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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): We're running a bit late because of votes in the House, but since we do have quorum, I thought we would commence. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted by the committee on March 8, the committee will resume its study of the federal government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

We have before us today three groupings. As individuals, we have the brothers Mustafa Hajji Mousa and Abdulbari Hajmusa by video conference from Waterloo, Ontario; we have from the University Settlement organization, Benhaz Azad, director of language, settlement and social services; and from the Compass Community Church, we have Jennifer Miedema, refugee sponsorship chair, speaking to us by teleconference from the United Kingdom.

I will begin with the brothers, Mustafa Hajji and Abdulbari Hajmusa.

Welcome, gentlemen. The floor is yours.

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (As an Individual) (Interpretation): Good evening, everyone. My name is Mustafa Hajji Mousa. I am from Syria. I came here to Canada at the beginning of March. I'd like to thank the Canadian government for giving us the opportunity to restart our life. It's our hope that it will be a better life for us here.

I'd like to talk about three items.

The Chair: Yes, continue.

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): I'm Mustafa Hajji Mousa from Syria. I came to Canada on February 23, to be specific.

The situation is better here. However, there are certain problems that we encounter.

I'd like, first of all, to start with the good things: the level of education, and the fact that we're able to get into schools freely to learn and improve our language, and to get integrated into the Canadian community, which is a good community. They are good people who like to do well. This is what I experienced first-hand as soon as I arrived in Canada.

However, there are some problems that have faced Syrians, in general. The most significant ones would be income, the income for a husband and a wife. It's not sufficient, in terms of the rental accommodation. The income is not proportionate to the cost of living. This is what I have encountered with my fellow Syrian refugees who talk, in general, about this issue.

I'd like to again thank the Canadian government for helping me continue my education. I studied geological engineering in Syria, but unfortunately I was not able to continue. Now that I am here in Canada, I look forward to continuing my education, to being a useful member of the Canadian community, and to returning the favour of having been given a chance to restart my life. I am studying English here. I am at the sixth level of the language. I intend to carry on with my studies at university, and to study electrical engineering. I hope that one day I will present something beneficial to this good country.

I'd like to reiterate my thanks for what you have done for us. We were in Turkey, and you helped us. When we arrived here, we found an even better reception.

The Chair: Would your brother, Abdulbari, like to say something?

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): Abdulbari.

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Mr. Abdulbari Hajmusa (As an Individual) (Interpretation): Good afternoon, my name is Abdulbari Hajmusa from Syria. I came here in February. I was in Turkey before that. I would like to thank the Canadian government a lot for giving us the opportunity to come here to start a new life and to fulfill our goals and dreams in life.

I am grateful for being here and to have a chance to carry on with my life and to fulfill my life's dreams. We are grateful to the Canadian government for enabling us to come here after a lot of suffering with war. Even in Turkey we were taken advantage of a great deal. Here we've experienced good Canadian people and the good Canadian government that we're thankful for.

The problems we encounter here have to do with a driving licence. I have an expired driver's licence. There's no embassy or consulate to help me renew my Syrian driving licence while I am here. I am having to wait a full year. Obviously driving is an important thing here in Canada to go about my life.

I repeat what my brother mentioned about the limited income for a married couple. This is an issue for Syrians here because of the increase in the cost of renting homes. The Canadian government has given us wonderful health services and health coverage. Even the income assigned here allows us to live a dignified life. We are grateful and thankful for that.

I'm currently studying English as a second language. Once I am done with this, I intend to start college. I'd like to go to the police academy. I hope that one day I will become a beneficial member of the Canadian community and reciprocate by giving something useful to the country and the Government of Canada. Thank you very much.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you.

I would now like to welcome Benhaz Azad, by teleconference. Please proceed.

Mrs. Benhaz Azad (Director, Language, Settlement and Social Services, University Settlement): Hello, everyone.

I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for the opportunity to appear before the committee.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the government for taking Syrian refugees and saving them from the war and trauma they had been facing in their previous countries of residence.

