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Chair: The Honourable Wayne Easter



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• (1500)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.)): We will officially call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 41, the first panel of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. We are meeting on government spending, the WE Charity and the Canada student service grant. Today's meeting is taking place by video conference and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

We are pleased to have on this first panel, Minister Bardish Chagger, Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth. Accompanying her is Gina Wilson, senior associate deputy minister, diversity and inclusion and youth, with the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Before I turn to you, Minister, I know you have an opening statement, but we do have a bit of committee business that we must complete first.

I believe all members have a copy of the subcommittee report. The subcommittee met on Thursday, July 9 to consider the business of the committee and agreed to a number of recommendations:

That, in relation to the study of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the awarding of the sole-source contract to WE Charity:

(a) the committee hold meetings on Thursday, July 16, Tuesday, July 21, Wednesday, July 22, and Tuesday, July 28;

(b) that for the meeting on Thursday, July 16, the first panel be comprised of the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth and the Deputy Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, and that the second panel be comprised of the Clerk of the Privy Council and the Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch at Employment and Social Development Canada;

(c) that preliminary priority witness lists be submitted to the clerk no later than 12:00 p.m. on Monday, July 13;

(d) that final priority witness lists be submitted to the clerk no later than 12:00 p.m. on Friday, July 17; and

(e) that over the course of the remaining three meetings, the committee hear from a maximum of 18 witnesses.

That was the motion that was moved. I have just one word of explanation: The clerk is on holiday and is not available for today's meeting. I said that would be fine and we would have him on the 21st. That has been established.

Does somebody want to move that report? Who wants to move it? Okay, Peter Fragiskatos.

Is there any discussion on it?

(Motion agreed to)

• (1505)

The Chair: With that, Madam Minister, we will turn to you. If you hold your remarks as tight as possible, certainly no more than 10 minutes, we'll have more time for questions.

Minister Chagger, the floor is yours.

Hon. Bardish Chagger (Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the members of this committee for your ongoing work during these extremely challenging and unprecedented times.

[Translation]

I also want to thank you for inviting me today to speak to Canadians about the measures we've taken as a government to support young Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[English]

Accompanying me today is my senior associate deputy minister, Gina Wilson. Moving forward, I will acknowledge her as "my deputy".

[Translation]

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the daily lives of all Canadians and disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable.

[English]

The Chair: Minister, I don't want to interrupt you, but just check to make sure that when you're speaking French, you're on the French interpretation channel, because both languages are coming through at the same level. When you're on English, you have to click the English translation channel at the bottom of Zoom; and when you're on French, you have to use the French. Otherwise, they come through equally.

[Translation]

Hon. Bardish Chagger: The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the daily lives of all Canadians and disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable. Canada's youth are no exception.

Mr. Chair, Canadians are hurting.

[English]

As a member of Parliament for Waterloo, I have three post-secondary institutions in my riding that I was elected to represent. I know first-hand that students are facing a unique set of challenges during this pandemic, be they their studies, disruptions to work opportunities, internships and co-op placements, or, like most Canadians, uncertainty about what comes next.

When the pandemic hit, our government acted by immediately placing a moratorium on Canada student loan repayments, including interest relief. Then in April, the Prime Minister announced a \$9-billion investment in students and youth, including the Canada emergency student benefit.

We also doubled Canada student grants and increased the Canada student loans program so that students facing financial challenges could access and afford post-secondary education. We increased employment opportunities and supports for youth across the country through the youth employment and skills strategy. We increased our investment in the student work placement program to help create 20,000 job placements for post-secondary students in their fields of study.

As part of this suite of supports for students and youth, the Government of Canada created the Canada student service grant. At the time the grant was developed, the pandemic had reshaped our reality, creating a number of overarching challenges.

First, the country was in lockdown. Post-secondary students and recent graduates, like all Canadians, were facing unprecedented challenges. There was economic uncertainty, and it became apparent that there would be difficulties for students to find employment over the summer months, employment that would be crucial to helping them pay for school in the fall, pay down student debt, or pay for related expenses such as housing and utilities.

Second, we heard from many not-for-profits that they were struggling to provide services in their communities. Almost half of not-for-profits were having trouble finding volunteers at the same time that they were seeing an increased demand for their services. With public health guidelines requiring physical distancing, many not-for-profits needed to find new ways to engage volunteers while continuing to support their local communities within the context of COVID-19.

[Translation]

Third, we also heard very clearly from students that they want to work, yet they also want to serve their communities.

Mr. Chair, we've seen young Canadians roll up their sleeves to assist their vulnerable neighbours, drop off groceries and help people around them connect using technology. They have stepped up to help in this time of need.

[English]

As a result of this reality, our policy objectives in creating this grant during the crisis were all-encompassing. We endeavoured to provide a way for students to both serve their communities and develop skills, while also rewarding their contribution and supporting their post-secondary education. It was important to me that the de-

sign of the program reflect the diversity of our country and be inclusive to students, regardless of their ability, region or socio-economic status. I pushed to ensure that a diverse range of students and a wide range of not-for-profits could participate in this new initiative.

Given the scope and scale of the program, it was recommended by the public service that entering into a contribution agreement with a third party was the best approach to ensure that both students and not-for-profits could receive the necessary support to deliver this program successfully, and as quickly as possible. The contribution agreement that was negotiated by the public service and signed by the Government of Canada and WE Charity allocated funding to different cohorts.

The first announcement we made was for 20,000 placements, and \$19.5 million was allocated. Of this \$19.5 million, \$5 million was for not-for-profits for the creation and support they needed, and \$300,000 was for accessibility supports, so that every student, regardless of their ability, could participate.

