrong agencies. They're not helping hands. They're not doing what they're supposed to do. If I hear you correctly, you're saying those agencies are getting paid by the government and by the taxpayer, but they're not doing what they're supposed to do. Am I correct? Is that what I'm hearing from you?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: As long as it doesn't get anybody in trouble, then yes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: There's no trouble. We're learning, all of us.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: It is a learning curve. You're right.

Mr. Bob Saroya: This is exactly what we try to do here.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Maybe in other services they had success rates before, but with the Syrian refugees, no, they didn't have success rates. So, yes, what you're saying is true. What you're hearing is correct.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What would you like to change for these agencies you work with? This agency or that agency, it makes no difference. The government, the people of Canada, are paying for these guys. What are they not doing that they're supposed to do? Nobody's in trouble here.

•(1200)

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: No, no, I know. It's just like Jenny was addressing when she asked me the question. I think we should give an opportunity to those other agencies that haven't been funded by government programs before to get the funds to actually help the Syrian refugees or the people who are in limbo. Maybe we could create something new for the Syrian refugees for this temporary transition part that hasn't received previous government funding.

Is this the first time you guys have ever heard that the non-profit organizations haven't been funded to serve the Syrian community, or maybe not a 100% effort in their performance, or is it something new? If it's something new that the committee has heard, then maybe it's only happening in B.C. or in the Lower Mainland, where we're seeing it. But, yes, my opinion is they're paying it to the people. Funding is there, so they are paying it, but to unqualified people.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The funding is there, but they're not getting the job done.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Yes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What would you do differently if the next batch of Syrians or any other refugees come in? What would you do differently? What would you recommend be done differently in the future than what you're seeing?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: First of all, I wouldn't hire just to cover the number. They needed interpreters; they hired interpreters, it's true, but none of them are qualified. You get people from different areas that don't understand Syrian accents, for example. For me, I can understand most of the Arabic accents, whether someone is from Morocco or Tunisia, but that's rare. But people from there, they don't understand the Syrian language, so even the interpretation was wrong.

There is one example I'll give you quickly on interpretation only. A lady was to attend a hospital for interpretation for a lady who had surgery, one of the Syrian refugees, so she was there, and they called me to please come. I took off work and actually went there. After the surgery was done, the lady came and said, "Sorry, I was late". Anyway, I sat on the side to listen to what the nurse was telling her such as the instructions, the medications, what she should be aware of and what she should avoid, etc. After the message was given, it was wrong. She told her to take it easy on spicy food and not eat too much. She said to beware of taking spicy foods. The thing is, I was like, no, no, she shouldn't eat spicy, period.

Anyway, these are the things. Some people are unqualified. She barely speaks Arabic, but she's getting paid for that.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The stories, what I'm hearing today, are totally different than what we hear in the House of Commons from the Minister of Immigration, that everything's good, good, good. Obviously, things are not as good as what we hear from the minister.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Eman, how many Syrians live in your complex?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq: *[Witness speaks in Arabic]*

The Chair: There's a problem with the translation.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Fifty families.

The Chair: Mr. Chen.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): My first question is for the Calgary Board of Education, Chair.

You mentioned that there was no consultation from the federal government. I know that in speaking to the departmental officials who came to our committee meeting last week that consultation did occur with intergovernmental partners, including the provinces and municipalities. Did your provincial government not consult your school board or have any conversations regarding the Syrian refugee resettlement?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: That is correct. We were informed that students would come into the province of Alberta, but we were not consulted. We were told by the province to keep track of all costs to date for all of the Syrian refugee students who would enter into our system. We believe that this was a promise by the provincial government that they would support school boards financially in working with our Syrian refugee students.

Mr. Shaun Chen: The province did consult with you, and in the federal government's intergovernmental consultations, that input would have possibly come up through to the federal government.

Now are you also, as a school board, a member of CSBA, the Canadian School Boards Association?

• (1205)

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: We are part of the Canadian School Boards Association through our provincial body of the Alberta School Boards Association.

I'd like to comment that we were not consulted. We were just asked to keep track of costs.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Good.

The costs you mentioned earlier were that there was \$2.6 million of additional expenditures. Your provincial government has asked you to make submissions in terms of how many Syrian refugee children are registered, or have they? I see some heads shaking.

Can you tell me what's happening with the \$2.6 million?

The Chair: Go ahead, please.

Ms. Jeannie Everett: With regard to our student record-keeping system, we have ways of tracking, and the government would have access to those numbers. We can certainly roll that up into a report about those students.

There are ways of tracking that information that we can easily make available to the provincial government, or they can mine our data.

Mr. Shaun Chen: But they've never asked for it.

Ms. Jeannie Everett: They have never asked for it specifically with the intention—

Mr. Shaun Chen: Is your provincial government funding and covering the cost of the \$2.6 million to help settle Syrian refugees?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: No, no.