I would like to convey a message from the Syrian refugees who have been receiving services from our different.... They have told us they are very grateful to Canada. They appreciate all the public and private efforts for their resettlement in Canada.

Many of them have been living in exile in countries other than Syria for the short or long term. They never had a chance to feel a sense of belonging to the countries where they were residing before coming to Canada. They felt they were not part of the host countries. However, their treatment in Canada has been totally different, and they show their gratitude and are appreciative to the government. They feel they are welcome and that they and their children can build their future here in Canada.

I would like to share some of our findings in providing services to Syrian refugees.

We have noticed a significant difference between privately sponsored refugees and government-assisted refugees. On average, the privately sponsored Syrian refugees have higher education and they have been actively looking for employment opportunities. Many of them have university degrees and a few years of experience related to their education, and they have been able to find employment here in Canada. However, they are facing issues with their credential evaluation, because the universities back home have been closed or bombed, and they don't have access to those universities.

The privately sponsored Syrian refugees are, on average, young families with no children, or one or two children. The government-assisted Syrian refugees have bigger families, a larger number of children, and they arrive with a lower level of education. However, most of them have experience in trades. Couples or families are very motivated and encouraged; they are very eager to learn, get engaged, and integrate in their new home.

Currently, the issue from our perspective is the Syrian refugees accessing community services. Some organizations have received funding from government, but they are facing a capacity issue because they haven't been able to foresee the number of families that

are interested in attending. Now they are saying that they have received the funding, but they don't have space in their programs.

In a general sense, the settlement process for government-assisted Syrian refugees will definitely be longer. They need some sort of support to utilize their transferrable skills to start their own businesses. I have seen that they have already started in food or carpentry industries.

It has been said that housing is an issue for most of the immigrants, and not only for Syrian refugees. I can say that Syrian refugees are not excluded from this group. However, they are very motivated; many attend school and are hoping they can learn and start their engagement soon.

I'm done, thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Azad.

Now we'll hear from Ms. Miedema by teleconference from Whitby, United Kingdom.

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema (Refugee Sponsorship Chair, Compass Community Church): Greetings. I am honoured to have this opportunity to speak with you today. I represent Compass Community Church, a church of about 1,500 people in the Orangeville area. We would like to express our appreciation to this government and to each of you for your work and the care and attention being given to refugees.

As a church community, we've been deeply moved by the plight of refugees. A year ago, we felt led by God to reach out and share our resources by welcoming refugees to Orangeville, so we initiated a private sponsorship through a sponsorship agreement holder, sponsoring a group of Eritrean refugees, five cousins of a friend of mine in Orangeville. These refugees fled Eritrea 4 to 7 years ago, making perilous journeys through various refugee camps and via human smugglers until reaching Israel. Three of them have families, so the total number of refugees we are sponsoring is 16.

Given the past year's emphasis on and almost total resource allocation toward Syrian refugees, our sponsorship efforts were stalled for months. We had hoped to submit our applications by last December, but our sponsorship agreement holder explained that only Syrian refugee applications were being processed. It wasn't until June that our first application was accepted, and even now only six of our sixteen refugees have their paperwork in process.

Although we initially had much momentum, raising nearly \$75,000 in the first three months and organizing multiple committees, the delay has been discouraging. We formed bonds with other local private sponsorship groups, but since they are all sponsoring Syrians, we have found ourselves left behind, as their applications moved ahead at a rapid pace.

In late May, our sponsorship agreement holder was informed of a cap of six refugees from Israel that they could help process for 2016. This cap is a limit imposed by our government. Compass Church was able to use these six spots to begin our applications, and we have received them under grievous protest for the 10 refugees we have to postpone until next year, and perhaps longer. We had hoped to settle this family together, knowing that their shared experiences and mutual support would have greatly benefited them in their transition to Canada.