There were two other categories of funding envisioned in the contribution agreement. There was \$10.5 million to be provided to WE Charity to administer the program for smaller, local not-for-profits that would want to participate. This money was provided to WE in anticipation of a desire by these groups to participate in the program.

Additionally, as we've always stated, our intent was for this program to scale up. Had that occurred, there could have been another \$13.53 million provided to WE for an additional 20,000 placements. Going ahead with this would only have been authorized if the demand was there and the program was proceeding as planned. There were checks and balances put in place, and they would have had to approve it for it to move forward. We had not moved to the second cohort.

The maximum amount that WE Charity could have received was \$43.53 million out of the total budget of \$912 million. The vast majority of the monies were for grants that would have been issued as one-time payments for students to pay for their post-secondary education costs.

Mr. Chair, I would like it noted for the record that our public service entered into a contribution agreement with WE Charity, and not a contract, as the opposition continues to imply.

• (1510)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, I'd like to make something clear once and for all: our public service entered into a contribution agreement with WE Charity, not a contract, as the opposition continues to imply.

[*English*]

A contribution agreement allowed the department to leverage the network and digital capacity of a national organization to swiftly implement the CSSG program. The non-partisan and professional public service made a clear recommendation that WE Charity was the organization that was able to deliver this program in the timeline that was needed.

Mr. Chair, as you know, WE Charity is no longer delivering the CSSG. There are tens of thousands of students and hundreds of not-for-profit—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The interpreter is indicating that she didn't receive the statement in advance, which is making her job harder, as I can appreciate. Is that true? If so, I would point out that the rules of the committee dictate that the interpreters be provided with statements in advance, so they can do the best possible job.

Can we get some clarity on that, please?

[*English*]

The Chair: There isn't a rule that ministers have to do that. It's better if they can. It make things happen more easily in Ottawa.

I'd ask the minister to maybe slow down a little bit to give the translators a better opportunity to translate.

Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: A contribution agreement allowed the department to leverage the network and digital capacity of a national organization to swiftly implement the CSSG program. The non-partisan and professional public service made a clear recommendation that WE Charity was the organization that was able to deliver this program in the timeline that was needed.

Mr. Chair, as you know, WE Charity is no longer delivering the CSSG. There are tens of thousands of students and hundreds of not-for-profits that expressed—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, she's speaking too quickly.

[*English*]

The Chair: You're still going fairly fast, Minister.

Go ahead, Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: We should have her statement in writing. If not, she should slow down enough so that the interpreter can hear what she's saying and do her job properly. I'm very fond of Ms. Chagger. She has a lovely voice, but I'm listening to her state-

ment in French, so I'd like to be able to understand what she's saying. It seems to me that's important.

Can we have the French version of her statement?

• (1515)

[*English*]

The Chair: It's too late at this point in time to get it to the translators. It isn't an absolute policy of committees that ministers come with their prepared text for committee members and translators.

That's the problem. We will have to deal with it as we can at the moment.

Go ahead, Minister Chagger.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, I can offer my words at the end, if you would like, so they can be shared. I will stick to English so there are no translation issues.

The Chair: The problem, I think, Minister, is that when you're speaking English you're going a little fast and the translators are having a difficult job getting it into French. When you're speaking French, I'm hearing it okay in English, so just slow down while you're speaking English, please.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I will slow down.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: If we're going to claim this is a bilingual Parliament, we have to walk the talk, as they say. We need to make sure everyone can hear and understand what's being said just as well in French as in English, but unfortunately, that's not the case.

Whether I can understand what the minister is saying doesn't seem to matter as much. Does she think she's speaking only to anglophone Canadians? Does she not care about francophones? She should say so, if that's the case.

[*English*]

The Chair: Order, Mr. Fortin. I don't believe that's proper.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I don't believe it either, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: She is speaking in both official languages. The reason we are using Zoom through the parliamentary channel is so that bilingualism will be upheld. If Ms. Chagger is speaking a little fast for the translators, we understand that, but I do not want it to be implied that either the minister or this committee is not abiding by the rules of bilingualism. We are.

Madam Minister, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: That's not what I was implying, Mr. Chair. I was simply asking the question.

[English]

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To continue, there are tens of thousands of students and hundreds of not-for-profits that expressed interest in participating in this innovative program. It is unfortunate and regrettable that these placements are currently on hold. We acknowledge that this process was not perfect and we remain committed to providing this additional support to both students and not-for-profits. We are working around the clock to find a new way to serve these needs.

Our government's objective remains the same: to connect the skills and abilities that young people are looking to develop and strengthen, with service opportunities to help heal communities. Our goal remains to get money to those in need as quickly as possible.

Mr. Chair, I represent the voices of Canada's youth at the cabinet table. I am committed to providing students and youth with the supports and opportunities they need, because when Canada's youth succeed, our entire country thrives. That has always been my priority. The measures I have mentioned are only some of the programs that we have put in place. These are necessary supports that students and youth need during this crisis.

Mr. Chair, committee members, Canadians, thank you for your attention. We are happy to answer any questions. We hope we are afforded the opportunity to provide the answers that members are looking for.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

The first round of questions will be for six minutes each. We'll start with Mr. Poilievre, Mr. Fragiskatos, Mr. Fortin and Mr. Angus.

I will say at the beginning that we will follow as closely as we can the rules established in the House. We expect the answers to be relatively the same length as the questions. I will go back to the questions when that time limit has been reached, as has been done in the House with the COVID-19 committee.