Voices: No.

Mr. Shaun Chen: No. Okay.

I know that the minister did say last week that education is a provincial jurisdiction. In the province of Ontario, for example, the provincial government there has asked school boards to make a mid-year submission in terms of the number of Syrian refugee children, as well as a breakdown by every school of where the children are being settled. In fact, the provincial government in Ontario has then stated that they will provide revised transfer payments at the end of the school year.

Are you suggesting that the federal government should get into funding school boards directly in terms of, for example, the number of special education students, the number of new immigrant students? How does it work for your school board in your province in terms of students who enrol mid-year, which is something that happens all the time, and numbers can fluctuate? Are you saying that your provincial government simply funds you at the September 30 submissions in terms of full-time equivalent students that are in your school board and then sort of says good luck for the rest of the year?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: That is correct.

Within the province of Alberta, and I cannot speak to other provinces, we have a drop-dead date of September 30, in which all school boards throughout the province of Alberta receive funding for each and every student in our school districts. Beyond that, school boards are required to make adjustments and allowances for whatever students come through our doors.

The difference here is the large influx of Syrian refugee students. Given that they have some significant complex needs and they are war-torn, traumatized, and require significant supports, we are frustrated in the fact that neither the provincial nor the federal government is taking responsibility to assist school boards in working with these students.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you.

I know that—

The Chair: Twenty seconds.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Back in February, at Wilma Hansen School in the Queensland neighbourhood, there were incidents where the walls of the school were vandalized.

Can you tell us how that was a teachable moment for the school community in Calgary?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: We were very disturbed to find that one of our schools was tagged twice with disrespectful language. It gave us an opportunity to talk to our students and our community about the importance of including everybody, recognizing that there's diversity, and ensuring that each and every student feels welcomed within the Calgary district.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, for five minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Ms. Bowen-Eyre, do you get a sense of why you've been asked to tally up the cost? What I would speculate is that perhaps you've been asked to tally the cost up to send to the provincial government, in which the provincial government would then perhaps petition the federal government for additional funds.

Do you think that would be a reasonable speculation?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: I believe that would be a reasonable speculation, and that would be my understanding. In conversations that I've had with our minister of education, we believe that in order to support students, we need financial support as well.

As I stated earlier, while we open our doors to each and every student, it comes with a significant cost to all of our students when we have to take money from other pockets of our budget.

• (1210)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The \$2.6 million that the CBE has spent has put you in a deficit situation. Is that correct?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: Not in a deficit situation, because what we've done is juggle resources. We get funded on a per student basis and that is to last throughout the entire school year, so what we do is juggle and provide resources where they are needed. When we take money from a certain pot to help fund some students, then other students may not be getting the services and support they need, or maybe some of our buildings aren't getting the care and attention

they need, or maybe we can't hire other staff in other areas as we might wish to.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: For the committee perhaps you could describe what juggling means in terms of specific opportunity cost calculations that have had to be made this year.

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: For example, we get pots of money for English-language learners. We know that we need to provide more support for our English-language learner students, as would our colleagues at Calgary Catholic. We also recognize that when we are juggling money, it means that our class sizes become higher for all of our students. We have larger class sizes in order to provide more supports for all of our students. What we hear from our parents and the community is that they would like smaller class sizes so that all of our students can feel supported.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Have you had to increase class sizes this year due to having to absorb this \$2.6 million in extra costs?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: We've had a modest class size increase this year; that's correct.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That's shocking.

Again, just to bring you up to speed, we did have the department officials in committee at the beginning of the study. They have indicated that there are no plans right now, or no plans to support school boards providing this service.

If my speculation is correct and the provincial government is going to have to come to the federal government to ask for costs for this, can you, perhaps, for some of my colleagues—I think I'm one of two Albertans in the room right now—give a sense of what this could mean for the provincial government, as well as the province of Alberta, given the economic downturn that we're in? How likely are we to see massive budget increases for school boards in Alberta, given the economic downturn at this point in time?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: This school year we were given our budget. Actually, ironically, we have a public board meeting later on, right after this meeting, to debate our budget. We have a hold-the-line budget from the province, so we have rolled out exactly the same money to all of our schools and classrooms going forward this year. We are anticipating a \$20-million deficit at the Calgary Board of Education for the next school year, and part of that deficit is the supports to our Syrian refugee students.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I think everyone in this room understands that Canada has a duty to help Syrian refugees, but the question that we're debating at this study is how we do that. It's not just about numbers on a score card.

In this situation, yes, public education is a provincial responsibility, but given the massive influx of refugees over a short period of time, do you think it's reasonable for the government to have consulted school boards and perhaps provided a more robust response?

I think you have two seconds.

The Chair: A 20-second response.

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: Yes, I believe that's correct. If I can put it into perspective, the number of students we've received is the equivalent of five elementary schools.