Eritreans are a people who have known much suffering. Their own government exploits them, abuses them, and effectively enslaves them in forced military service. In its 2015 inquiry into human rights in Eritrea, the United Nations found systemic, widespread, and gross human rights violations being committed by the Eritrean government, violations which may indeed constitute crimes against humanity. Citizens are routinely and arbitrarily arrested, tortured, made to disappear, or executed without trial, and the rule of fear exists throughout the country. There is no freedom of expression, association, or religion. A high percentage of Eritreans have fled the country, facing severe punishment if caught. Young people there know that if they want to choose a life for themselves, self-determination, they must escape and find it elsewhere. In doing so, our Compass-sponsored refugees endured much on their journeys to Israel.

However, their situation in Israel remains extremely difficult and has deteriorated greatly since they first arrived. The Israeli anti-infiltration law makes it almost impossible for them, or any refugee, to be officially designated refugees by the Israeli government, and there is much anti-African sentiment. Human Rights Watch has reported that Eritreans and Sudanese there are denied access to fair and efficient asylum procedures, and that the resulting insecure legal status is used by Israel to unlawfully detain them indefinitely, coercing thousands into leaving for unsafe countries.

Many refugees, including some of my own group, are currently detained in the Holot detention centre or in jail in the Negev Desert, where there is substandard food and medical care. There are also reports of various human rights abuses. Amnesty International has called upon the Israeli government to stop flagrantly violating international human rights law with its detention of asylum-seekers in what is essentially a prison in the desert.

While I am very proud of my country and the way it has welcomed Syrian refugees—and we do welcome them all with open arms—it is unjust to prioritize one group to the detriment of all others, and I truly don't think that was the intent of the Canadian people.

I plead with my government to lift or greatly increase the caps given to our visa offices, particularly in Israel, where the need is so great. Please move more resources there and enable private sponsorship groups to extend our own hospitality and generosity toward those in desperate need.

• (1550)

There are many groups like mine wanting and waiting to sponsor refugees currently detained in Israel. We are being demoralized and stymied by these incredibly low caps.

Please improve the processing times for refugees in Israel. Why are they being lost or held in limbo for years? Refugees in Israel are not legally declared refugees by that government, and only sponsorships through a sponsorship agreement holder are permissible. As we've done for Iraqi and Syrian refugees, I ask that the minister extend similar regulatory exemptions to allow sponsorship of Eritrean refugees in groups of five, and community group sponsors without refugee status recognitions.

These measures are necessary to help this vulnerable group. All of Canada was moved by the sight of one small Syrian refugee boy, Alan Kurdi, whose drowned body washed up on shore a year ago. We weren't just emotionally moved, but we were moved to action. Last June, in three separate incidents, 700 more refugees drowned in the Mediterranean. Most were Eritrean, and many were women and children. A female cousin of one our Compass refugees was among them. May these deaths, may these people, and may these children not go unnoticed by our government. May the plight of the Eritrean people move us to action. Every human life is worth saving.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Miedema.

Mr. Tabbara, seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much to everyone joining us here today and for sharing your testimony with us.

My first question will be to the two brothers, Mustafa and Abdulbari. Good afternoon, gentleman.

My first question is on housing. Can you briefly describe to the committee when you first came to Canada how your housing situation was. Where were you when you first landed? How long did it take you and your family to get permanent housing?

Either of you can answer.

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): When I first came to Canada, I was in the Toronto International Plaza Hotel for about 20 days. After that I moved from Toronto to Kitchener, the city where I am currently living. I was at the Reception House. From the Reception House, where we stayed for 70 days, we finally found a permanent residence.

The first problem that we encountered was the high rent. Secondly, when we made an application, we didn't readily get an approval because of our young children. The neighbours were not comfortable with them. For 70 days we kept looking until we finally found suitable accommodations that would be within our income boundary.

This is a significant problem that we have struggled with. We were seven families at the Reception House. Another family stayed for 75 days until they were successful in locating a residence. The problem is that the companies that run these residences do not approve of it. We finally got an approval after five unsuccessful previous applications.

● (1555)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Is the housing that you're in right now sufficient for your family? Are there enough rooms, etc.?