With that said, I usually try to give a little bit of flexibility or a little more leniency on substantive issues. We'll try to do that, but we want to stick as closely to the time as we can.

Mr. Poilievre, the floor is yours.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): What is the name of the public servant who recommended that we deliver the Canada student service grant? Just the name, please.

• (1520)

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Rachel Wernick.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: She gave the recommendation. Did she give it in writing?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Do you know if she spoke to the Prime Minister's Office, or any member of the Prime Minister's Office, prior to rendering that recommendation?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: The public service made a recommendation to me that WE Charity was the only organization that could deliver this program, and I accepted the recommendation.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes, I understand that.

Did Ms. Wernick speak to any member of the Prime Minister's Office before making that recommendation?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I understand that Ms. Wernick will be appearing after me. That's a great question you can pose to her.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did cabinet sign off on the sole-sourcing of this contribution agreement with WE?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: There are processes that are followed. The public service made a recommendation to me. I accepted the recommendation and, yes, I presented it to cabinet. Cabinet—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Was your name on the memorandum to cabinet?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Prior to that, did you discuss this matter with any member of the Prime Minister's Office?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: We have conversations and consultations all the time. We had a goal of helping students during the pandemic, as well as not-for-profits—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you discuss it with the Prime Minister's Office?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, I believe that if I'm not interrupting, I should be given the courtesy of being able to answer in the same time that was provided.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Poilievre, and then we'll go back to the minister.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you discuss this matter with any member of the Prime Minister's Office prior to bringing it to cabinet?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I was given a recommendation by the public service. I accepted the recommendation. I asked many questions. Many questions have been posed. I accepted the recommendation and I brought it forward to cabinet.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay. Did you discuss it with Katie Telford before bringing it to cabinet?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I personally did not discuss it with Katie Telford.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Or anyone else in the Prime Minister's Office...?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I personally did not have those conversations. I was working with the public service. The professional, non-partisan public service made a recommendation. I accepted it.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Anyone...?

You did not discuss this with anyone in the Prime Minister's Office prior to introducing it to cabinet.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I did not have conversations with the Prime Minister's Office in regard to the proposal that was being recommended by the public service.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did you discuss it with anyone in the finance minister's office?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I personally did not have those conversations with the finance minister's office.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did anyone in your office talk to—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, give the minister a little opportunity....

Go ahead, Madam Minister.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I answered the question, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you.

Did anyone in your office speak to anyone in the Prime Minister's Office about this proposal before it was introduced in cabinet?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I know it is a substantial amount that was budgeted, so I would hope that all offices had conversations to ensure that the program was delivered in a meaningful and successful way.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So that's a yes. Your office did discuss this with the Prime Minister's Office prior to introducing it in cabinet.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, the member can choose to put words in my mouth. What I am stating is that we had a proposal and we wanted to move forward on a plan for students and not-for-profits, and to be able to deliver during this very challenging time. A recommendation was made by the public service. I acknowledge that many conversations take place, and I would hope that those conversations do take place.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right, so I take that as a yes that your office did speak to the Prime Minister's Office prior to your presenting it to cabinet.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, I hate to interrupt, but I think the minister said that isn't exactly what she said and that you could not take it as a yes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, I'll just ask her yes or no. Did your office discuss this matter with the PMO before you introduced it in cabinet?

If you can't answer, I can move on to another question.

The Chair: Go to another question, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay, she does not want to answer that question.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: That's not—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: We'll follow that trail, then.

All right. The next issue is that the government website says this was a \$900-million project. What was the total number of job placements that \$900 million was guaranteed to create?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, as I said in my opening statement, the \$19.5 million that was allocated or given to WE was for the initial 20,000 placements. There was an additional \$10.5 million for the supplemental cohort. If the program had proceeded,

there would have been an additional \$13.53 million. The total amount that WE Charity could have received through the contribution agreement that was negotiated by the public service and WE Charity was \$43.53 million.

The majority of the \$912 million that was allocated for the program was for grants so that students would have the supports they needed for post-secondary education costs.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Originally the government claimed that WE could only get \$19 million. Now you're saying \$43 million. Which is it?

• (1525)

Hon. Bardish Chagger: As I stated publicly, Mr. Chair, WE would be allocated or given \$19.5 million for the initial 20,000 placements. Of that \$19.5 million, \$5 million was for not-for-profits so that they would have the supports and ability to create placements, and \$300,000 was for accessibility supports so that all students would be able to—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That wasn't the question.

You say the maximum amount that WE could get was \$43 million. Originally, your government claimed WE was only going to get \$19 million, so you have two different numbers you're working with.

Then there's the third number, which is the \$900 million. That was the total scope of the program for which WE was the sole-sourced administrator. You said now that the \$900 million was to create 20,000 positions, but 20,000 positions times \$5,000 per position—we can do the math right here, Mr. Chair—comes to \$100 million.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, you are substantially over time. I'll let you finish your point, and then I'll let the minister give the explanation here in full.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Again, 20,000 positions at \$5,000 maximum per position brings us to \$100 million. Where does the other \$800 million go?

The Chair: Madam Minister, you can give a fairly substantive answer here.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, I actually reject the explanation of the member. Obviously, the member is not listening to what I am saying. When I came out publicly, I stated that \$19.5 million was going to WE Charity for the initial cohort of 20,000 placements. Of that \$19.5 million, \$5 million would be for not-for-profits so that they would have the supports necessary to be able to create these volunteer placements given the COVID-19 context, and \$300,000 was for accessibility supports so that all Canadians, regardless of ability, could participate.