A voice: One.

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: Sorry, one elementary school at 414 students, yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, I understand you're splitting your time with Mr. Chen.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Correct.

The Chair: You have two and a half minutes.

• (1215)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you all for being here today. I appreciate all your speeches you've given to the committee today.

I've heard a lot about access to health care. I'm very proud that the interim health program was fully restored on April 1, 2016. It had been cut previously, which left many newcomers vulnerable, so I'm very happy that's been reinstated.

My first question will be for the Peel District School Board.

There have been challenges facing young Syrians who have been out of school for a long time, so the concept of school itself is very difficult for them. There are low literacy levels and they've been experiencing trauma. Can you briefly explain how you help these children make up for their lost time and deal with the trauma they've experienced?

Ms. Zaiba Beg: One thing I can speak to is the idea of just being in school. The orientation to school has been a big adjustment for students and they will continue to do that over the next year.

We have a framework that we have actually received from our Ministry of Education in Ontario, which is all about learning skills that children need to have for school. It's about being able to feel safe in school, and different things around co-operation and responsibility. Teachers are also being informed through professional learning sessions that we are doing of what to look for, signs of emotional distress or places where they can actually, as a teacher, intervene and help the student become more present.

We have provided schools with a series of books that allow students to, in English and Arabic, talk about their feelings, their emotions. When teachers start to notice signs that are actually beyond the scope of the work that they do, they bring it to the attention of the school team or the principal and social workers are involved.

I'm really happy with that support. We can always use more, of course.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you very much.

Shaun.

Mr. Shaun Chen: My question is for the Peel District School Board.

I know that you have a wide range of services that are provided for newcomer students through your multicultural settlement services. You work with local agencies, other school boards, and receive funding through the federal government, particularly around settlement workers in schools.

If there are issues in terms of what we've been hearing today where Syrian refugee children might face a wide range of different needs, do you feel equipped, given your expertise and the work that you've done locally on the ground, to engage with local agencies and other school boards with your provincial funder to address some of those challenges?

Mrs. Louise Clayton: Yes, we do.

We have a very in-depth network in Peel with not only our MSEP providers but with all Peel agencies. We meet quarterly with our federal funder and our Region of Peel and other community agencies. We try to coordinate services. We feel very equipped.

Certainly, the large influx and the lack of Arabic-speaking settlement workers on the ground has made it complex for us to try to get as many families directed to services. But in terms of the coordination between agencies, I think we're very well equipped.

Mr. Shaun Chen: It sounds like you're doing a great job.

You're also members of OPSBA and CSBA, the Canadian School Boards Association. Is that correct?

Mrs. Louise Clayton: Yes, we are.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Has there been any conversation at the provincial association or at the national school boards association in terms of how different school boards across the country are grappling with the Syrian refugee resettlement issue and how some of the best practices, like the great work you're doing in Peel, could be shared with other boards across the country?

Mrs. Louise Clayton: I don't sit on that particular committee, but I do know that they happen.

I participate in a working group at the Ministry of Education. There we have different service providers and organizations and different school boards representing. Certainly, we are discussing sharing best practices and how we can meet with the resettlement of our new Syrian families.

Ms. Zaiba Beg: I could also add that the Ministry of Education has provided the school boards with grants. We applied for a \$30,000 grant, so we were able to run some wonderful professional learning for our teachers and the school administrators. We also network with the ESL leads across the province through our assessment network and ERGO, which is a provincial organization.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Louise Clayton: Just to conclude, we have also been asked by many other school boards for our expertise and knowledge.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have three minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

Just to follow up with the questions earlier, Ms. Allhalaq, you mentioned that resettlement services would offer to meet with Syrian refugees in the library. When you go there and the people don't know.... You can't get the resettlement workers to provide assistance. Is that correct?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): No. When we meet with them, when we call them, they say to us that when we need their service, we should come and meet them at some place. When we go to the appointed place, we don't find anybody there.

In general, we don't manage to find them. The offices are very far away. They give us appointments. They say to go to the library, because the library's the closest place to us. They say, "Come and meet with us."

Recently, when we were in a hotel there was a fire and the rescue services took the children. Sometime later, I was sent a bill for several thousand dollars for the ambulance services, \$2,400. I didn't know what to do with the bill. I didn't know what the solution was.

I contacted Options Community Services and DIVERSEcity. I left a message. For three days I didn't know what to do with this bill that I had been given. Finally I asked at this school what I should do and this person said, "Give these papers to me and I'll get it sorted out for you." There are all sorts of papers that we keep getting. We try to get in touch with the relevant services to find a solution, but we often don't get an answer. We don't get an answer.

