



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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CIMM • NUMBER 034 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

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EVIDENCE

**Tuesday, October 25, 2016**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj**



## Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)):** Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 25, the committee will resume its study on family reunification.

We have three witnesses before us. I wanted to give the committee members a heads up. There is a video link-up with Effat Ghassemi from the Newcomer Centre of Peel that's having some difficulty.

We will proceed with the other witnesses and, hopefully, by the time the other witnesses' presentations of 14 minutes in total are done, we'll have that link in place.

We have before us here today Mr. Alex LeBlanc from the New Brunswick Multicultural Council. He's the executive director. Welcome. As an individual, by video conference, we have Jeffrey Reitz, Professor, R.F. Harney Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies, University of Toronto. Welcome, gentlemen.

We'll start with seven minutes from Mr. Alex LeBlanc.

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc (Executive Director, New Brunswick Multicultural Council):** Thank you.

The interpreter has just taken my speech to make a copy of it, so I'll start without and, hopefully, fill in the blanks later if I leave things out.

Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today. I want to say that we appreciate the work this committee does in ensuring we have thoughtful immigration policies and programs that address the needs of newcomers to our country.

Essentially, I have two key messages for the committee related to family reunification and family sponsorship. The first is related to the quota system and its impact on newcomers, immigrants coming to our province.

The second is pertaining to the opportunity that family-class immigration presents insofar as facilitating retention in the Atlantic provinces.

First I would say—and without my speech this is a bit of a game-changer—the family reunification quotas impose limits on the numbers of people we can bring in through that stream.

I'll move on to my second point. The second point is around retention rates. Family-class immigrants have a 25% higher retention

rate in New Brunswick than economic immigrants. As the federal government undertakes the Atlantic immigration pilot, which is intended to address labour market gaps....

Research sponsored by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 2014 has shown empirically that retention rates are up to 25% better for family-class immigrants coming to New Brunswick versus skilled worker streams. This is cited in the “Interprovincial Mobility of Immigrants in Canada 2006-2011” report published by CIC.

The retention rate for family-class immigrants arriving between 2006 and 2011 was approximately 80%, while the retention rate for skilled workers was 58%. This data bears out that the immigration streams that facilitate family reunification and family sponsorship are key to New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada's retention and immigration aspirations.

As we embark on the Atlantic immigration pilot, which was announced by the federal minister for IRCC in conjunction with the Council of Atlantic Premiers, I encourage the committee to look at how the family-class immigration streams can enhance the overall retention strategies that are a part of that immigration pilot.

I will leave my comments there and welcome questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. LeBlanc.

We'll proceed to Professor Reitz, seven minutes, please.

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz (Professor, R.F. Harney Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies, University of Toronto, As an Individual):** Thank you for the invitation to appear here, and for the opportunity to present some views. My comments are not about any of the specific questions about the features of family-class immigration, but about the place of family-class immigration in the overall immigration program. I want to address that because it seems to me that sometimes the primary economic impact of immigration is seen through the economic stream, and that the family class is a humanitarian concern. I think, as the previous speaker illustrated, families are economic units, and it's very important to recognize that and to include that consideration as a positive element in the design of the family class.

I think you all know that; you've heard that argument before, but I do want to mention one piece of evidence, which I think is often not taken into account in thinking about this, and that is when we compare the Canadian program with the American program. The American immigration stream—and I'm speaking now of the main part of the immigration program in the United States that's administered by the government, not undocumented immigrants. The main immigration program is a very high-skilled program, and the largest bulk of people coming into that program are family class. Ask any American, they'll tell you that they have mainly a family-unification immigration program. What is often not then observed is that the educational level and the economic contribution of that stream, including the family class and the economic component, is as high or higher than what we have in Canada.

Why is that? I think the reason for that is that the family members who come into the program under family reunification are the family members of those people who have been selected previously under the economic stream. Their characteristics are not independent of the characteristics of the economic stream. For example, the reason the educational level of the family class, humanitarian immigration stream in the United States is as high as it is, is that the educational level of family members of those members of the economic stream is very high; it's higher than the economic stream in the Canadian immigration program.

• (1540)

Of course, the reason for that is they have a very small stream, and it's a requirement in that stream that the main immigrants, the economic immigrants, have university degrees as a minimum.

The point is that it has reverberations throughout the immigration program, including the family class. I think that, when we're designing the family class, the two parts of the program, the economic and the family classes, should really be designed together, recognizing the interdependence of them. Our goal should not necessarily be to increase the size of one group relative to the other. Rather, it should be to design the two of them together, recognizing that the characteristics of the two streams are interdependent. That's one point I want to make.

The other point has to do with the fact that when we look at the economic stream in recent years, we're bringing in immigrants who are as much as possible selected by employers because of a particular labour market need. They're coming to fill labour market gaps. That's occurring at all levels of the economic hierarchy: high-skilled jobs,

middle-skilled or trade jobs, and less skilled jobs. In all these levels, there's increasing attention given to the need, once people come into the country and begin making an economic contribution, to transition to permanent status. To some extent, that is actually happening.

This has an impact later on the family class. It means that the family members coming in will be the family members of people selected for those economic criteria. In the family class, as it's being administered, family members are asked to take responsibility for the economic welfare of the family members they are bringing in. That's because, I think, family members are seen as a potential liability we should protect ourselves against.

On the employers' side, employers are bringing in people they want for a particular purpose, but they're not necessarily asked to make the same kind of commitment, even though there's a potential economic liability there. I think there's been a difference in the view of family-class immigrants as opposed to skilled or unskilled workers coming in for particular employment needs. Both of those streams, since they're not individually selected for the long-term interests of the Canadian economy, may represent potential liabilities.

On the family-class side, we think of imposing constraints and requirements on the people requesting that they be brought in, but we don't ask that on the employers' side. That's a bit of a disparity, it seems to me, suggesting that family-class immigrants are viewed with a bit more suspicion. I think that, as I mentioned initially, the family-class immigrants—

• (1545)

**The Chair:** Mr. Reitz, please be brief.

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** Sure, this is my last sentence: the family class is an important part of the economic goal of the immigration program.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Professor.

Mr. LeBlanc was cut short earlier and he didn't have his presentation before him, so he missed his first point. Mr. LeBlanc, we'll hear you now.

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** I appreciate that.

The appropriateness of imposing a quota system for family reunification is something that I and our members believe needs to be studied further. It seems to be inconsistent with the desire to increase humanitarian immigration and economic immigration. We have to have available streams for those individuals to reunite with their family members.

Applicants who meet all of the eligibility requirements may be denied the ability to reunite with their family members because the quota has been met. It would be reasonable to examine alternatives to the quota system that determine cases based on eligibility criteria alone.

This is really just to hammer home the point made by this question: why would some people versus others be able to reunite with their loved ones by the simple virtue that they got their applications in on time? Both groups meet the criteria for our system. Essentially, that's the second point I wanted to make.

To circle back to the New Brunswick-specific, the Atlantic-specific context, our region has a much smaller population. We have smaller centres. We're more rural in nature. So there are much smaller existing immigrant communities. If we're trying to increase retention in the Atlantic provinces, we have to look at family-class immigration as a mechanism to enhance those families who have chosen our region. The retention rates, as I said, are 25% higher for family-class immigrants in the Atlantic provinces, or in New Brunswick specifically, as compared with those of economic immigration streams.

Thanks.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. LeBlanc.

Now we have Ms. Effat Ghassemi with us by video conference. She's the executive director of the Newcomer Centre of Peel.

Ms. Ghassemi, you have seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi (Executive Director, Newcomer Centre of Peel):** Thank you.

I'm a good example of family reunification sponsorship. I will tell you my story very quickly, but not now.

I wanted to start by asking, do we need a quota system? Do immigrants need another level of stress or anxiety? Research shows that immigration is one of the top ingredients for stress in human life.

Everyone needs their family. This is not a privilege. It is not a demonstration of Canadian kindness or based on humanitarian or compassionate grounds. It is a human rights issue.