I'm sharing today that an additional \$10.5 million was provided to WE Charity to administer a supplemental cohort so that smaller and local not-for-profits could participate, because there was a demand after the announcement was made. We received an influx of desire and demand for the program, so we wanted to make sure that they, too, had opportunities.

I am sharing that the contribution agreement also included, for the second cohort, \$13.53 million provided to WE for an additional 20,000 placements, should we have gotten there. We never got to that spot. It would have been after administration and checks and balances were in place, like we stated in the contribution agreement.

My initial comments to the public were in regard to the initial cohort of \$19.5 million, and the member is welcome to check what I shared.

The Chair: We will end it there. We're substantially over. My apologies for that.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for the work you're doing and for being here.

Mr. Poilievre used the phrase "sole-source contract". This was actually a contribution agreement—a technical distinction, but an important one. I wonder if you could just explain that for the committee.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: If suitable, I would also ask my deputy to elaborate.

There is a difference. A contribution agreement is what the public service entered in with WE Charity. It was not a contract. As I stated in my opening comments, the contribution agreement is what we negotiated with WE Charity. It was not a contract, as the Conservative opposition continues to apply.

If suitable, I would like to have my deputy share a couple of comments.

Ms. Gina Wilson (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, Department of Canadian Heritage): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Indeed, "sole-source contract" is incorrect terminology. I'll give a little bit of a flavour of the difference between a contribution agreement and a contract.

Contribution agreements are regularly used by the government to further policy objectives and to engage a wide diversity of skills and resources outside the government. Contribution agreements are not subject to procurement thresholds, like service contracts, and follow terms and conditions. They are subject to performance conditions specified in the funding agreement, audits, monitoring and reporting requirements to ensure that all results are received. Officials negotiated an agreement for the design of this program under Canada service corps, an existing contribution program. A contract is a completely different tool.

• (1530)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Minister, could you go more into why WE was specifically selected as the organization that would carry out the administration of this program? I know that we'll be hearing about this later today from Ms. Wernick. She will speak to that as well, I'm sure, but provide for us, if you could, an explanation of what it was specifically about WE, as opposed to other organizations, that stood out in terms of their ability to carry out the program.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, in the midst of this pandemic, which has been a very unprecedented and challenging time, there are numerous programs being provided to Canadians to ensure that they have the support needed. Our focus has always been on Canadians and making sure mechanisms are in place. The non-partisan and professional public service is actually delivering many programs. At that time, they were also delivering the Canada emergency response benefit in addition to numerous other programs and at a greater scale than had ever been seen.

I would like to assure the member that I asked the same question about why the public service could not offer this program. Third parties had been used pre-COVID, but also during the COVID context it was recommended that WE Charity be used because they had the capacity as well as the network to be able to deliver this program. It was a recommendation that was made. I asked a lot of tough questions to see if there were others. The public service, and I am confident that they did their due diligence, was confident that this was the only organization that could provide this program in the timeline needed. I accepted their recommendation.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Again, was there any directive that came from the Prime Minister's Office, from the Prime Minister himself, about the need to choose WE as the charity that would administer this particular program?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I was not directed by the Prime Minister's Office. I did know that my focus was on students and youth. We wanted to connect young people who have been rolling up their sleeves with service opportunities and not-for-profits that have an increased demand for their services. It's something we turned over to the public service: "How can we deliver this program?" They have worked with numerous organizations, as I have been also communicating with, and they made the recommendation that WE Charity was the organization able to deliver this program within the timeline needed, with the scope and scale and magnitude that we were desiring. It's a very innovative program and had received quite a positive response.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Finally, I'd like to know what will happen now. Now that WE is no longer charged with the task of carrying out the administration of the program, what is being planned? What will become of the Canada student service grant? What is the message to organizations that wanted to participate, and indeed to young student volunteers or would-be volunteers, who wanted to make a contribution as we try to face the post-COVID-19 recovery?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, I would like Canadians to know that our government and I remain committed to students to have these additional supports and opportunities, and for not-for-profits we know that there is an increased demand for their services. We are committed to finding innovative ways to deliver this program. I can assure you that my team and the public service are working around the clock to have opportunities and options available so that this program does go ahead. We recognize that there is a need. We've heard it with the messages and communications we are receiving from not-for-profits and students, so we remain committed to seeing this program delivered to help students in this very challenging time, as well as not-for-profits.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

Mr. Fortin will be followed by Mr. Angus.

Mr. Fortin, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Good afternoon, Ms. Chagger.

Minister, you said that you didn't speak to anyone at the Prime Minister's office before recommending WE Charity to cabinet and that you received the recommendation from Ms. Wilson. Is that correct?

My apologies. It was Rachel Wernick, rather.

Do you know who Ms. Wernick spoke to before she came to the conclusion that WE Charity should be the organization recommended to you?

• (1535)

Hon. Bardish Chagger: The public service, which is non-partisan, clearly indicated that this was the only organization with the capacity to deliver the program—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I asked you who she spoke to prior.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —within the required time frame.

I'm going to take as long to answer the question as you did to ask it.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: There's no need to play the violin. Please answer the question.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Fortin, the minister has the floor.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Bardish Chagger: As I said, Rachel Wernick gave me the public service's recommendation, which I accepted. I know, as I'm sure everyone does, that Rachel Wernick will be appearing after me. The committee members will have the opportunity to ask her these questions directly.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Minister, did you have discussions with Ms. Wernick and other public servants about the recommendation before bringing it to cabinet?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: The members of my team were the ones who had ongoing discussions with the public servants.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: And what about you?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: The objective was to help students and not-for-profit organizations. We asked public servants for recommendations, suggestions. They recommended this organization because it could deliver the program.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Very well. I gather, then, that you did not take part in any discussions.