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): The last residence is good. It's suitable. It's spacious enough. We pay \$1,500 a month in addition to the price of electricity and gas. This we obtained after a lot of struggle.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'll move to the same brothers. With schooling, can you tell the committee when you entered school and where your English level is at right now? If you're comfortable speaking in English, by all means, but if you're still comfortable speaking in Arabic, that won't be a problem.

Mr. Abdulbari Hajmusa (Interpretation): The English education is excellent. We went to the schools that are covered by the government. I started with an evaluation. Then I started at the seventh level. I was placed at the seventh level at the end of the sixth level. We are able to manage with English on a day-to-day basis in daily living, and our command of it and our accent improves as the time goes by. Learning the language has not been a problem.

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): We've also started work. We study in the morning, and after school we work for five hours a day. This enables us to better integrate into Canadian society in a more efficient and faster way. This is our ambition, so basically we're complementing education and work.

My language is at the sixth level.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: You've answered my third question. I was going to talk about employment. Is it part-time employment after you finish your schooling during the day?

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Do I still have time, Chair?

The Chair: Yes, you have two and a half minutes more.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My second question is for Ms. Azad. You mentioned access to community services and that Syrians were having some issues accessing that. In your testimony you briefly touched on it. Can you elaborate more on that?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Sure. I was talking with one other agency, and they have received funding. They are planning to have some programs for mums and kids from Syria. These are customized for Syrian refugees, but they have noticed that the uptake has been higher than anticipated, and many people have been willing to attend the program. Now they are facing a lack of space.

What is happening is that at the beginning, when the Syrian refugees came to Canada, we were not thinking of interfacing with large families. When it came to the point that we had the opportunity of providing services to them, and we were providing one-on-one counselling to them, we realized that the families had very young children and that we needed to come up with some programs that could fit the range of ages of children. This is becoming a problem for us because it is hard to have a holistic program to cover all ages and in the meantime to be able to serve all of them.

The other piece, interestingly, is that they have been placed in rental buildings as a group. In order not to have the feeling of isolation, families have rental units in one building, so in one specific—

● (1600)

The Chair: Ms. Azad, you have 10 seconds, please.

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Sure. There are many of them living in one building. In order not to discriminate, we have to include everybody. This is a challenge for us.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, for seven minutes, please.

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

Ms. Miedema, I should tell you that you're probably the first witness this committee has ever had who has given testimony from a hotel lobby.

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: It's a pub. We're outside a pub in England.

Mr. David Tilson: That's even better. We've never had somebody in a pub give testimony.

Ms. Miedema, fairness in the selection of refugees, while recognizing the most vulnerable, is clearly something the government should be striving to achieve. Do you have any suggestions regarding how the government should prioritize from which countries refugees should be selected?

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: That is an important question. I'm sure the committee wrestles with this continuously. I think Canada does work with the United Nations Refugee Agency, and that is vital, but there are times perhaps when there are certain refugee populations that resonate with the Canadian population in a certain way. I think the government needs to be careful about making decisions just based on who gets the media coverage.

It's extremely important for the government to have a long-term plan for refugee resettlement and for prioritizing the most oppressed and vulnerable people. The long-term plan should have some capacity to be flexible to respond to current crises in the world, but maintaining focus on yearly goals for refugees from countries where there is longstanding and ongoing oppression needs to happen.

Mr. David Tilson: You've expressed great frustration about the way in which the refugee allocation numbers for other parts of the world have been handled this year with the Syrian initiative under way. I wonder if you would like to tell the committee to recommend what the government should do in the case of the Eritrean refugees your church is trying to sponsor.

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: What I'm asking the government and this committee to recognize is the unique situation of asylum seekers in Israel, particularly Eritreans. The process needs to be amended so that private sponsorships can be carried out despite Israel's hesitancy to give the label "refugee" to these people. Eritreans are clearly recognized around the world as true refugees. Their status is not in doubt.

Enabling groups of five and community sponsor groups to sponsor these people would break through the current logjam of our only being able to sponsor through sponsorship agreement centres. That's where the cap exists. Recognizing how desperate and urgent the need is for these African people in Israel and moving the resources to that Tel Aviv visa office would greatly help the processing times.