Immigration enhances Canada's global standing. Everybody needs family. Enhancing family reunification and sponsorship is essential and important. It is the safest way of bringing immigrants to Canada. A quota of 5,000 or 10,000 is not sufficient, in my opinion.

Not every family wants to sponsor their grandparents or parents. For the ones who need them, Canada should facilitate their sponsorship in a very timely manner—in my opinion, less than a year.

“Almost 100% of Canada's net population growth will be through immigration by 2035”. Immigrants “boost trade ties between Canada and the world”, “strengthen culture and diversity”, and “are motivated...”. Immigrants “are motivated, innovative and entrepreneurial”. That's according to The Conference Board of Canada, 2016.

The super visa, in many cases, is very expensive. Insurance is expensive and doesn't cover everything. I think our government

should deal with a few insurance companies in order to make it affordable for newcomer families. In my opinion, super visas add a great value to the whole Canadian immigration system.

Not every parent or grandparent would like to come and stay in Canada, because they have other kids and family members around the world. Some told me that they live in two or three countries. Every year they have to travel to see their children and their family members. They need to buy tickets and insurance. It's very expensive, but it's a good way for so many other cultures and countries.

Canada should make the process of issuing super visas quicker and more affordable, so children can see their parents. Many times they want their parents to come to Canada for a particular reason—a new baby, a sickness, or challenges at work or at home. They need their parents. They need the immediate attention from their own parents and grandparents.

One thing that I am hearing over and over because of my work with immigrants and refugees is that parents and grandparents are a burden on our health system. Since January 2014, the length of a sponsorship has been changed to 20 years. If there's no government funding involved, families are paying for them. Health expenses versus what they provide to their children and grandchildren is a huge spectrum....

Parents and grandparents take care of children at home, and they not only take care of them, but they care for them in a very nurturing and kind environment. We all know that day care is expensive with limited spots. It is a national issue in Canada. They teach their culture and their language to their grandchildren. This is amazing. Morality, fate...ll these things come from the family, especially from grandparents. They cook traditional food with love and pleasure. They do chores and gardening around the house.

I know for a fact that the older generation is the magnet for the family. They are the magnet in my family. Italians say that the grandfather's home is the headquarters of the family. It keeps us connected. Of course, the Middle Eastern cultures say the same, as well as people from India, and Pakistan, and the Arab world. There will be much greater respect at home when you have the presence of parents and grandparents as well.

•(1550)

I always ask, “Why do immigrants leave Canada?” The major reason is their families. They want to reunite with their own families. That's why Canada, in my opinion, has a low retention overall of keeping good immigrants as good citizens forever in Canada.

Of course, there are some other reasons, like employment, that are important too, but family is really on the top of the list. By the way, before Canada grants grandparents and parents a permanent visa under sponsorship, they have to undergo extensive medical exams. They should be healthy to come to Canada. Also, there's a three-month waiting time for their OHIP card in Ontario, basically. That's another issue.

Parents and grandparents bring money to Canada. My parents sold everything, all the properties, and brought the money here and spent it to help the children. Some bring their own pension to Canada. Some countries allow them to get their pension here, but in some countries, they have to go back every year to collect their pension.

Overall, I'll just come up with the Italians. Italians say “family helps family”. Indians and Pakistanis say, “Parents take care of children and children take care of parents”. There is a culture behind these quotes.

•(1555)

**The Chair:** Thirty seconds.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Absolutely time is important, and it has to be really under one year to get all these visas granted to parents and grandparents.

I think that's all I wanted to say.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Ghassemi.

We'll start with Ms. Khalid for seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.):** First of all, thank you, Chair, for having me in your committee today. It's definitely an honour and a privilege.

Thank you to the witnesses for your very positive testimony today with respect to this very important issue.

I think all three of you have spoken about the positive impacts of family reunification not just with respect to economy but also with respect to social life. I think that all of the members of Parliament sitting around this table can relate that we are basically the front-line workers with respect to immigration issues in our constituency offices.

The human stories that we hear on a daily basis really reflect our immigration system, the troubles and the challenges that it faces. I'd like to actually share a story.

Ms. Effat, you talked about parents, so I will say that I have a constituent who had applied for his parents in 2012. His parents are in India where the typical processing time is nine years. The couple had a child in 2014 and wanted to invite his parents on a TRV to meet the newborn. The visitor visa was refused. In 2014, the father of the couple had a heart attack and passed away without seeing his grandchild. The mother is now alone back home, old and sick without any assistance; and since the father passed away, there had to

be a change in the principal applicant for their sponsorship application. So that caused further delays in their case. The couple sends money back home to support the mother. I would say that with the number of cases that we see of this, not only does this have a negative impact on the economy here, where dollars are leaving the country, but also there's the social impact on this family, and the stress that they go through.

I'd like to know, Ms. Effat, if you have had similar experiences in your work especially in the Peel region, which is very rife with new immigrants.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Before I came here, I talked to my settlement counsellors. Every day they see people from around the world coming to our centre asking different kinds of questions, and family reunification and sponsorship is such an important part of their work. They really suffer because of the lengthy process of bringing their families—mom and dad or grandparents—for a visit to see them.

There is a reason behind all these applications. They need them so quickly. They have a baby coming or they are sick or they have stress and anxiety. Young people are getting other kinds of stress in their lives and they need somebody to help them. They are alone.

We really want to have family around the corner. Of course, we don't have them in the neighbourhood. In our culture, we have family in our own neighbourhood. It's a headquarters. Everybody is connected and we help each other. But here at least the family members like mom and dad, grandparents and others, or siblings.... I'm really emphasizing bringing in siblings; open the door for siblings to come. I came as a sibling in 1988 with my family to Canada, and look at me. I'm not a burden. I did so much for Canada and Canada did so much for me. We should really reopen this conversation to sponsor and bring in siblings, too.

Thank you.

**Ms. Iqra Khalid:** I also want to talk a little bit about the impact of economy and then family reunification. It's my understanding that when potential employees are looking for work in highly specialized industries here in Canada, they're not often given the opportunity to bring their families—or their spouses, in particular—to come to Canada while they work here.

Can I get a comment from Alex? How does that impact New Brunswick? Do you think that has a negative impact on people who are coming into Canada, or does that deter them from taking contracts in Canada?

• (1600)

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** In my experience, it doesn't prevent people from wanting to come to Canada. It just creates hardship, in terms of separation, for them once they are here. There are 13 settlement agencies across New Brunswick. They work with economic immigrants, family-class immigrants, and refugees. Their experience is that the stress, the mental health impacts, and the overall social integration of newcomers is impacted negatively due to separation from family members.

So if we as a country are looking to get the best and the brightest to address our labour market gaps, to help us grow our economy, to start new businesses, we should be recognizing that those people have family connections, and their families are important to writing that Canadian story, to the fabric of our country and our communities. I think if that's the vision—that we want the best and the brightest—then we have to understand that they're going to want to bring their family members.

Furthermore, in terms of refugees, I want to applaud the government for the ambitious objective of bringing in 25,000 refugees and for meeting that objective. We worked very hard in New Brunswick on this, to collectively make it a success. These individuals are now very preoccupied with the fact that many of them have family in inhospitable and unsafe environments. And so on a daily basis—three, four, five, or six times a day—they're getting contacted by their family members, and this is weighing down on them.

So family class in terms of family reunification for people who arrive as refugees is part and parcel of the original objective that we had as a humanitarian undertaking. Bringing in their family members is part of the undertaking, part of the follow-through in terms of the humanitarian commitment that we made as a government.

For both of those reasons, I think it's important that we look at a quota system, and whether a quota system makes sense, or whether we want to define very clear eligibility criteria for those—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. LeBlanc.

Mr. Saroya, you have seven minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their expertise and for telling us how we can improve the system.