Canada service corps oversaw all of this in 2018, so how is it that the organization is out of the picture in 2020? Why was it excluded from the process?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Once again, that was the recommendation I was given by the public service, and I accepted it. This was the only organization with the capacity to deliver the program within the required time frame. I know, as everyone else does, that Ms. Wernick will be appearing after me, so any other questions about the public service should go to her.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Understood.

Did you, personally, ask why Canada service corps was apparently no longer fit to administer the program?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I asked that question and many others to make sure the program would be successful. The recommendation I was given, after numerous questions and discussions, was that this was the organization with the capacity to deliver the program. I accepted the recommendation I was given.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Who did you ask about why Canada service corps was no longer involved?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I had those discussions with a number of public servants.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Who exactly?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Ms. Wernick was one. My deputy, who is here, is another. She knows I asked those questions and can speak to that, if you'd like.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did you put the question to anyone in the Prime Minister's office?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I put those questions to the public service. It was actually the public service's responsibility to provide me with a recommendation regarding who should deliver the program.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: In January 2018, the Prime Minister proudly described Canada service corps as an unparalleled organization capable of administering the program, with the support of 10 other organizations.

What happened between January 2018 and April 2020 to cause Canada service corps and the other organizations to be ousted from the process?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I'll ask my deputy to answer that.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I'd like to know whether you, yourself, know.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I was advised that the program was receiving too many applications for the organizations to handle. Other options were explored and recommendations were made. The members of the public service know better than I do why they recommended what they did.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Do you think Canada service corps was no longer fit to administer the program?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I think Canada service corps does great work, but this is a new program with a lot of people applying. The program met with unprecedented demand because of the pandemic, and I think it was necessary to determine who could meet the demand.

• (1540)

[*English*]

The Chair: This is your last question, Monsieur Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: What makes WE Charity more qualified than Canada service corps to administer the program?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I was told by public servants that WE Charity had the capacity and network necessary to administer the program. The idea was to ensure that as many young Canadians and not-for-profit organizations as possible could benefit from the program. It was supposed to reach as many people as possible. It's a program that—

[*English*]

The Chair: We will have to end it there, but I will give Ms. Wilson a chance, if she wanted to add further to what the minister said on that previous point.

Ms. Wilson.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Mr. Chair, thank you.

The program Mr. Fortin is referring to is the Canada service corps. It's a program that continues and, in fact, was enhanced to some degree as well, so everyone involved with the Canada service corps is working very hard.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll turn to Charlie Angus, who will be followed by Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. It's great to be on committee with you again.

It's good to see you, Minister.

Mr. Chair, is it possible to make sure we maintain the short question, short answer, because I only have six minutes?

The Chair: I will endeavour to do that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you so much.

Today, the Ethics Commissioner announced an investigation into Minister Bill Morneau. That's two ethics investigations, unprecedented: the finance minister and the sitting Prime Minister. This happened on your watch, Minister, because you brought this \$900-million program to cabinet.

When you brought it forward for discussion, were you aware of the family links between the Trudeau family and WE, and the Morneau family and WE?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, my focus was really on making sure there was additional support for young Canadians, for students, and that's why—

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's not the question. The question was, were you aware?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —it was part of the suite of programs that we put forward.

When I brought the proposal forward.... First of all, it should be known that the Prime Minister, prior to me, was the Minister of Youth. It is a portfolio that he kept on—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Sorry, that's not the question.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —and before being the youth minister, he was also the critic for youth, because Canadians are well aware that when it comes to—

The Chair: We will have to go back to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Angus.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I don't think I have the same amount of time.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You failed, Minister. You failed them. You were not aware of their family links and you brought this. This is astounding. We now have a serious scandal, and it happened on your watch.

The Prime Minister said that it was raised, when he spoke about recusing. Were you the one? You had the responsibility. Did you say, "Hey, Mr. Prime Minister, your family has links here"? Were you the one to call the Prime Minister to get recused?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: The Prime Minister has acknowledged that he should have recused himself. He has apologized, because what has been left is that students do not have service opportunities right now, and not-for-profits are not able to have the assets they're looking for. We continue to stay focused on delivering this program.

When it comes to the investigations by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, we have stated that we will comply with any information he requires.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I'm glad you're going to comply.

Now, you said you asked a lot of tough questions, and I find that surprising based on your last answer. The Prime Minister's wife is an ambassador for WE. After Justin Trudeau became Prime Minister, his mother was hired by WE, as was his brother. There was a clear financial link, but their relationship was evident.

In the due diligence, did anyone in your department raise a red flag that this was going to be a problem? Was this raised as an issue?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I believe, Mr. Chair, the department can speak for themselves. Obviously, there are tough conversations—

Mr. Charlie Angus: No, I'm asking you. You're responsible for this. Don't throw your staff under the bus.

The Chair: Mr. Angus, the minister has the floor to answer the question.

Go ahead, Minister, with your answer.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Of course we have tough conversations around the cabinet table. We have tough conversations around our teams. Yes, these questions were posed. Our focus was on delivering a program for students to be able to volunteer and provide service opportunities in communities and link them with not-for-profits that were looking for much-needed support.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay—

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Therefore, that was my focus. Yes, I asked tough questions of the public service. When we made this decision—

Mr. Charlie Angus: So okay, enough with that—

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —and the public service recommended that it was the only organization that would be able to deliver this program—

Mr. Charlie Angus: No, the question was—

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —we continued to have tough conversations.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Come on, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Finally, I accepted the recommendation.