• (1220)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

On language training, you mentioned in your presentation that you are now getting access to language training at S.U.C.C.E.S.S., but sometimes you can't make the classes because you don't have child care. Is that right?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Yes, we waited for three months to have child care services. Finally, we took some steps ourselves. For example, I go in the evening and my husband goes in the afternoon. We try to work it out between ourselves, but my husband is diabetic and he can't watch my daughter all the time. I can't leave him with this responsibility. He can't assume full responsibility for her.

There's also the problem of day care in the schools. There are health services available to us, yes, but the problem is that for the day care services you often have to wait eight or nine months. Some people are waiting for a year or a year and a half before they're able to get their children registered in the child care centres. During that time, we have to stay home and look after the children.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Even if you qualify for child subsidies, then, you can't get a spot because there are no child care spaces available.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Yes, that's exactly it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kang, please, for seven minutes.

Mr. Darshan Singh Kang (Calgary Skyview, Lib.): Thank you.

First of all, I'd like to congratulate both Calgary school boards for the work you have accomplished in welcoming the Syrian refugee students. I have heard from teachers in my riding of Calgary Skyview, who have outlined some of the challenges they face when working in a classroom where a new student shows up without support from home.

Can you outline some of the unexpected challenges you have had to address from the parents of these children, challenges that the government may be unaware of, such as, for example, scheduling, help with homework, and ensuring lunches are packed? That is my first question.

Ms. Anne-Marie Hagel: We have a multicultural team that supports families and students with cultural adaptation. We recognize that many of the families are not in a position to support or understand how to support students coming in to school within the Canadian system.

Through our multicultural support, we provide teams that go in, and we provide sessions that allow the families to integrate into the school system and learn about the various supports that are available. I believe that including them and encouraging them to come into the school system makes them feel more adequate and better prepared. They feel more involved and more integrated within the system.

Many other agencies we work with also support families that are not prepared or not able to support their families adequately. We utilize those organizations as well. The CBE mentioned the Calgary Bridge Foundation. We also work with the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association. All of these organizations help to support those families with those needs.

• (1225)

Mr. Darshan Singh Kang: My next question is about all those organizations that have done a great job in helping to settle the Syrian refugees in Calgary. Am I correct? In your opinion, have all those agencies been doing a wonderful job?

Ms. Anne-Marie Hagel: Yes. I do believe that. I believe the CBE feels the same way.

A voice: Absolutely, that's correct.

Mr. Darshan Singh Kang: We are told that the area of education funding and support is mostly the focus of the provincial government. We know that. We've heard that.

Also, now we know that what we plan to do can be very different from what we have to do. My question is, while trying to make your program successful, what are the challenges you uncovered that might have been overlooked or unaccounted for by the provincial and federal government funding agreements? Also, what are your top three recommendations to make sure that we succeed in this?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: For us, this is an exceptional circumstance, where we had an influx of a large number of Syrian refugee students from one country at a targeted, specific time. We needed to rally support for those students in a specialized setting to ensure that they could transition from their home country to Canada and to our school district, and be successful. That is the greatest challenge we are facing.

When we receive a few students here and there, we can accommodate and assimilate them into our district. When we receive a large number in a very short period of time that we are required to support, that puts tremendous strain on our system. What we are requesting is for the provincial government and the federal government to work together to ensure that, if we are going to do this again, there is a coordinated effort to work directly with the school boards that are educating those students each and every day.

We are also requesting for the federal and the provincial governments to work with us now to help and support us by reimbursing us for the funds we have already utilized in supporting those students.

Mr. Darshan Singh Kang: Has that funding shortfall put any pressure on any other areas of the school board's education programs? What kind of pressure has it put on them?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: As I said, we receive refugee students throughout the year, every school year, but it comes in fits and spurts throughout the school year, and some of the students who come have a high degree of English. They are not from war-torn countries, and they have not experienced trauma to the degree our Syrian students have. Because of that, they are coming into some of our mainstream classes. They are living within their own community. They are going to their community schools, and they are receiving supports within their community schools.

The students we are talking about today need some significant support to ensure that they can be successful. We have put on 20 extra classes for these students. They are receiving significant support. As a result, the costs continue to escalate.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Darshan Singh Kang: Okay. My next question is for Mr. Sawaf.

Sir, you were talking about the agencies. They haven't been doing the kind of job you were expecting them to do. In my opinion, from Calgary, from Alberta, I think those agencies have done a wonderful job.

In your opinion, what percentage of those agencies have been falling behind or not keeping up with your expectations? Is it just the volunteer agencies? I think you are saying that everybody is not doing a wonderful job.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, Mr. Sawaf.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: I am not sure if it is the same in Calgary, because I haven't witnessed anything in Calgary. When I say "all agencies", obviously they are not government agencies. They don't represent the government, for sure, so they are not funded by the government. No, they are not doing their jobs at all.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, you have seven minutes, please.

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

Michelle is going to take two minutes, and I am going to take the first five minutes.

My first question is for Eman. Are all your children going to school?