Three of you talked about the quota system. The 2016 immigration level plan shows the government intent to admit 80,000 family-class immigrants, of which 20,000 are to be parents and grandparents.

In your view, are these targets adequate? If not, why not? What are the implications of these targets with respect to family reunification? I'd like to hear from all of you on this. We can start with Alex.

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** Again, I would say it needs to be guided less on a predetermined number but more on how many eligible applicants we are seeing come through, and how we facilitate that. Especially given the 25,000 to 30,000 Syrian refugees we've recently welcomed, and the increased focus on now having an Atlantic immigration pilot in New Brunswick, we're going to see up to 2,000

more families come to our region through that stream. This is going to bring a corresponding increase in demand for family-class immigration. We're going to see a growth in demand in that area. As we bring more people through humanitarian streams, economic streams, we have to be prepared to respond to the increased demand in family-class immigration.

Again, I wouldn't want to say that the quota system or the targets for this year are adequate, because I think any time we're turning families away and saying that they missed the cutoff or we already have our quota, so to speak, I think it's inappropriate. It doesn't reflect humane immigration principles.

• (1605)

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Ms. Ghassemi, what's your opinion on this?

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** My opinion is that I don't know what magic number I can put on the table, but definitely this number of 5,000 applications, which then became 10,000, really is not working. In January 2016, they opened for applications, and within two hours the applications were done and they just closed it. It means that the demand for family reunification and sponsorship is high.

I think this is the safest and one of the best ways of bringing people to Canada in order to have a community of different cultures, different families. They can help each other and live happily here.

As to quota, I have no idea how many applications we have to have, but I know the quota that we're practising right now does not work at all.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Mr. Reitz, do you have any opinion on this? Is there anything you'd like to add?

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** Yes. I certainly agree with all the comments that have been made by the other two presenters, but I want to emphasize that while we may call the family class a humanitarian class, that is a term we're using, it seems to imply less of an economic contribution from the family class. The basis that's usually used to make that statement is that the earnings of family-class immigrants are lower than the earnings of economically selected immigrants.

I think that's a false economic model. We should be asking, what is the impact that the arrival of a family class has on the earnings of the economic immigrants? In my view, that is quite positive. My evidence for that is, as I said, to compare the Canadian immigration program with the American one. In the American one, by far the largest group of immigrants is the family class, and the way they are seen, it's called a humanitarian category. Yet the overall economic contribution of those immigrants, mostly from Asia and the Caribbean, is as good or better than their counterparts in Canada. So having a very large so-called humanitarian program in the United States is definitely not hurting the economic standing of those immigrants.

Again, while I think we should be addressing the concerns that have been expressed, the pain of separation in families, and so on, we should not take that to imply that allowing those folks to come to Canada is in some way an economic disadvantage for Canada. I think to the contrary.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** I don't think anybody is disagreeing with you on the issue. We bring in about 300,000 in total numbers with all the different classes, so we have to have something in mind. I believe there is a huge number of family reunification files sitting there, from throughout the world, but we have to mix and match. Within the family class, how many can come, and within the economic class, and many other classes? That's what the question was. To the three of you, what would be acceptable if you had to pick a number?

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** I guess one of the points I would make there is that as we've seen the immigration numbers change over the years, there has been a definite attempt to increase the proportion of immigrants selected on the basis of economic criteria and reduce the family-class component. I think that has been done without any evidence that this is really a priority from the point of view of the overall design of the program.

While we've been doing that, we've also been changing the economic selection criteria to reduce the emphasis on skill level and increase the emphasis on immediate labour market concerns. That may actually have reverberations for family-class immigration of the future. That probably represents more of a threat to the long-term economic benefit of the program than increasing family-class immigration.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes, please.

• (1610)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I'd like to thank all the presenters for their presentations.

I have a question around quotas. People were talking about numbers, but I wonder whether there should be a quota at all. I think there's a real question to be asked if you have a situation where the quota of applications was changed from 5,000 to 10,000, and within hours it was already met. If there's value to family reunification in a whole range of perspectives, then should there even be a quota, for example?

I wonder if I could get quick comments from each of the witnesses, given that we only have seven minutes in our allotted time.

**The Chair:** Perhaps we'll go in order of the speakers' presentations.

Mr. LeBlanc.

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** I think I would echo that question. The question this committee has to look at very seriously is whether a quota is an appropriate measure or a system to facilitate family-class immigration or family reunification. I don't believe it's consistent. It's arbitrary. It's an arbitrary number.

You have an 80,000 quota, but you have 100,000 applicants. Why are those 20,000 families not getting reunited? What is different about their circumstance, apart from the fact that their applications didn't get submitted on time. I think it's an arbitrary measure; that separation of families has a negative economic and health impacts on newcomers.

As was mentioned, we're talking about human lives and human stories and I think a quota system is inconsistent with our objectives, collectively, in terms of our immigration, economic and humanitarian.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Professor Reitz.

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** It's my view that the legislation requires Parliament to set the total numbers of immigrants, and within that numbers are allocated across the various categories, and they all can be seen as, in effect, quotas.

It seems to me setting the numbers is part of the responsibility of the government in designing the immigration program. So whether you call it a quota or not, there are going to be numbers that are used to establish the size of the various streams.

**The Chair:** Ms. Ghassemi—

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** I think to have people under a family class without any kind of limit at all, that would be contrary to the legislation.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** It doesn't mean the legislation could not be changed or government can't change the stream of a program... making that assumption. Of course, a recommendation could be made to say this doesn't make sense and therefore there should be a change to reflect that.

My question to you is whether or not that should be considered? I get it about all of those things, about what it means, but the real question, of course, is does it even make sense to have those rules in place accordingly?

I'm going to move on to the next witness, please.

**The Chair:** Ms. Ghassemi.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Yes, thank you..

I'm thinking about whether we need a magic number in my opinion, and I'm thinking about how not every economic family wants to bring their parents or grandparents here and not everybody has small children and they need immediate attention.



I think the quota should be between 50,000 to 60,000 families on a yearly basis.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm going to move on to a different stream of questions. The issue around the definition of family was also raised and particularly on the notion that siblings are excluded within the family reunification program.

I want to touch on this quickly, if people have a view about that and whether or not that should be changed as well. I know this is a major issue in different cultures and particularly with the new stream of refugees coming in. They define family very differently. I know from my own community, in the Chinese community, we also define it very differently in terms of the extended family and the value of that.

I wonder if I can get some quick comments about whether or not that ought to be changed as well in terms of the definition of family to be expanded and where once upon a time it actually included a stream to allow applications to be made for siblings in that family reunification stream. We'll go very quickly.

**The Chair:** Mr. LeBlanc.

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** Yes, our organization would support opening up some options for sibling reunification and there was also some discussion about cut-off ages. In many cases the families are coming and somebody is going to be 18 years old and they're still a university student or college-age student. They're still a dependant in the family, but for some reason they're evaluated as an independent.

I think that also needs to be looked at in terms of the circumstances of the family. Is this person still an economic dependant? Are they studying or are they going to attend our post-secondary institutions? What are the realities of the family?

Thank you.

Professor Reitz.

•(1615)

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** I'll pass. I don't have a view on that question.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. Ghassemi.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Yes, I'm very pro opening the discussion on siblings and extending the family definition. I told you my story, I came as part of the siblings' sponsorship and I think this is working amazingly well for family reunification.

All of a sudden, it brings down the quota of parents' and grandparents' numbers that if you look at the whole family and bring them one at a time if they ask to come to Canada, then you will see that you have a basket of different flowers and different fruits that make a balance in our Canadian system.

I see it that way.

Thank you.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Just very quickly then, on the question around the cost of sponsorship, which is also very onerous, if you were a family of three sponsoring a parent and a grandparent or two grandparents, let's say, then you would need to actually get the

income at the level of five people for three years preceding that. I am wondering—

**The Chair:** You have 10 seconds.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** A quick comment, should that be lowered? We'll start with Ms. Ghassemi.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Of course, the cost is very important, but I don't know how to balance 10 years to 20 years of sponsorship and then have a high cost for four, five, six, or seven family members. I really don't know that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today and helping us conduct our further study on family reunification.