• (1545)

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I think I heard you say that it was raised that it was a problem his family was so closely tied. Someone raised it, yet you failed to bring this to cabinet and this thing blew up in your government's face.

My question is this: You mentioned originally \$19.5 million, and now it's about \$43 million. This is a very complex process. For each placement, what was the figure that we would get? Like an overhead....

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Contribution agreements as they are written are, as you know, disclosed publicly and quarterly, so it will become available. The contribution agreement for the initial cohort was \$19.5 million, which was for—

Mr. Charlie Angus: I know that, but how much were they paid per student?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, if I can listen to the question—

Mr. Charlie Angus: It's a simple question.

The Chair: Mr. Angus—

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —I think he should be able to listen to the answer.

The Chair: Could we have a little order from both sides, at the moment?

Mr. Charlie Angus: I'm going to move on. I want to move on.

The Chair: I'll give the minister 15 more seconds to answer that question.

Go ahead, Madam Minister.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I publicly stated, \$19.5 million was for WE Charity for the initial 20,000 placements—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay—

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —and \$10.5 million was for the supplement cohort, knowing that local not-for-profits wanted to participate.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I didn't hear the answer, Chair, so can I move on to my final question?

The Chair: Charlie, order, please.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Because the committee is asking for information, I've added information to make sure that the information is available for—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Come on.

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had asked the first question—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, the interpreters can't do their job when people speak over one another.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is this a point of order, Mr. Fortin?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Yes, it's a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I would ask that everyone show a bit more discipline, because the interpreters can't do their job when both people are speaking at the same time. With all due respect to the minister and my fellow member Mr. Angus, I would ask that everyone be mindful of that. An interpreter's job is hard enough as it is. I watch people speaking for half a minute before I get to hear what they're saying. I'd like the person interpreting for me to be able to do a good job.

I would also ask that people speak a bit more slowly.

[*English*]

The Chair: Your point has been made.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Caroline Bosc): Mr. Chair, if Mr. Angus could hold the mike closer to his mouth, that would make the interpreter's job a little bit easier when he is speaking. That's just a heads-up.

The Chair: Okay.

We will not take that time from you, Mr. Angus.

You have time for a couple of quick questions. Go ahead.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you so much for that.

I did ask what the per-student placement fee was. The minister refused to answer, so I think that's an outstanding question.

I want to ask whether or not they got a legal opinion on this. If a post-secondary or master's student goes to work doing data entry, which is one of their positions, and works 70 hours they get zero. If they work 170 hours they get 60% less than minimum wage.

Did the minister get a legal opinion on whether having people do paid work and paying them less than minimum wage...? Did anyone in her department raise a red flag about that? If they weren't raising red flags about the Trudeau family's connections, were they raising red flags that this might not even be legal and would put charities in a potential liability situation?

The Chair: Madam Minister, there are two questions there. Go ahead.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, on the preamble, I guess, that the member has provided, it varies. The number of hours that a student would volunteer would determine how much each placement would cost. Obviously, grants were between \$1,000 and \$5,000, as we have shared publicly.

Second, when it comes to the legal opinion, I am confident that the public service, who work really hard and who really have been working with the government—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Don't throw them under the bus.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: —to deliver these numerous programs—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Don't throw them under the bus.

The Chair: Mr. Angus, order. The minister needs time and a little peace and quiet in order for us to hear the answer.

Minister.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I'm confident that the public service would have done their due diligence and would have requested legal opinions. I think what's important to note is the difference between employment opportunities and volunteer opportunities. This was about service opportunities within communities. As someone who has been volunteering in her community since she was 13 years old, I know that volunteering and providing service opportunities are an opportunity to develop and strengthen skills. Some of these opportunities would actually allow young people—

• (1550)

Mr. Charlie Angus: You didn't give an opinion. As minister, you didn't give an opinion.

The Chair: We will have to end it there with you both.

We'll turn to a five-minute round, and we only have room for two five-minute rounds. We'll go to Mr. Barrett first, and then Ms. Koutrakis.

Mr. Barrett, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Minister, is there a competitive process used in awarding contribution agreements?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I'll refer to my deputy.

Ms. Gina Wilson: There are different mechanisms to actually award a contribution agreement. The first one would be a call for proposals. However, we determined at the time that a call for proposals, an open call, would take about two to three months, at a minimum, to actually get something in place. We could have done a limited call for proposals, which would have probably taken—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, I'll reclaim my time there.

The Chair: I think that's a very substantive answer, Mr. Barrett. I won't take time away from you, but I think we need to hear the answer.

Go ahead, Ms. Wilson.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I was just wrapping up with that.

An actual call for proposals would take several months to move forward with, and we needed to get this program off the ground very quickly, because at the time of the pandemic, in the severity of the pandemic, students were graduating.

Thank you.

The Chair: It's back to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: There was no competitive process used in this place, though there was one that was available.

I want to confirm, Minister Chagger, are you the minister responsible for this program?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Yes, I am the minister responsible for the program. That's why the recommendation that the public service made to me after a lot of rigour and discussion and questions and answers—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Is Ms. Wernick with your ministry, Minister?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Ms. Wernick is with ESDC.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Why didn't the ESDC minister introduce this proposal to cabinet, then?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: As the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, my responsibilities are actually part of multiple departments, and this is part of the responsibilities that I have been given.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Which department was responsible for developing this program, then?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: It's ESDC. I'm just going to get you the name of the branch. It's the skills and employment branch of ESDC.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Who was working on the background and resources to implement this program?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I understand that Ms. Wernick will be appearing after me, and she would be able to provide a more substantial answer.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay.