• (1230)

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): I have two daughters in high school and one in third grade, so third, eighth, and tenth grade, and the youngest is staying at home.

My older children stayed for four years in Jordan without schooling.

The Chair: We have stopped the time while you resolve your technical difficulties there, Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: The kids are in school.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are the kids in school?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Three are attending school, but the youngest is not.

The older children stayed in Jordan for four years without schooling. The grades are third, eighth, and tenth. I also have a young daughter who is staying at home, no schooling.

Mr. Bob Saroya: What is the Canadian experience of the children who are going to school? Since they hadn't been in school for a long time, do they enjoy the learning process?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): They like the school, they like learning, but there are so many things they don't understand, even with the interpreters who try to help them. They are still afraid. They are anxious that they might not be able to reach the required success level.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Would you like to see something different, if we could provide something from this side? Do you have any suggestions, any guidelines?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): They have been at school for a month because there was a delay in sending their papers. That put them behind. They need to be in special classes until their language command is strong enough to go to regular schools with regular students.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The 13th month is coming soon when you will be on your own. Are you ready for the 13th month? Has anybody you know in your complex found a job?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): No, because we lost approximately three months in the hotel and two months of school, so we're talking about a total loss of five months. We should have started to gain experience during that period of time to be qualified to stand on our own later on.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Will you be staying in the same house after one year?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): No. They mentioned to us about another residence in city housing that is less costly, but it's too far. It would require an hour and a half by bus from where I'm living. I'm very anxious about that. We're ready to live in a less expensive one, but again, we don't want to replace that with a different set of problems.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Government-sponsored refugees are assisted for 12 months. The 13th month is coming soon. Is there anything you would like to say? Are you ready to move on by yourself or do you still need government assistance?

• (1235)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, please.

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Definitely we need somebody to continue to follow up with us: what to do, how to find employment, where to go, and how to go about our life. What would we do about that year? We have learned only half of what we were required to learn, so we still need to continue to learn before we can stand on our own.

We do not want to continue to be a burden. We want to work and be independent and be useful to our society through our skills.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel, you have a minute and 45 seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'll go back to the Calgary Board of Education and the Catholic Board of Education.

You mentioned, Ms. Bowen-Eyre, that you are having your budget meeting tonight. With the time remaining, could you tell the committee what conversations you've had with your provincial colleagues on how to absorb these costs? What will you be telling the people who are at your budget meeting tonight on how to best deliver service to all students, as well as refugees, given the funding constraints that have been created by the federal government's decision to increase the influx in such a short period of time without consultation?

Mrs. Joy Bowen-Eyre: We have been having conversations. We've had both formal and informal requests looking for support go to both the provincial and the federal governments. Our board reached out to every school board across the country and asked them to participate in a joint advocacy, knowing that all school boards across the province were facing similar challenges as we are within the Calgary Board of Education. We know different agreements have been made in different provinces. Within our province, our board has advocated very strongly at every opportunity when we have met with the provincial education minister, and we will not let up. We will continue to advocate. We believe it's in the best interests of our school board and our students.

Next year, the new students who have arrived will be rolled up as part of the enrolment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I think for the Lower Mainland there are some issues with respect to the volume. I think that's the case for everybody else who's just trying to manage.

For us, we have received more than 1,600 Syrian refugees in a very short time frame. In the beginning, I think the government's plan was to house the Syrian refugees temporarily on the military bases, and that changed all of a sudden. I think that the non-profit agencies were not prepared with respect to that change of course, and all of sudden the refugees were arriving into the community.

We have a large volume of people and the NGOs weren't prepared to receive this large number in such a short time frame. We ran into lots of problems with people being stuck in hotels and not being able to get access to permanent housing.

Then stemming from that, it flows with all the resettlement services and the deficiency in providing the necessary support for the Syrian refugees. Consequently we see the community, the volunteers such as you, Mr. Sawaf, and others who stepped in as best they could to provide assistance to Syrian refugee families.

In that process, of course, none of you are funded. You're just doing this off the side of your desk as a volunteer while maintaining your own job.

There were deficiencies that were identified because there were people in the community who speak the language, who understand the culture, who could step in to provide assistance, but there was zero coordination of that from the government side. There was no programming with respect to that, and no funding to these new agencies that could have done some of this work to alleviate the pressure.

I see some of the challenges that are emerging, and they continue today. Even for people who have moved out of the temporary housing, out of the hotels into the permanent housing, resettlement service is deficient. That's sort of what I'm hearing from both you, Mr. Sawaf and Ms. Allhalaq. Am I correct in understanding the scenario properly?

Mr. Sawaf, you go first.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Yes, you understand it correctly.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'll turn to how to fix the problem going forward, aside from the government needing to actually provide support and funding to new agencies to enter into the fray to alleviate the pressure, specifically in terms of programming that could provide support.