Mr. David Tilson: How can the government do a better job communicating its reasons for its numbers in each source country, and do you feel that the numbers seem arbitrary without policy reasons to back them up?

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: I do feel like the numbers are arbitrary because I don't know the policy reasons, and I'm not sure how the government communicates those now. Whatever they're doing now, they need to change. I haven't had it communicated to me. I don't know where the numbers come from. I don't know how the government chooses which countries to focus on. I don't know the process by which I could engage with the government in a discussion about that, which I would love to do. I know the need is great and you can't do everything for everybody. I would love to know the policies.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you.

How can the government improve the way in which it deals with sponsorship agreement holders? The committee has heard significant testimony about the potential improvements needed in the lines of communication.

• (1605)

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: This has definitely happened with our sponsorship. In dealing with our sponsorship agreement holders, they hoped we could get some applications in for November and December, but it didn't happen. Every week that went by we hoped and they hoped. Then March 31 came and there seemed to be this opening. John McCallum made an announcement, and we worked for many hours straight to hit that deadline of midnight and get everything in. It wasn't clearly communicated that it was just for Syrian refugee sponsorships, so we didn't know until May that our applications hadn't gone through.

I think there should be more communication with the sponsorship agreement holders, more clear communication, and maybe better response times when they're asking questions, just to get back to them faster. There's definitely a lot of frustration at that end from the sponsorship agreement holders.

Mr. David Tilson: We've heard from some private sponsors that they would be willing to accept government-assisted refugees, but they don't have access to that stream. Would this be something that the committee and the government should be pursuing?

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: Definitely. I know just from the community that I live in that many people want to help and are unsure of how to do that. We had numerous groups mobilize in Dufferin County, as you know. I think a few of them, or one of them at least, did connect with that and they are involved in one of those types of sponsorships. I don't know that it is difficult to connect with. I think the information is out there, and I think it's an excellent way for people to help the people who need it the most.

Mr. David Tilson: We've heard from some private sponsors about renting apartments, only to have them sit empty. Other examples have been given as well. Have you encountered any financial impact or hardships while waiting to receive your family, and have you entered into any leases, for example?

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: No, we haven't had that problem. I was involved in refugee sponsorship some years ago, and I know that the process is a long one. I think that some groups heard that the Syrian refugees were coming right away and they were inexperienced at this, so they jumped into those kinds of agreements. I think, generally, we know that you don't do anything like that until you hear that it's going to be within the next week or two that your refugees are coming. The process is normally so long, with all the interviews and the medical checks, that you really have to have an idea of when they're coming.

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

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: No, we did not have any financial hardships of that kind. We just have some money sitting there not being used, while we wait for our refugees.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Miedema.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes, please.

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

I'd like to ask my first question of Ms. Azad.

You mentioned that there are difficulties for families, particularly those with children, with service provision. You mentioned children of all ages. I wonder if you can elaborate on that. Is it the case, for example, that women who have young children are going to language training classes but don't have any child care for their children, or is it a case of older kids who need after-school child care provision and youth programming?

I wonder if you could just elaborate on that.

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: First of all, yes, it goes to the children. For parents with children under the age of 18 months, who are accessing English classes, some of the Link programs provide child care. It's actually child minding for the kids over 18 months. This is something that is preventing moms from taking English classes. We are talking about after-school programs that can help moms and kids to spend quality time together and help the parents to learn about the system. They also have productive activities for the children. It's, s an after-school program, but it's mainly for kids under 13 years old. We are having problems with providing space in these programs.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: For the Link programming, do you know or have any sense if there are wait lists? If so, what are the wait lists like?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Yes. The wait list is because of the age of the babies. It's not a long waiting list for the parents, specifically, but because they need child minding, it means they have to stay on the waiting list until the child reaches the age of 18 months.

• (1610)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Right, and do you have any sense of how long that wait list is?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Unfortunately, I cannot give you an exact answer to that now. I don't know.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No problem. If you happen to have that information at a later time, and you could submit it to the committee. That would be great. We've been hearing that across the board in other communities as well, that it's a major challenge for people.