During one of the respondent's answers, I heard “the best and the brightest”. I want to talk about that. I had a consultation in my region. We're in the Waterloo region. It's the high-tech sector in Canada. When I spoke to individuals there they said that immigration was an issue they had. They're trying to attract the best and brightest to come to work in these high-tech sectors, but they are having some of issues with immigration.

My first question would be for all, but I'll start with Mr. Reitz. Would you say that family reunification is a good incentive to attract and keep the best and brightest by providing them an opportunity to reunite with their loved ones?

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** That is a very interesting question, and we don't have a lot of evidence I can cite in research showing that people are attracted to one country as opposed to another because of more liberal family-class admission criteria, but the point was made earlier that, when family members are not able to join their loved ones in Canada, it is stressful. That tends to suggest it's a negative experience, and that experience is shared with people back home, so it would be surprising to me if it is not the case that the family-class rules that are in place in the immigration program have an impact on the desirability of coming to Canada and an impact on recruiting people to come for highly skilled jobs.

I certainly know that's the case in my own sector. In the universities, when we're trying to recruit from abroad, people look at the immigration rules that are in place. If they are going to come to Canada, they want to know what the rules are going to be relating to members of their family.

I can't cite research on this question, unfortunately.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** For Mr. LeBlanc, I was mentioning that the best and brightest are trying to come to our region, to our country, but they have concerns about whether or not their family and extended family would be able to join them.

•(1620)

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** In various sectors, certainly from my perspective, the best and brightest doesn't necessarily mean that they're the highest educated. In some cases it could be skilled tradespeople. Recently we've opened up streams in New Brunswick hoping to facilitate entry into more semi-skilled occupations because we have an aging workforce and a shortage of workers in certain more physically intensive sectors.

In any event, on attracting economic immigrants to address gaps in our labour market, we have to look at what those family units are going to require, the requirements of those workers, those human resources who are going to come in and grow our economy. I think the requirements are to have a connection to their families, to be close, to build community, and to build a home in our country, wherever that is.

Family reunification, family-class immigration supports our economic objectives but is also part of the follow-through on our humanitarian objectives in terms of refugee resettlement.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** My second question is for Ms. Ghassemi and Mr. LeBlanc.

Many witnesses have come to this committee, have testified before it, and have talked about the aging out issue of dependent children, which is a real problem when applicants take a long time to be processed. Have you encountered any cases like these, and would you recommend a lock-in date for families?

Ms. Ghassemi first.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** I'm sorry, I didn't hear your last part of the question. Could you please repeat it?

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** I was referring to the aging out issue, when children apply to come to Canada at a certain age, but then the process takes too long and they've aged out and may not be eligible. Have you experienced that in your field?

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Yes, indeed. It's a big issue when you use a number, say 19 years old, as dependence for children, and then if it comes to 22.... In different cultures we live with parents until we get married. Maybe we're 40 years old or 35 years old, and we still live with our parents. We are dependent according to our culture and definition on our family structure. Putting a number for aging people is very problematic. We should really reconsider that if children are living with parents, then we should not have an age for them.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** I'm concentrating on teenagers. Maybe they are 16 or 17, and then their process took a lot longer, and now they might be in their mid-twenties and they are not eligible when they process. I'm just focusing on that bracket.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Okay. We should have the grandfather clause when you apply when your children are 16 or 17, and then you have to really focus on when they applied and when their age was 16 or 17.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** You would be in favour of a lock-in date, correct?

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** Yes, I would.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** Okay.

Mr. LeBlanc.

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** Yes, as well. We'd be in favour of a lock-in date, providing that there would be some planning around that and defining what the lock-in date is. We believe, and it's been raised in our organization several times, that not allowing dependents who are within one or two years of the age of 18 to be part of the family class is unreasonable.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, five minutes, please.

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

There was an internal departmental study done recently that concluded that the economic outcomes of parents and grandparents are below the average of other immigrants, with fewer than half reporting employment income, with low average earnings, and with increased EI usage over time. In other words, the department said this was a drain on the economy. In addition, the parents and grandparents population is largely responsible for the disproportionately high rate of family-class immigrants reporting social assistance usage as compared to all immigrants. This study was done by the department.

I wonder if we could have a comment about that from all three witnesses, starting with Professor Reitz.

•(1625)

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** As I indicated before, in discussing the question of the family class generally, I think that if you want to assess the economic impact of the presence of the people in Canada, then you can't look only at their earnings. You have to look at the earnings of the family unit, at a minimum. It's not surprising to me that the earnings would be lower.

I wanted to clarify. You said their earnings were lower than, did you mean lower than mainstream Canadians of the same age?

**Mr. David Tilson:** Other immigrants.

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** The immigrants of the same age?

**Mr. David Tilson:** All other immigrants.

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** All other immigrants?

**Mr. David Tilson:** Yes.

**Prof. Jeffrey Reitz:** Well, you might say the appropriate comparison would be people in the same demographic category. I think that's not a proper economic model. The census of Canada is very clear to identify families as economic units. They call it "economic family". The census data are collected in such a way that you can examine the economic interdependence of members of the family. When it comes to immigration, I think that to select certain streams, and measure their economic contribution only in terms of their own particular employment, is a conceptual mistake.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Mr. LeBlanc.

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** I'm working from research done by Professor Yoko Yoshida from Dalhousie University that indicates that the economic immigrants coming to New Brunswick report roughly 74% employment after year one and that family-class immigrants are on a par with the economic immigrants who come to our province in terms of labour market participation. Their earnings are lower, but they are earning and they're participating in the labour market. It will take people working in various capacities in our economy to drive it forward. We're not all going to be engineers or doctors or entrepreneurs in the tech sector. I believe it's a misnomer to suggest this. It takes all parts to drive this engine. I agree with the professor as well.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Ms. Ghassemi.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** I agree with both Professor Reitz and Alex. I always think and ask, what do you mean by low earnings? What is poverty? Many cultures believe in a very simplified life that in your opinion as a western citizen makes you think they're so poor because they don't have meat every night or this and that. But we live a very humble and simple life that is so comfortable for us, and we don't call this a low level of earning and lifestyle. That is different. I think it goes back to the culture of the family and the culture of people who come and then want to live together happily. I don't think money can play a big issue in being healthy and happy living in Canada.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

You have 20 seconds.

**Mr. David Tilson:** I pass.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll proceed to Ms. Dzerowicz.

You have five minutes, please.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.):** Thanks so much, Mr. Chair.

I want to also thank all the participants for their excellent presentations. I'm going to start with Mr. LeBlanc.

Mr. LeBlanc, you are very sensitive to the plight of the east coast. I hear your couple of messages on the limits of the quota system. I also hear that facilitating retention in the Atlantic provinces is very important and that the retention rates are much higher for family-class immigrants than economic immigrants. We are trying to get to recommendations around this program. What would be your specific recommendations to us that would be beneficial for east coast Canada?

**Mr. Alex LeBlanc:** When we looked at the percentage of overall immigrants coming to New Brunswick through the family-class streams, it was roughly 10% in 2014. Contrast that to 25% of overall immigration to Canada. Proportionally, a smaller percentage of our overall immigration in New Brunswick is coming through family class and yet it performs better in overall retention. I'm not sure how to reconcile that from a policy standpoint. I think perhaps we need to look at ensuring there are no limitations on those immigrant families in our province who are looking to bring their extended family or their immediate family to join them in New Brunswick. I think that certainly the quota system does impact those living in our province whose applications may be denied or who are experiencing

prolonged delays because of the quotas. Again, 10% of overall immigration to New Brunswick in 2014 was through family class, 25% across the country, and yet retention rates are 25% better through family class than economic streams. I don't know how to reconcile that from a policy standpoint. I think there is some work to do around this Atlantic immigration pilot and how we build in family reunification and support that work for newcomers who are coming through that pilot so we achieve better overall retention and population growth in the Atlantic.