I think, Mr. Sawaf, you mentioned the issue around people being left alone and that they need guidance. For example, are you talking about having resettlement workers visit Syrian refugee families in their homes and to help them with getting medical appointments, getting translation organized, so that they can actually have proper translation when they have major health issues that they're dealing with, trying to figure out where to enrol their children for school, and so on?

I wonder if you could elaborate on that. What specific resettlement services need to be provided to the Syrian refugees who have now finally made it into permanent housing?

• (1240)

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Actually, it's about teaching them how to get to areas, what to do for their next steps, plan for them, because they don't know how to plan. In a new country, they don't know what to do first or what's the highest priority to do in this country.

Yes, go with them to the doctor's or tell them how to register for school, or at least guide them; for example, this school has somebody Arabic and ask for so-and-so and they'll help you. Give them some guidance. There is no guidance. There is nothing.

Going back to the ward and being left alone, yes this is a reason.

Also, hire qualified people to do it. Yes, they will run after you in the beginning to get your names. They need the names; they need the numbers for their quotas and their deliverables. They need that. It's true.

At the beginning, they'll take all your names down—okay I need you and you and you—and then that's it. These are the deliverables that they have, these clients or people whom they're servicing.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Once they collect the name and the information, the follow-up in providing the service is deficient and that's part of the big challenge.

On the question around employment, did I hear you correctly to say that there are individuals, I guess potential employers that are out there, who are offering jobs to Syrian refugees below the minimum wage, and perhaps maybe even offering to hire them under the table? In that sense, they are really taking advantage of Syrian refugees because they're desperate to get some sort of income.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Yes.

I don't know the names if anybody wants to ask me for them, but not to get anybody into trouble, yes. Yes, 100%.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's the stuff that you're hearing is going on in the broader community.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Yes, under the table is going on.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You mentioned the issue around pods, and you said that initially you had these pods that were set up where you would have a group of Syrian refugees with someone who has Canadian experience to take them to the work site, and that this is now not being worked on because the funding was eliminated.

Could you elaborate on that?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: That was through the organization I work with, the British Columbia Construction Association. They had the program. When I made that pitch, they were really interested. They said, "Let's just see if it works." It did work. We matched them even with somebody without the background. There is a shortage of labour in the construction industry, and these Syrian refugees can fill this shortage. That's supply and demand, right? We placed them, and it was a huge success. You can have five at a time being placed in different industries, whether it's framing, painting, flooring, concrete, etc.

Then that was stopped. We can't engage anyone—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Why was that stopped?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: With the funding program, they said they needed to give it back to the existing agencies that worked for them before. They handled employment. We couldn't handle employment anymore.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I see. You had an employment program that was working effectively, and the funding ran out because it was a pilot program, and then it ended.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: It was shifted, yes, to only pre-arrivals. It was shifted to only people offshore, not people actually in Canada. They left the "in Canada" for service agencies that are currently being funded, and they have employment programs through the agencies. Every agency we mentioned has an employment sector in it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: You have 25 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Turning to education for a minute, we have a big problem in British Columbia as well. In Vancouver we have a \$24-million funding shortfall, and that is without the influx of Syrian refugees.

To the video conference folks, is it your understanding that the provincial government's intention is to pursue this funding from the federal government, even though the federal government and the

minister have said they do not intend to provide funding for provincial services?

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. I'll keep that for my next three minutes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, Ms. Allhalaq, I want to emphasize how terribly sorry I am to hear that you've had some problems. Obviously there have been some oversights. For example, you cited the fact that you had received an emergency bill and a demand for payment. You also mentioned that on one occasion you had made it to the library, where you had an appointment, but no one from the settlement agency was able to meet you there.

Out of curiosity, do you only deal with one settlement agency?

• (1245)

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): No, it's more than one agency. We have the ISS, which is in charge of us. I tried to call them. They said that the employee in charge would call me back. I waited a whole day and nobody called me. I contacted Options. I left a message. I said that I had an urgent matter, that I had a bill for the ambulance and I didn't know how to handle it. I called again the second day. I tried to call DIVERSEcity, but I did not have the number.

When I narrated this at school, they told me there was somebody there who could help me and perhaps that would work. I was told that if somebody sent a fax along with the health papers, then I would get exempted. He took the document, photocopied it, and gave it back to me. He told me it should be fine. Then he took it upon himself to fax the document.

So I had tried. I had gone to more than one agency. When one agency does not answer me, I will try a second one. That's what I did, but I got the same outcome. They say to us, "We have too much pressure. We have too many numbers. You have to be patient. You have to wait." I try to tell them that some matters are urgent. Some matters are more of a priority. If I need to go to a doctor for a headache, perhaps I can wait. But if somebody has an urgent need to undergo a medical test, and there's a need for an interpreter, they'll say that they don't have an interpreter, that they have to work with their own priorities. That's the situation.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: We were told by previous witnesses that you are only permitted to register with one settlement agency. No agency ever said that you could deal with them exclusively? You were allowed and permitted to call various settlement agencies? Is that correct?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): Any settlement agency would be available to receive me. It's not my understanding that I have to restrict myself to one settlement agency. I have not been told that specifically, no.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That's good to hear. Thank you for that.