In some communities they've mentioned the challenge of having classes that are more focused on addressing the women and their needs. Have you come across those challenges in your community as well?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Not specifically to this point, but considering the backgrounds and also the ethnic backgrounds, I know that there are some drawbacks with having inclusive programs. There are also so many new things for women here that it's totally different for them. I know they are willing to learn more, but the language barrier is a huge barrier for them. That's why I think we need more customized programs for women. This is something that I can talk about specifically with the issues, but I know that the women definitely need more customized programs when considering their backgrounds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To the two brothers, you mentioned that when you first arrived you were at a hotel in, I believe you said, Toronto, and then later on at the Welcome House. In total you waited for about 90 days before you were settled into some sort of permanent housing. Even at that, it was difficult to secure housing.

Can you give us an understanding of your family size, and for the other seven families that you mentioned who were with you along the journey, what kind of family sizes are we talking about? The interesting point that you raised is the difficulties that also face couple and perhaps people with smaller family sizes too.

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): The first problem is that Kitchener is a smaller city, and it received more than 400 families. That put a lot of pressure on the resources and where we could find permanent housing. Second, the companies that lease the houses, when they look at the families and they see many children, they don't lease the property because they're worried about the furniture and the house itself.

My family has six members, but some families in Kitchener have eight members, with six children plus the parents. When you have a bigger number, you find that it's a bigger challenge to locate successfully a residence. There is so much pressure in Kitchener because there are so many families. There were about 400 families in total, with a total of 1,000 people, so this is what has put a lot of pressure on the resources. Add to this the increased cost of rent.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think you said your rent is \$1,500 a month. What is your monthly income?

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): Well, the problem is that a husband and a wife take \$1,400. I receive \$760, my brother receives \$760, and the payments for children under 18 has not been given yet. From the time we arrived in Canada until today, we have both worked to supplement the income. The payments for my sisters have not been disbursed.

• (1615)

The Chair: Mrs. Zahid, I understand you'll be sharing your time with Mr. Ehsassi.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Yes, that's correct. Thank you, Chair.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the witnesses for providing their important testimony. I want to welcome both of the brothers, Mustafa Mousa and Abdulbari Hajmusa, to Canada. Welcome to the Canadian family.

My question is for Ms. Azad.

First of all, thank you for the work you are doing with this organization. We know that teenagers find it more difficult than younger children to adapt to their new community and Canada, because of their age and more advanced stage of development and academic skills.

What do you find to be the best practices in serving the teenage group you are dealing with at your organization?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: In the summertime, we received a huge group of Syrian refugees, over 30 teenagers, who were attending our swimming pools program. It has been very successful. We felt that a recreational program that didn't involve specific language or English proficiency, doing something fun, where they could play together and feel a sense of belonging, was very helpful and very encouraging.

At the end, we realized that the refugee kids started to develop friendships with Canadians kids. A bond has been developed among them, which shows us how easily they can do that. They can learn from each other, and the friendship. Also, the friendly environment at our agency has been very helpful. Again, the recreational program has been a very successful starting point to get connected to the families.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

During this summer, I had the opportunity of attending a newcomers' youth forum in Scarborough. It was an eye-opener for me. I saw many newcomers helping the new Syrian refugee families as mentors.

In your community and the organization you are working for, do you find such examples where the teenagers have taken the responsibility of mentoring the newcomers?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Yes. We had some early university students from the community who spent a lot of time helping Syrian refugees. It has been a very successful experience for us. We never thought it was going to come out like that. They were very young—18 or 19 years old. They went to the reception centres and started to support and help the families, working with the teenagers. It has been very, very positive feedback that we have received from the Syrian refugees.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I have a last quick question.

Are the needs of these Syrian teenagers different from the other newcomer teenagers of that same age and other refugees?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Definitely, yes, because they are coming from a trauma background and they are more reserved. They have been facing with huge challenges in their past lives, being in the war and facing all those things. Helping them to develop a sense of security and feeling safe in the community takes longer, and we need to work harder to develop that feeling among them.

So definitely, yes. I feel it's different.