• (1630)

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Thank you very much.

Ms. Ghassemi, we've heard this over and over again. You were talking a little about applications for parents and grandparents, within a couple of hours or by the end of the day all the slots are completely full and it's closed for the year. Do you have any recommendations on how we can improve this application process so it would be fair?

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** When I talked about two hours, that means the slot is filled. It means first-come, first-served. The applications up to here are done; the rest are out. In my opinion, we should really have the resources—in terms of Canadian resources—to look at the application and see what these application requests are. If it's reunification for various reasons, it has to be timely. Then the quota should really be expanded. Of course, 5,000 or 10,000 doesn't really make sense; within two hours it's filled. We should really look not to a magic number, but to the magic families; they need family members to come and join them, to help them. That's what I think in terms of family reunification.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** I think we've heard quite a bit about how long it takes in terms of processing times. What do you think is a fair amount of time? When we're talking about family reunification, our focus today has been very much on parents and grandparents, but we are talking about spouses and children as well. Could you provide a little bit of input there? What's a fair amount of time?

**The Chair:** You have thirty seconds, please.

**Ms. Effat Ghassemi:** In my opinion, for an express entry or any visa or anything, it shouldn't be more than one year. It should be less than one year.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Okay. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** I'd like to thank the panellists for joining us today and providing their insights.

We'll now suspend for two minutes to allow the next panel to assemble.

●(1630) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

●(1635)

**The Chair:** I'd like to welcome the second group of panellists before the committee today.

We have representatives from the Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood and Community Health Centre. Erika Garcia is a settlement worker there. Gishelle Albert is here as an individual.

We'll begin with Ms. Garcia.

The floor is yours. You have seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Erika Garcia (Settlement Worker, Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood and Community Health Centre):** Good afternoon, and thank you very much to this committee for inviting me here today.

Reuniting families is a key objective of Canada's immigration system. The family reunification program has very positive aspects about it, but there's always room for improvement. The information I will be providing today is based on my 10-year's work experience, working on the front lines, working one-on-one with clients, working with individuals and families, recent immigrants as well as Canadian citizens, looking to reunite with their families here in Canada.

For the majority of my cases, family reunification has done a fantastic job. It's done a good job according to the response from relatives here in Canada. There are significant benefits to sponsored families that I have noticed over the years. One of them is that the large majority of sponsored families have continued to contribute to the household income, either directly by working part-time or full-time, or indirectly by enabling their sponsors to work longer hours. Keep in mind that most sponsored relatives can acquire a social insurance number and are able to work legally in Canada,

Also, sponsored spouses and partners provide emotional support for their sponsors. In most cases, what I've noticed with people who have come through my doors is that they're usually by themselves, the sponsors. They're on their own just waiting for their relatives to arrive here in Canada.

Although I've seen the benefits of the program, I've also seen some of the challenges through my clients. One of them is the long processing times and delays with the applications here in Canada and abroad. In Canada, it takes about 26 months for partners to be sponsors—the partners themselves, I mean. Abroad, it takes 9 to 15 months for some regions. I have a lot of clients who come from African regions covered by Nairobi visa offices, and this processing time takes 15 to 31 months. That's a very long time for people waiting to reunite with their families.

I have clients who have expressed difficulty communicating with inland offices here in Canada and abroad. Clients need to know what the status of their application is. It's very difficult to acquire that information when it's difficult to get in touch with CIC offices. Sponsors are able to communicate only via mail or email, which can lengthen this process. Clients also face very long waiting periods when accessing the CIC call-in centres, and often have expressed that the telephone systems, the CIC website, and the application

forms are very difficult to navigate. They feel they have been overloaded with information, as well as jargon. The language is very difficult for them to understand, especially if English is not their first language.

I have made some recommendations based on my experience with this population, with people using the family reunification program. One of them is that I see the continuing need for the family reunification program to exist and to be made a top priority. At our office, we continue to see significant numbers of applications from Canadian citizens and permanent residents looking to sponsor eligible family members under the family class, mainly spouses, partners, and dependent children. This demonstrates the continuing demand and ongoing relevance of the program.

The other recommendation I have is speedier family reunification. In other words, we need express family reunification. I believe children should be reunited with their parents in six months or less. Canada has a very slow process for family reunification. Many children wait over two years before being able to reunite with their parents. For family members and refugees, overseas processing can take up to 31 months. These children sometimes are exposed to very dangerous situations, similar to the situations their parents fled. Also, it takes an extremely emotional toll on the children to be apart from their parents, and it's necessary for them to be with them.

●(1640)

Citizenship and Immigration Canada has implemented the express entry program for economic immigrants. For immigrants with a valid job offer, CIC will process their applications in six months. My question is, shouldn't children be reunited with their parents at least as quickly as these economic immigrants are processed? I think Canada can do better.

My next recommendation is reinstating the previous age of dependants to 22 from 19. Also, repeal that excluded family member rule to avoid cutting off and leaving behind family members.

Last, improve communications with CIC networks to speed up the process. My idea, at least, is to increase staff and training to meet the demands.

In order for the family reunification program to sustain its greatness, and to make improvements, I believe the federal government must ensure the program is ongoing. Also, CIC must ensure that delivery of the program benefits the sponsored family in Canada. As well, the sponsor must ensure that they meet the responsibility and obligations undertaken in the sponsorship agreement for the well-being of the sponsored family members in Canada.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Garcia.

Ms. Albert, seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert (As an Individual):** My position is that Canada needs more skilled immigrants and fewer parents and grandparents. The current government's plan is to more than double the intake of foreign nationals who are the parents and grandparents of naturalized Canadians, while concurrently reducing the number of economic immigrants, such as skilled workers, entering the country. Doubling the quota for parents and grandparents moving to Canada coupled with other immigration flaws, such as not requiring these individuals to have basic knowledge of one of the country's two official languages, is not in the best interests of Canadians. I believe this policy-making is irresponsible because it does not take into account the financial burden on taxpayers when these individuals require services, such as medical attention.

It also does not factor in scenarios when sponsors default on their commitment to support their parents and grandparents, who then rely on social assistance because they are unable to secure employment.

The number one argument for increasing the parents and grandparents quota to as much as six times the current level, or even removing the cap on those coming to live as permanent residents or citizens, is that they help young couples save on child care costs, and in turn that money will make its way into the economy through increased consumer spending.

The benefits to an individual's family do not offset the costs to taxpayers if these individuals require medical attention or social assistance. Parents and grandparents are the least likely of all categories of immigrants to report employment earnings, and family-class immigrants have a disproportionately high rate of reporting social assistance when compared to all immigrants. This can be attributed primarily to parents and grandparents.

Increasing the quota or removing the cap would put an additional burden on our already strained social programs. Canada already has an aging population, and it is facing a shortage of workers to support our aging population. I've included a chart for those of you who received the handout previously.

Since parents and grandparents being sponsored under the family reunification program are not required to meet the minimum education, skills, and training standards set forth by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Canadian economy will be negatively affected.

Another aspect of this argument is fairness. Those who are unable to secure employment because they do not have a command of either of the official languages, or because they are too old for employment and have never paid income taxes in Canada, are eligible for the same benefits, such as health care and social assistance, as someone who may have worked his whole life in Canada and who paid into these programs.

I have a number of questions. How is it fair that those who have used up their useful working years paying into and building up another society are able to move here, not pay any income taxes, and yet enjoy the same benefits as those who have paid into the system for a large part of their lives? How is it fair that the younger generation of Canadians, who are now working and paying to support Canada's seniors, now have to support people who have never paid a dime into our highly subsidized education system? How

sustainable is this plan, and how does it benefit Canada? Our population is aging, and research has shown that approximately 1% of the population accounts for a third of health care spending. Of that 1%, 80% are seniors.