To the Peel District School Board, I first of all want to reiterate what my colleague was saying. Thank you for the tremendous work you're doing. It is good to hear that other agencies and various school boards are calling you, because you obviously are very experienced.

One of the disconcerting things we heard several weeks ago was around the long lineups and waiting periods for the provision of English as a second language classes for both adults and children. Could you apprise us of whether that is a challenge in Peel district as well?

Ms. Zaiba Beg: I can speak to the ESL programs in K to 12. We actually offer ESL support in every school in Peel, so there really isn't an issue around lineups.

I have been in touch with our adult ESL site as well, and they did say that they are working very hard to support families. Where they need help in the adult ESL area is really around additional support services to cater to the adult Syrian learners, services such as counselling from trained professionals. They're doing their best with the ESL programs. We definitely know that ESL has always been underfunded, so we're trying to work creatively. Because the students who are in elementary schools from grade 3 and up have gaps in education, they need intensive time with the teachers, much more time than other English-language learners.

Mrs. Louise Clayton: I'd like to just add that in terms of the adult ESL classes in our community, many of the classes are full, but I think the lack of child-minding services for such large families is creating the issue in the community.

• (1250)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that.

I will be sharing the remainder of my time with Ms. Salma Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

My question is for Mr. Sawaf.

I know language is an important tool for successfully integrating into Canadian society, especially for the job market. I know Syrian newcomers are eager to begin working right away, to begin supporting their families, and there are lots of transitional jobs that they do. For example, in my riding, the Adonis supermarket has hired over 40 refugees. Those who are fluent in English are working as cashiers, but those who don't speak English are working making salads and at the bakery. They are eager to work.

Are there any employers in your community who are eager to hire the Syrian refugees? What types of jobs are being offered to them?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: They're mainly in construction, which is what I specialize in. I believe there are other areas they can work in, as you mentioned, such as supermarkets or factories, etc. There are a lot of opportunities for them to get employment, yes. There are a lot of employers.... There's a shortage, right? These will actually be able to....

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: When the people are working, do they get some time to learn English as well, along with working?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: Oh yes, we try to register them for the night classes. They work in the morning and do night classes, and that works perfectly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Shipley, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you very much.

First, welcome.

Mr. Sawaf, your comments at the start were quite contradictory to what we heard last week in terms of how well the program is working, how well the resources are streaming out, and how well all the accommodation...that in fact, 99% have now moved out and have their own living accommodations.

The reality on the ground is a little disturbing, quite honestly, compared to what we've heard politically.

Ms. Allhalaq, you say there are 50 people in your complex. How many people is a complex designed for?

Ms. Eman Allhalaq (Interpretation): These are big housing complexes made of apartment buildings, so big apartment buildings that have so many apartments, in the region.

Mr. Bev Shipley: If I could go to the Peel District School Board—I'm filling in today for David Tilson, who's in your area—how many students were brought in under the refugee program?

Mrs. Louise Clayton: Since January we have received 530 students.

Mr. Bev Shipley: That's not unlike the Calgary board. That's equivalent to one school.

Were you consulted on it ahead of time?

Ms. Zaiba Beg: Ahead of time in the fall we did know that the students were coming. The Ministry of Education since December has been providing our school board with very thorough communication on a regular basis. Memos were received in December and in the early part of this new year, where we were given information about the different resources that we would be able to access. Also, we were given a template to track our expenses, and our board has been making very careful decisions around expenditures.

We didn't create brand new classrooms for all the students. We tried very much to keep students in their home school, if possible, and we have regional sites for students in secondary school, because of those very different kinds of needs. Fifty-five per cent of our population, the students who have come in, are in the primary years. Their needs are really well met in their local community school. Our board has been very careful about those decisions, and then we have really collaborated with the Ministry of Education.

Definitely we need more support. They've put some occasional teachers in place right now until the end of June, and they've also put in a couple of teachers for September. We'll have to determine needs later in August, and that's up to our senior leadership team.

Mr. Bev Shipley: The Calgary board mentioned that it had created about a \$2.6-million gap. Can you tell us if, in Peel, there has been any financial gap around your board?

•(1255)

Mrs. Louise Clayton: I don't think I'm the person to ask about that.

What we have been asked to do is track our expenditures. We have been told that the province will match us dollar for dollar for extraordinary expenditures that we were forced to take to meet the needs of our Syrian families.