The Chair: Mr. Ehsassi, for just under three minutes, please.

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

I will start with the Hajmusa brothers. Welcome to Canada. I also want to applaud you for all the hard work you're doing by going to classes in the morning and then working in the evening. It's inspiring, indeed.

I was wondering if you could share with us the experiences that you have drawn on, and those of others that you know from within your community, as to obtaining work. What has that been like? What are the best practices? What seems to have worked and what hasn't?

• (1620)

Mr. Abdulbari Hajmusa: (Interpretation): When it comes to obtaining work successfully, there is a centre in Kitchener called the Working Centre. It helps newcomers with job searches. For those newcomers among the Syrian refugees, there are Canadians who come and befriend them. Those Canadians have become family friends, and they share their own experiences with the newcomer refugee Syrian families when it comes to looking for jobs, or when it comes to day-to-day living. This has been very helpful, also. We obtained work through a Canada family friend who started looking for work opportunities on our behalf and helped us to locate jobs.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: If I could just make a suggestion to Abdulbari, given that you're very focused as to what your long-term plans will be, I would suggest that you approach police stations in the Waterloo area, because I wouldn't be surprised if they would be interested in providing a mentorship program. That would obviously be very helpful, if possible.

My next question is for Ms. Miedema from the Compass Church. First of all, I want to thank you for your compassion and commitment. Second, I want to say, as you can appreciate, that the principle guiding the decisions on where people are welcome from at this particular juncture is who is the most vulnerable. I'm sure you will be happy to hear that insofar as government sponsored refugees are concerned, apart from Syrians, there are four countries that the government is currently focusing on: Colombia, Congo, Turkey, and Eritrea.

I just wanted to provide you with that assurance. The Canadian government is quite sensitive to the challenges that are currently going on in Eritrea.

Mrs. Jennifer Miedema: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I'm almost out of time, am I not?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay, if I could now ask Mrs. Azad a question.

I'm sure you have experience in dealing with various agencies that provide employment opportunities or skilled development opportunities. Could you highlight for us what you have found to be the most useful programs in the Toronto region, in five seconds or less?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Okay. What I have noticed, as I said at the beginning of my speech, is that the privately sponsored refugees—and here I would like to refer more to the Iranian ones—have been very successful in obtaining employment. Surprisingly to me, they have been able to find employment related to their backgrounds. They have been working in other countries—

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Benhaz Azad:—and they came to us just for resumé. Their English levels are good. They have been very successful after three months, so I would say that in six months they have been able to find employment.

The Chair: Mr. Saroya, for five minutes please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for their hard work. Please keep it up.

My first question is to the Hajmusa brothers. Why does it take so long to get benefits? You said that your sisters are not getting their benefits yet. I understand that you have been here for nine months and you still have not received any benefits for your sisters.

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): That's correct. As of now, my sisters have not received the benefit. It's been about eight months, and the delay perhaps has to do with the numbers. Perhaps the government has not managed well how to distribute refugees among the different cities. When we arrived at the welcome centre in Kitchener, there were seven families already there. We were the eighth family. Perhaps that caused undue pressure on the system, because there were too many refugees, so they went chronologically. Also, the real estate companies refused to provide a lease. This means looking for another real estate company, another residence.

• (1625)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Is this a problem throughout the system in your neighbourhood? How many other families that you are aware of are having the same problem?

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (Interpretation): Well, there are two or three families that I am aware of that have delays in receiving benefits, but I am not aware of the proper numbers with other families, so I can't give a precise answer.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Okay, thank you.

My next question is for Mrs. Azad. You mentioned private sponsorship versus government sponsorship, smaller families versus bigger families, and more education versus less education. Are you dealing with both sides, the private sponsorship as well as the government sponsorship program?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: Yes.