Was it written on the memorandum that only WE Charity could deliver this program?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: It was the recommendation that was provided to me in writing, after a lot of rigour and discussion. I accepted the recommendation. Yes, it was provided to me in writing.

Mr. Michael Barrett: The question was this: Was it only WE Charity that was recommended?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: When the public service made the recommendation to me, yes, it was the organization that was recommended.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Were you given any options as to how this program could be administered or which organizations could administer it?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I asked numerous questions for options, and after the public service did their due diligence, it was a recommendation that WE Charity was the organization, the only organization, that could deliver the program in the timeline needed to the scale that we desired.

Mr. Michael Barrett: How was the decision to award WE Charity to implement this program taken, if no other organizations were presented as options?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Mr. Chair, I think it's also important to acknowledge that we are in an unprecedented and challenging time with the pandemic. We know that all countries are facing challenges. It's something we've never had to address, including the public service. The public service, I'm confident, did their due diligence and made a recommendation. I accepted their recommendation—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you discuss awarding this program to—

The Chair: Mr. Barrett—

Mr. Michael Barrett: Equal time, Chair...?

The Chair: You're getting equal time. I'm watching the time very closely, but it makes it a lot more difficult when members interrupt. It takes time away. I'll give you the time back while I was speaking.

Go ahead with your question.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you discuss awarding this program to WE with Prime Minister Trudeau or Minister Bill Morneau?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I personally did not have those conversations. I had those conversations with departmental officials. As for what options were available and why this recommendation was coming forward, we were—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you discuss the program with anyone at WE before discussing it at cabinet?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I did not discuss this program, the CSSG program, with anyone at WE.

• (1555)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did anyone in your office discuss the program with WE before you discussed it at cabinet?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Once again, Mr. Chair, we wanted students to have service opportunities. We knew that not-for-profits had increased demands for their services.

It's something that we turned over to the public service. The public service was able to take the vision and then make a recommendation. I'm confident they did their due diligence. They made a recommendation. I accepted the recommendation.

The Chair: This is your last question, Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: What are the names of the individuals who negotiated the termination of this agreement?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I was just referring to my deputy as to our being able to provide the member with a substantial answer.

Those are questions that Ms. Wernick and Ms. Wilson will be able to answer in the next panel.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Sorry, Mr. Barrett. We're out of time.

We're turning, then, to Annie Koutrakis. This will be the last questioner before the minister has to leave.

Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to begin by commending the Ministry of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, as well as the public servants at ESDC and the Department of Canadian Heritage, for their work in designing the CSSG. This is truly an innovative program, and I can only imagine the considerable creativity and outside-of-the-box thinking by everyone who was involved in this.

At a time when charities are struggling like never before, a program like this is essential. The \$900 million in student grants would have translated into roughly 90 million hours of volunteer work and would undeniably have helped charities close the front-line service gap that currently exists.

Additionally, the maximum of \$43 million in administrative costs to compensate the WE Charity, if all \$900 million had been distributed, would have represented less than 5% of the total program costs, which, in my opinion, would have been well within the norm of project management and administrative fees for such programs, especially given the tight timelines.

Minister Chagger, can you highlight the intentions and objectives of the CSSG? With over 35,000 applicants, how effective was the program in encouraging volunteerism at a time when so many charities and communities are struggling with donations, which are down by about 50%?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I thank the member for the acknowledgement of the very challenging and unprecedented time we all find ourselves in. The public service, just like the government and all members of Parliament, has been working around the clock, as have Canadians.

This was really another program within the suite of programs that we put forward for students and youth. We know that COVID-19 has impacted all Canadians and has disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable, and youth are no exception. We know that young people have been rolling up their sleeves and giving back to communities to help heal communities during this challenging time. This was really about ensuring that young people, students, were being rewarded for meeting service opportunities, not only within their communities but also within others by a virtual platform, thus helping heal their own communities and others virtually.

When we launched the program, there was immediately massive demand for it. We saw 35,000 applications submitted by students who wanted to participate. The conversations continue. Students want to see this program delivered. Not-for-profits want the support. That's why I am committed to seeing this program delivered.

Our focus remains on Canadians. Our focus remains on vulnerable Canadians. That's exactly why, when the contribution agreement was negotiated, we ensured that we were collecting disaggregated data so that the most vulnerable in our society would have an opportunity to give back and heal communities.

This is a very innovative program. Volunteers, as we know, from coast to coast to coast, are instrumental in the work that not-for-profits do. They should not go unrecognized. This was one way of not only thanking them for their service, but rewarding students. We know that the financial burden on them, come their post-secondary education costs in the fall, would be high. We just were providing a grant to help them out during this very challenging time.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: How common is it, Minister Chagger, for third party organizations to work alongside the federal government when delivering programs such as this? What are the benefits that are created by these partnerships?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: It is not uncommon for the Government of Canada to work with third parties to deliver specialized programs, and working with third party delivery agents to deliver emergency funding throughout the pandemic has proven to be an effective approach.

We partnered with the United Way in May to deliver the emergency community support fund to support vulnerable populations. We partnered with Food Banks Canada to fight food insecurity. Officials recommended that we work with a third party to administer the CSSG and that the third party be WE Charity, given their extensive reach with students and their capacity as an organization to deliver this program within the timeline needed.