Our federal government funder has also provided us with an additional settlement worker, an Arabic-speaking worker, for our centres. We continue to dialogue with our community partners and our federal government funder to meet the needs in our school district and in the community.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Sawaf, you mentioned also something about trying to get jobs and employment for the refugees. The concerning part that I heard is that there were some being paid in cash, at below minimum wage. In Canada we actually want to make sure that our employers are following the rules so that the employees pay into the Canada pension plan, pay into EI, pay into the benefits that Canadians get. I'm concerned that this isn't happening. Is it because the refugees at this stage are not allowed to work legally?

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: No. Legally they're allowed to work.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm trying to understand why an employer then would try to employ people and not meet the legislation and the law of the country, and would have employees work for cash.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jenny Kwan): Mr. Shipley, I'm sorry to interrupt but your time is up.

We have Ms. Zahid. We have probably close to five minutes before we adjourn.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I'll share my time with Mr. Kang.

I just have one question for the Peel District School Board.

I know that many of the youth we are getting among the Syrian refugees have special needs, and they have to be accommodated in the schools also. I met a family in Scarborough Centre. Two of their kids had special needs.

Can you discuss how you are accommodating the Syrian newcomers who face special needs? Are there any lessons we can all learn from that?

Mrs. Louise Clayton: When they come to Peel all of our students come through our welcome centres. For students with special needs, it's no different. We have a screening tool that we use there, and we dialogue directly with our consultants in the board office. They come out to our centres and meet with the families and our settlement workers and teachers who work at our centres. They're doing a home and family visit to determine the appropriate placement that is needed for that family.

Again, the family may be out of school for a week or so, but when the placement is made, it's a proper and informed placement that is going to be right for that student and that family.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

I'll share my time with Mr. Kang.

Mr. Darshan Singh Kang: Thank you.

My question is for Mr. Sawaf.

Mr. Sawaf, you seem to be contradicting yourself. On the one hand, you're saying there's a lot of demand for employees in B.C., and on the other hand, you're saying that the Syrian refugees are working under the table. I find it hard to believe. They're legal to work here. Somebody who is illegal to work here could probably accept jobs under the table, and that's breaking the law. I think if they are working under the table, they are breaking the law, and the employers are breaking the law, too.

I find it hard to comprehend that such a practice is going on. I find it hard to believe.

Mr. Imadeddin Sawaf: It's not contradictory. It's going back to the same thing of not being put on the right path.

When I see them being paid in cash, it's not because there's no opportunity for them. There are no programs in place, like the pods that I mentioned, for them to get employment. No Canadian company will hire them, if go to a company and say, "Hello, are you going to hire me?" That's number one.

Number two, when you're getting paid in cash, you are drifting; you don't have direction. My main concern is that they not drift into these things, getting paid in cash, and then getting into more illegal stuff, which we don't want to see. They're really happy they're here. They're more than happy, and they're thanking the government it brought them here. The thing is, I don't want to see them drift. Now, people tell them, "Stay with the government funding. When the settlement allowance is finished, go on welfare. Get paid in cash for that \$9-an-hour job and you can still make it." Their mind is being injected with this mentality, which I don't want to see happen. I'm running from one family to another and saying, "No, no. We don't do that. No, no. We don't do it." Do you see what I mean? I'm trying not to get them steered toward that, because all cameras are on them right now. Everything is on them. If they are going to do anything wrong, I'll look at them and see they're not good. That's what I don't want to happen.

•(1300)

Mr. Darshan Singh Kang: Okay.

I'll share my time with Mr. Chen.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is for the Peel District School Board.

I know that in September 2015 your school board wrote to the prime minister at the time urging that Canada bring in more Syrian refugees. In that letter, your board chair wrote that through your three We Welcome the World Centres, co-funded with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, you have had the privilege of welcoming refugees from Syria and other war-torn areas to your community and to your schools.

I know that since November 4, our government has brought in 27,580 refugees.

Can you tell me what the impact has been? What have the students learned about other children from other countries with dire circumstances? Do you believe there is more capacity for your board to accept more refugee children, moving forward?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jenny Kwan): You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Zaiba Beg: It's definitely been an honour and a privilege. Schools have been really stepping up and doing their own initiatives at the school. The children have seen it as a way to understand the world better. Our board's priority is equity. We definitely would support this. We know that through these partnerships we have with the Ministry of Education and through our agencies that we can find better solutions. There's a definite openness and the teachers are very excited.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Jenny Kwan): Thank you very much. I'm sorry to cut you off.

We're out of time, so I want to thank all the witnesses for making time to come and present to the committee. All of your comments as well as the information that you provide are very important.

If you have additional information you wish to share with the committee that may not have been touched on, or needs further clarification, please feel free to send in a written submission to the clerk's office and it will be distributed to every single committee member here.

With that, I want to thank everybody, with a special thanks to our interpreters as well.

The meeting is adjourned.

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