Mr. Bob Saroya: How is the situation with the kids when they go to school? How are they doing in school? In some cases, they haven't attended school for a long time and haven't seen teachers for a long time. Do they understand the system? Are they doing their homework? Are they getting along with the other kids? Are you seeing any issues?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: I can't comment on any major issue, no. It's regular, normal issues that we see among all other immigrants. The kids are okay, even though, yes, some of them didn't have education back home and are starting from scratch here in Canada, but it is not a major issue. They are progressing as expected. It's not very fast. However, they are moving well. The good thing is that negotiations between the agencies and the school have been happening in a good way, so the school knows about their background and is providing enough support, especially when it comes to homework, as well as support after school. The kids are receiving more support, compared to the other students in the school.

Mr. Bob Saroya: How about the government-sponsored refugees? How is the employment situation? Is it easy to find jobs, or do they have difficulty finding jobs because of the language situation and no Canadian experience, etc.? Are they finding jobs?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: They are finding labour jobs. This is our experience. Again, because they have a big family and they really want to integrate, their goal is finding employment. That's why they are willing to start doing labour jobs, and they have done it. However, many of them are looking to start their own business in the trades.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Dzerowicz, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to say a huge thank you to everyone for their presentations today.

I am going to start with a couple of questions for the two brothers who are our witnesses today, Mr. Mousa and Mr. Hajmusa.

After the 13 months, do you think you'll be staying in Waterloo?

• (1630)

The Chair: Can we start from the beginning again? We lost our translation services.

I will ask the witness to pause. We are having some technical difficulties.

Mr. Abdulbari Hajmusa (interpretation): I intend to stay here after the 13 months because my field of study and field of work is in the city where I currently live, so I am not forced to change cities. I don't need to change cities in terms of what I want to study. It's available in the city where I live.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay, and how about your brother?

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (interpretation): After I finish my English, after I complete the 6th and 7th levels, I'll go to the college to study electrical engineering. Again, in the city where I am, there is the University of Waterloo. My programs are available, and they are offered by this university, so I intend to stay where I am. I feel that my goals will be met here. I don't know where work opportunities will take me once I graduate.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That's wonderful.

I know that you've been working with a settlement agency, so you have English classes, and you have jobs in the afternoon. What other

ongoing interactions do you have with the settlement agencies on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis?

Mr. Mustafa Hajji Mousa (interpretation): Yes, there is a working centre, and every week they have different programs, let's say for women or for men. For example, 20 days ago there was a program where people could see the different factories. We went to a car factory. There are programs for women where they see handicrafts. There are also programs for children. Almost every week, there is a different program targeting a different group. Now there is also a program for students every Sunday, where they can go and visit the University of Waterloo to see the settings and the requirements by universities. This will help people find out exactly what their goals are.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much.

Also, as I meant to say at the beginning, a very warm welcome to you both and to your families here to Canada.

My next question is for Mrs. Azad.

Mrs. Azad, you mentioned how the Syrian refugees are finding jobs—many in labour, some in their background—and this is great. Are women also finding jobs, and what is the child care option available for those women who may be working?

Mrs. Benhaz Azad: In answer to this question, I should say that my experience shows only the private-sponsor families. I have seen young women who are looking for jobs and have been able to find jobs. However, for government-assisted refugees who have big families, I haven't seen any employment of the women. Maybe they prefer to stay with the kids and take care of them. That's why I cannot comment on whether any child care issue exists. However, I know that child care expenses are a huge problem for women, for the ones who are seeking employment, because they need to find a decent job to be able to pay for child care. We have been able to introduce a subsidy benefit for them. However, not many of them are taking advantage of this opportunity.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you.

You have 10 seconds left.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I thank you so much.

The Chair: We will now suspend for two to three minutes and return in camera to deal with committee business.

Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, Mr. Chair, before you do that, I wonder if I could get a clarification from the clerk's office.

The two witnesses who are brothers, is that one family who is presenting, or are they separate families?

I'd just like to get a clarification because it wasn't clear.

The Chair: Mr. Tabbara, perhaps you could provide some clarification for us.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: The two brothers are from a family of six.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Combined as one family.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Combined as one family.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So in the household they live in—

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: There are six people in total.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There are six people and they're all part of one family.

The Chair: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now suspend for two to three minutes and return in camera to deal with committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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