Health care is a significant expense. Provinces spend about half of their budgets on health care, so for the federal government to add more seniors to the health care roster is unfair to provinces. The Canadian immigration system's primary objective should be to accept people into the country who will work and pay taxes to help build a stronger economy and country. As the Canadian population ages, more people rely on social programs, such as health care and subsidized housing. The people entitled to these benefits should be first and foremost the ones who paid into these programs.

There is no real correlation between the rate at which the Canadian population is aging and the rate at which Canada is taking in economic immigrants to replace the aging workforce. Canada's focus should be more on economic immigrants and less on parents and grandparents.

• (1645)

The economic class is made up of skilled workers and business people. Skilled workers are educated and have knowledge of English or French. They are of employable age, and they are also adaptable. They can move from job to job as the economy shifts. Business immigrants are those able to create jobs for themselves and others, contribute capital to the Canadian economy, and stimulate economic activity. Currently the economic class of immigrants are in the minority, and we need to change that policy.

• (1650)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Albert.

We'll begin with Ms. Dzerowicz.

You have seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks so much to the two presenters today.

I'm just going to delve right into questions.

Ms. Garcia, I'm going to start off with you. You said you've had 10 years of work experience front line, so I'm going to take advantage of that.

We get a lot of complaints, so all of us are front-line workers as well because we hear all the complaints. We deal with a lot of immigrant issues in our offices as well.

What specifically, in your opinion, takes so long in the processing of an application? Is it health checks or security checks? Is it lost applications? Is it incorrect information? What is it within the whole processing that, in your experience, you're finding is taking so long in the processing of applications?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** That's a very good question.

To be honest, in my experience I've noticed that it's the lack of understanding of how to navigate the process, especially for people who's first language is not English. They have difficulty, like I mentioned, communicating with visa offices. Some of my clients are sometimes not able to give appropriate information. If I'm not there to actually help them navigate through the process, sometimes they do it on their own because they have specific time limits to submit certain information. It's very difficult for them to submit it when it's written in a way that is actually not very easy to understand.

Also in terms of the forms, there's usually a repetition of forms. A lot of CIC offices, especially abroad, often ask for schedule As or family information forms to be resubmitted. It can also take a long time for them to submit this information, given that the information might not be easy to send to the right visa office.

For sure communication is certainly one. Like I said, I'm finding the visa process in Nairobi very difficult. I'm saying that specifically because it is extremely long to get an answer from them and extremely long to get any sort of communication with them. I've seen it a lot with my clients who have children abroad waiting to bring them over. When they're hitting the 22-month mark, it can be very stressful for those parents.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Thank you very much.

You talked a little bit about the constricted annual quota of applications. What do you think is the right number? We've doubled it from 5,000 to 10,000. You heard the earlier conversation here around quota /no quota. Do you have an opinion on that? That's one part of the question. The other part that I'm grappling with a little bit is the super visas. I don't know if you have an opinion on that. Then the third part of the question is, what is the fair ask in terms of support for parents and grandparents? Our other presenter today talked a little bit about it. This is something that you hear is quite common: that you have older people coming in, and if they do get ill, they tend to be a more extraordinary burden on the health care system, and it becomes a little bit unfair. I would love to get your opinion on each of those three, if that's okay.

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** Sure.

One of the things I want to mention is that when people come here to Canada and they're sponsored, they go through various testing, especially medical tests. The majority that I have seen.... Many of the people being sponsored are very healthy. If anything, their health deteriorates abroad.

When I think about grandparents and parents, I think about the concept of family. It was mentioned before that the concept of family is very broad. For some cultures, grandparents and parents are a huge part of what the family is. I've also noticed the ability for grandparents and parents to come here and help with the child care of the sponsored families. When parents and grandparents are not able to come here, that decreases their ability to help out their larger family here. That also adds costs for those sponsored families, especially low-income families, as they now have to look for child care.

• (1655)

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** For quotas—I don't even like calling it a "quota"—if there was a number for parents and grandparents, what number would you give?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** It's very difficult to say, to be honest, because we are talking about people, 10,000 people. I heard, when it was mentioned previously, that it takes about two hours for that quota to fill, which shows the demand of people wanting to bring their grandparents and parents here.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Do you think there should be a quota?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** I don't think that's enough. In two hours, it's already filled up.

You mentioned the super visa. People come to my office waiting to see whether they can bring in their grandparents one way or another, and when I tell them that, unfortunately, they are not able to submit an application to sponsor them because the quota has been met, they have to apply for a super visa. Bringing grandparents in that 10-year gap can be very difficult, in terms of the cost of flying them back and forth, because they are not able to stay here more than two years.

I'm not really sure I have a specific number for you. The only thing I know is that 10,000 is just not enough.

**Ms. Julie Dzerowicz:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Tilson, you have seven minutes, please.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to thank both Ms. Garcia and Ms. Albert for appearing before us today with their comments. It will help in our report to the government.

Ms. Albert, you stated in your remarks that you are concerned about the financial impact that increasing the levels of parents and grandparents will have on the Canadian economy. You went into that to some degree. I wonder whether you could elaborate on that.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** A number of research studies have shown that people use the health care system the most in the first couple of years of life and at the end of life. If you visit an emergency room, you see mostly older adults. Yes, it's great to reunite family, and maybe an individual would have the benefit of having their parent or grandparent there to look after their children, but the question is, who pays for that individual? Statistics show that there is an increased burden on our health care system, and that's what the provinces spend the most money on.

Yes, there is that burden on the system with our own seniors, with our own population. Now we want to increase the quotas, or even remove them, to add that additional burden, and we don't have that additional revenue going into the system to pay for it.

**Mr. David Tilson:** You commented that in the 2016 immigration levels plan, the minister has made a marked shift away from economic migrants towards family reunification. Why do you feel that this is the wrong approach?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I feel that our economy is struggling as it is, right now. We need to generate more jobs. We need people to help grow our economy. We need people who are innovative, and that all comes when you're younger and you're better able to adapt to changes in the world, with what's happening in technology, with what's happening in our political environment, not only in Canada but throughout the world. We need people who can help us advance our economy and grow, and become more significant in the world in that sense. That's where the economic class of immigrants fits in. I believe we need to grow that base first, before moving further with aging parents and grandparents.

● (1700)

**Mr. David Tilson:** You referenced fairness, in your remarks, with respect to the utilization of benefits in Canada by those who may not have contributed to them. You spent some time on that. Could you elaborate as well on that issue?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** When we speak of people's parents and grandparents, we're already looking at an older age. They have lived and built up another society, then they move to Canada and are now entitled to the same benefits as someone who has worked and helped to build this society. We don't have a system where, if you move here after the age of 60, you pay insurance. I believe now it's coming in with the visas, but if you come here as a permanent resident and become a citizen, what have you paid to help build the system that you're now able to access at the same level as someone else who has helped to build the system?

**Mr. David Tilson:** You note that with Canada's rapidly aging population, we're in need of more economic migrants to support those heading into retirement with the aging population. You spent some time on that as well. What do you see as the biggest problem here?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand the question.

**Mr. David Tilson:** You've emphasized that we need more economic migrants to support those heading into retirement, but that's not the direction the government seems to be taking. So the question is, what do you see as the problem?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** What's happening is that over time the number of working individuals to support one senior is reducing, so as we have more seniors coming from our baby boomers, and now we add more to that, it puts more of a burden on someone like myself, who is now trying to work to get set for my own retirement. I'm now paying into someone else's retirement—well, not retirement because they wouldn't have worked—paying into supporting someone who hasn't even helped with my education. We're all aware that our education system... For university it's subsidized about 50% or something like that. I don't mind paying for someone who has helped me to acquire the skills I have now, to work and help to build the system, but I would have a problem supporting someone who has never helped me in that sense. It comes back to the issue of fairness.

**Mr. David Tilson:** The committee will be making a number of recommendations after hearing—

**The Chair:** Briefly.

**Mr. David Tilson:** Time's up? Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Tilson.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes, please.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations.

I'd like to ask Ms. Garcia some questions, if I may. I think you emphasized the importance of family reunification and you expressed difficulties with individuals you have assisted in your organization with their application, with processing time particularly, which is often a major concern. You're right. We hear this all the time, and one of the reason we're gathered here today is to look into this situation.

Do you have a suggested time frame that you think would be a reasonable approach with respect to the processing time?

● (1705)

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** I think, for children, especially, six months or less is a time frame that is appropriate, mainly because I think being away from their parents for more than six months, as I mentioned before, can have very detrimental and emotional impacts on them and their development as well.

I think six months or under a year. I echo what the last panellist was saying that at about a year there should be something. I was very surprised, to be honest, over the years to see the that number of months hasn't decreased; in fact, it seems to grow. So it's 24 months at the moment, if you're making the application within Canada, but I think that should be lower as well. Since they're in Canada it could be a year and a half perhaps at the most, but abroad, I'm thinking about a year, and six months for children.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** You also mentioned the difficulties for people to get information and updates about the status of the application. We hear that all the time as well. Our offices are inundated with constituents who want us to try to get them information.

I wonder if you can elaborate and give us specific examples of those issues with the call centre, and then suggest what needs to change in order for people to access information regarding the status of the application.

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** I know personally, because I often have to make those calls myself as a representative of my clients. The call-in centre system seems to be getting more complicated as well, even for me, and I have been using it for about 10 years, as I mentioned.

Usually, the waiting periods are about an hour for now. Often half-way to accessing, it tends to hang up on me. The options it gives us, there are too many of them, too much information. And accessing an actual person who I can speak to, a representative on the phone, can be very difficult.

Sorry, can you repeat the second part of your question?.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** What do you think needs to change? How can they improve the system for people to access information about the status of their claim?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** One of the things my clients have often expressed is the need to have somebody, a person with a name whom they can have communication with. Sending an application is very personal. We're talking about their families here. I hear a lot about numbers, but it's also important to remember that there's a humanistic aspect to these applications. We're talking about reuniting people together, their families as a unit. Having that contact with someone, one on one, even a specific name, could be very helpful for them, so they know that so-and-so is actually looking at their application.

This is a problem with applications abroad, because they seem to go from different hands to different officers sometimes—sometimes even different offices. I've had many occasions where applications are sent from one office to another, because there are too many applications in one visa office abroad. Seeing those applications being shifted to different offices can be very stressful to a lot of my clients.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Some people say that, if you're good enough to work here, you're good enough to stay. We have situations where some temporary foreign workers come in, and sometimes they come in year after year to work, but they don't get access to permanent resident status. I wonder whether or not you have some thoughts about that.

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** For sure. Over the years I've talked to many temporary workers, farm workers, specifically, coming through my doors. They work very hard, extremely hard, in jobs that are not easy jobs to do. They're paying taxes in one way or another here. They're putting in hard labour here for us.

I want to speak specifically about farm workers, because those are the populations that I tend to see the most. I think giving them access to bring their families, to have permanent residence here, for me it would be ideal because the majority of people I've seen in that program, specifically, just want to continue to work. They want to give their children a better opportunity. They want their children to go to university and become something, just as many of us have done here in this room.

• (1710)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** On the family reunification application, some in previous panels have actually identified the high cost of the application for individual families to submit, both in the fees and the sponsorship amount. I wonder if you have some comments about that.

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** Especially for refugees who have gained permanent residency here through the refugee protection program, many of those are highly skilled in many professions. They have left and come to Canada because they have to flee for reasons not in their control. Unfortunately, when they come here they're not really established and they don't have a job waiting for them. They do want to sponsor their families at some point. It can be very costly for someone who doesn't have employment yet. Five hundred and fifty dollars per applicant and \$120 per child can be a lot, especially if you want to bring your husband, for example, and two of your children who have been left behind because, for some reason, they haven't been able to come.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Garcia.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have seven minutes, please.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.):** First, I would also like to thank the witnesses for their testimony today. What we've heard today over the course of this hour and the previous hour has obviously been very helpful.

Since there have been no questions directed at Ms. Albert, I just thought I'd ask a few questions there.

The first one is this. I had the opportunity to read your written submission, and I must say it's very much at odds with what we've been hearing from other specialists who have been appearing before this committee. That said, we've heard from an impressive range of individuals: settlement workers who have first-hand experience, academics, lawyers. Could you tell us what your experience has been and what you're drawing on?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** My background is in public policy and public administration. I've done a lot of research on immigration.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** But you don't work at a settlement agency, or you don't specifically work on immigration matters, do you?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** No. I work in corporate governance, which has nothing to do with immigration.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** I was just reviewing what you were saying and what you've stated in your written submission. You have very strong opinions. Is there any affiliation that you think may have coloured your judgment? Are you part of an association, a riding association perhaps that may inform your strong opinions?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I don't feel like my judgment is coloured in any way. I just feel like I'm a taxpayer. I look at the facts. I've done research papers on immigration, and that's my opinion.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Okay.

In terms of research and research papers, one of the things you seem to be very much concerned about are parents and grandparents. As you know, the class that we refer to as family reunification extends way beyond just parents and grandparents. But let's just stick to parents and grandparents.

We have research presented to us by Professor VanderPlaats of Saint Mary's University that suggests that approximately 70% of sponsored parents and grandparents actually are employed. Earlier today, thanks to Mr. LeBlanc, we heard of some more research undertaken by Professor Yoko Yoshida that 74% of parents and grandparents are employed.

Do you have a sense as to what the numbers are, as to what percentage of parents and grandparents arriving here would be employed?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** It depends on what type of employment, because it could be self-employment. Do the statistics say what percentage would be self-employed? Because that would be taking care of grandchildren. Does it break it down into the type of employment?

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Into actual employment....

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** So that would be considered employment too.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Not taking care of children on behalf of....



I suppose the better question would be, do you have any data as to what employment rates are for parents and grandparents who have been sponsored?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** As for having data with me right now as I sit here, no, but I have done that research and that is why I was able to summarize it in that sense.

My statement also did say that even when they are employed it would not be at the same level as other immigrants who may have the skills. If you think about it, if you cannot speak one of the official languages of the country, what would your income level be, because you don't have the basic knowledge to communicate?

• (1715)

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** But my question is somewhat different. For example, Dr. VanderPlaat looked at raw data, and referred to the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants. Do you have any data to back up your—

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I'm not a doctor and I don't focus on the statistics. I look at the information that comes out of the data, and that's what I base my argument on.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Okay. Another concern you had was about parents or grandparents coming here, and then you said that a lot of times sponsors default on their obligations. Do you have any data as to how widespread this would be, since it is obviously a matter of concern to you?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** The information is on Statistics Canada's website. It's on the government's website.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** How widespread would it be?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Enough that if we're on the hook for it, as taxpayers, it's too much. How do you hold—

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Okay, so what would you define as “enough”?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** “Enough” could be if someone agrees to a certain length of sponsorship, and they're not able to back that up, then they're defaulting. Whether it be 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, why does it then become the taxpayers' problem?

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Do you know what those numbers are? I'm asking a very straightforward question.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** You're asking me for specific numbers, and I believe I mentioned before that my information came from various—

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Such as?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Such as Statistics Canada. I assume you would trust that study. Based on that, no, I don't remember—

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Can you be more specific? StatsCan does a lot of studies.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Statistics Canada has a number of different studies that support my argument.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Sure. Do any specific ones come to mind?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** If you would like a specific reference for that, I will send you an email. I don't have it memorized. I believe I just had seven minutes, so I did not memorize the specific numbers.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Okay. Another question is, you were concerned about parents and grandparents relying heavily on social assistance.

Do you have any data to back that up, that it does pose a problem and that—

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Again, it does come back to research and analysis that was done on various websites and—

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Do any specific ones come to mind?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** On Statistics Canada's website.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Okay.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Since you want the specifics, I could forward those links to you.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Thank you, we'd be grateful.

Lastly, you are very much concerned about provinces. You speak on behalf of provinces, that this is a drain on provinces. I've had an opportunity to look at the position of various provinces, insofar as family sponsorship is concerned, and to the extent that I've done any research they seem to be quite supportive of family reunification. Do you know of any province that is not in favour of family reunification?

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I don't believe I say that in any part of my statement. What I did say in the statement was that health care is a huge issue for provinces. When you sponsor someone who's over a certain age—and no, I don't have statistics for that—but I just assume that it's general knowledge, the older you get the more you rely on the health care system.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Albert.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Earlier you referenced some research data that you had on parents' and grandparents' employment levels; there is the opportunity to provide that data to the committee.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Sure.

**The Chair:** We now turn to Mr. Saroya.

You have five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to both of you for giving us your perspective.

I believe in 2011, or whatever the year was, the super visa was introduced. It was the alternative for family reunification. I believe over 142,000 files are waiting in the queue for family reunification. It would be impossible for the system to bring everybody here. I understand the wait time is seven years, five years, whatever the number is.

If we have to pick a number, what quota would you like to see picked?

• (1720)

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** Is this for super visas?

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** That was my second question. Let's come back to the super visa first.

Where do you see super visas succeeding in the country when we cannot bring everybody at the same time? The super visa helps in your case?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** If there's no alternative. Like I mentioned before, if the quota of 10,000 has been met very early in the year, the super visa does help, at least to have their parents or grandparents here for some time.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** It does help.

How about, Ms. Albert, from your point of view? It doesn't cost anything to the taxpayers.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I don't have a problem with the super visas because a lot of that responsibility is on the sponsors themselves.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Going back to the quota, as I said before, we cannot bring everybody in 2016 or 2017. There is something like 102,000 files waiting in the queue. What should be the quota, in your mind?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** I think I answered this question before in terms of—10,000 at this moment is the quota that is being given to parents and grandparents, but I can't answer that in terms of how many, a specific number. All I know is that it's not enough.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Any opinion on that?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** It would be nice to double that, to be honest, and I'm sure if you double it, it'll take another two hours for that to be filled.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** Ms. Garcia, what type of social services do newcomers to Canada under the family reunification plan require and how does this compare to immigrants under the economic or humanitarian cases?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** I'd say that they are services that require, for instance, employment services. Many of them want to start working right away. As far as my personal opinion, I don't really see in my office a lot of people who want to fall back into the social service system. Many of them just want to start working right away, but in order to start working, many of them have to learn English, so many of them do at least a year of ESL. Many of them already speak English, especially my clients from the Caribbean, so they look for employment services right away.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** In the immigration plan for 2016, one-quarter of the family reunification slots were projected to go towards admitting parents and grandparents. Would you say that this proportion is appropriate or would it be beneficial to alter this quota in the future?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** If I'm understanding, you're saying to increase the quota in the future. Is that correct?

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** In the immigration plan for 2016, a quarter of the family reunification slots were projected to go towards admitting parents and grandparents. Would you say that this proportion is appropriate or would it be beneficial to change this quota in the future, for 2017-18?

**Ms. Erika Garcia:** I'm pro for increasing it, as I mentioned before, because there is a demand for people to reunite with their families, including parents and grandparents.

**The Chair:** You have ten seconds.

**Mr. Bob Saroya:** I'll leave it.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, you have five minutes, please.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.):** Thank you to the witnesses. Thank you, Ms. Garcia.

Ms. Albert, you had alluded to a number that we have more family-class immigrants versus economic immigrants. Can you tell me what the number is? You said family class now outnumber economic in our numbers for this year.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I never mentioned it for this year, because I don't know what—

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Was it for last year?

**A Voice:** It's in the last part of your statement.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** For this year? I don't believe I have it for this year.

• (1725)

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Do you think that we outnumber? "Currently the economic class of immigrants are in the minority, we need to change that policy". It's in the last line of your statement.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Okay, yes, but you were referring to this year.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** How are they in the minority? Do you know the number?

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Specifically, no, I do not know the exact statistics, but I know that there is, and over the years—

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Can I just correct you and let you know there are 160,000 economic immigrants that are expected this year, versus only 80,000 family class. It's 2:1 in favour of economic.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Okay, but your question was for this year and I believe I said I did not put a statistic on for this year.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** No, last year was even higher than that, so there are more economic—

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Okay, so what was—

**Mr. David Tilson:** Why are we having two people talk at the same time?

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Go ahead.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** Okay. Over the last 10 years, what would you say the percentage was?

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Over the last 10 years, I would say the ratio has always been 2:1 economic immigrants versus—

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** No, it hasn't.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** I can tell you that last year it was. I can tell you that this year it's projected—

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** You can tell me last year and you can tell me this year, but if you average it over 10 years.... We're not talking about people coming to live here for one or two years; we're looking at decades, right?

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** So, as you said, we'll wait for those statistics. I just asked you because you made a statement that I was—

**The Chair:** If I could interject—

**Mr. David Tilson:** Mr. Sarai is giving evidence.

**The Chair:** When members are questioning we should display appropriate courtesy and allow witnesses the opportunity to answer the questions.

Thank you.

Mr. Sarai, please continue.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Okay, I'm a little shocked at where you got those numbers. I can tell you in my situation that my grandparents came in 1982. They came as family class and they worked on a family farm, not my farm, my uncle's farm. My grandfather never took a nickel of social services for 32 years. My grandmother never took a nickel. She raised eight grandchildren, two of whom are lawyers, one is a doctor, one is an optometrist, one is a teacher, and one is procurement specialist. I think the economic benefit that she provided to the country outweighs anything any number can do.

Also, my uncles who sponsored her had guaranteed that for 10 years she would not take any social services or any government assistance, and she never did that in that time. Had she done so, they would have been billed for that.

You seemed to allude to parents or grandparents being a burden. I'm not sure if you're aware that now, under the current rules since a few years ago, for 20 years a parent or grandparent cannot collect social services in Canada and cannot collect the pension, other than for what they have contributed to. I don't know if you have looked into that or not.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** I understand that there is a 20-year sponsorship. My question is, you have to prove a certain level of income, but are you aware of any job that's guaranteed for 20 years, and what happens if the sponsor defaults? Does that person then go back, or do taxpayers then have to pick up that bill?

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Since you asked, I'll tell you what happens. If the sponsor defaults, the government will definitely give social

assistance to the person who is sponsored, the parent or grandparent, and immediately the next month the Canadian sponsor is billed, so the child who sponsored his parents will be invoiced the exact amount of dollars that the parent is given. That will be invoiced with interest and they are obliged to pay that within 30 days. If not, interest at 5% comes on, so there is virtually zero default in this country in terms of parental or grandparent sponsorship in that program.

**Ms. Gishelle Albert:** If they lose their job, they're not able to pay for that. Who pays for it? It comes back to taxpayers. It does come back to taxpayers. If you're not able to pay it, you're not able to pay it.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Again, I stand to correct you. Unless you go bankrupt, you are obliged to pay that. It's a debt, just like your taxes. That person will have to pay it, and other than the rare case of 0.01% or less where somebody goes bankrupt and cannot pay for it, there is absolutely zero burden on the taxpayer.

It is the same for any pensions. I just want to remind you and those who might be watching this that other than those countries that have reciprocal agreements on pensions with Canada, you get no old age pension other than what you contribute. My grandparents never took a nickel until they passed their time here, and they unfortunately passed away and were unable to collect any pensions. Most parents or grandparents, for the 20 years, will not collect a nickel of pension in this country because of that.

I think you should look into that prior to making the assertion that Canadians are going to have to pay for the default of any parent or grandparent.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

That concludes this round of our hearings, and I'd like to thank the panellists for appearing. We've had an eye-opening round. It has been very informative. I'd like to thank everyone for their participation.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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