We've been acting and working very quickly to ensure that we're responding to the needs and challenges that Canadians are facing.

• (1600)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I just have some final thoughts. I want to commend the public service and the work that you're doing, Minis-

ter Chagger. I know all Canadians are looking to find ways to help one another. I could not be more proud of the work that our government has tried to do in such a short timeline to make sure that everybody who needs the help is there.

We were not looking for perfection. We were looking to be effective and to get the help out there that we need. Perhaps things could have been done differently along the way, but I think what was intended with this program is there for everybody to see. I hope that we go forward with it and it helps the young people, as it should.

The Chair: Minister, do you have any final thoughts, you or your deputy? Do you want to answer that comment?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: I will share my time with my deputy and provide her an opportunity as well.

I echo the comments that were just shared. This has been, really, about all Canadians working together and stepping up, all members of Parliament, all parties and all levels of government, because all of us are in this together to ensure that we fight this pandemic. The health and safety of Canadians has always been our priority. It remains my priority, and I'm confident that this is the goal of everyone, because we want to succeed.

I believe that, when it comes to this program, it was in response to a direct need that we were hearing from Canadians from coast to coast to coast, including not-for-profits, which do very important work. I think it's important that we recognize the work of volunteers, especially young people who have been stepping up, and this is one way to provide a grant and a reward to appreciate them during this very challenging time. A lot has been taken away from individuals because of this pandemic, and youth are no exception.

The Chair: Deputy, we'll give you about half a minute.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Certainly. I won't take long.

I just wanted to acknowledge my fellow public servants, particularly those at ESDC, because in the midst of the severity of this pandemic, officials have been essentially working around the clock to deliver new emergency supports and payments to Canadians, such as the CERB and many, many other initiatives.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister and Ms. Wilson, for your appearance today and for answering questions under somewhat tough circumstances on these timelines. As well, I commend the public servants on the efforts they've been making on the COVID-19 pandemic.

With that, we will suspend for two minutes, and then we'll turn to the next panel, with witnesses from the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Department of Employment and Social Development.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1600) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1610)

The Chair: We will reconvene the meeting. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 41, the second panel today of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. As everyone knows, we are meeting on government spending, WE Charity and the Canada student service grant. Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. Proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

For this panel, we have Ms. Wilson, senior associate deputy minister, diversity and inclusion and youth, from the Department of Canadian Heritage. Ms. Wilson was with us in the first panel. From the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Rachel Wernick, senior assistant deputy minister, skills and employment branch; and Stephanie Hébert, assistant deputy minister, program operations branch.

Ms. Wilson has an opening statement. Then we will go to questions. Just as a heads-up, we'll start with Mr. Poilievre and then go to Ms. Dzerowicz, Mr. Fortin and Mr. Julian.

Go ahead, Ms. Wilson. The floor is yours.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to share my opening statement time with Rachel Wernick. She can follow me right after.

Kwe. Good day. I'm very pleased to be here and to be able to join you from Algonquin territory today.

I'd like to thank the members of this committee for their continued work during these challenging times.

My remarks will be twofold. First of all, I want to provide some context on how the public service responded to the challenges posed by COVID-19, as it delivered emergency measures and supports for the government. I will then speak about the measures the government has taken to support young Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chair: Ms. Wilson, I believe I'm going to have to say the same thing to you that I said to your minister. Just slow down a little bit to give the translators an opportunity.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Got it. They also have my remarks.

Mr. Chair, back in March and April, when the severity of the pandemic became obvious, the Government of Canada focused its efforts on providing Canadians with help as quickly as possible. I know that, at Employment and Social Development, the priority was to establish, implement and quickly distribute the Canada emergency response benefit, or the CERB, working with Canada Revenue Agency as well as putting in place other much-needed supports, such as the Canada emergency student benefit. My public service colleagues worked around the clock to support the government's response and to help Canadians when they needed it the most.

At the same time, ESDC was adjusting to new ways of working, with most employees working from home as provinces and territo-

ries implemented lockdown measures. Some employees were also facing concerns about their own health and safety and the spread of COVID-19. Despite these challenges, the department was able to deliver quickly and efficiently. However, we cannot ignore the fact that these are unprecedented times for Canadians. They are also unprecedented times for public servants.

Young people are also facing challenges during this pandemic. In response to the government's desire to develop a comprehensive package to help students, there was a general call-out to relevant departments to provide options to enhance existing youth and/or student-related programs, including ESDC. A series of student measures were being pulled together to make up a student package. The government wanted it to include a volunteer service component.

On April 22 the Prime Minister announced a range of measures to assist students during this crisis, including enhancements to the Canada service corps program delivered by ESDC and the new Canada student service grant. Officials were seized with quickly determining how best to design and implement a new program that met the government's objectives and the broad parameters established by the announcement.

Three things were clear to the public service. One, in the COVID-19 context it was important to move forward as quickly as possible. This initiative aimed to support students in contributing safely to their communities over the summer and then recognizing that service in the fall through a financial reward would help them pay for their studies.

Two, it was imperative to find a fast and effective mechanism to engage not-for-profit organizations in all parts of the country, many of whom were struggling at that time to provide service to their communities. They were, and many still are, responding to a great increase in needs and could benefit from volunteers to help out.

Three, the program had to be easily accessible to all students and effectively bring in students from under-represented groups. It had to involve a diversity of students and a diversity of not-for-profit organizations, large and small, from every part of the country.

It was determined that a third party, funded through a contribution agreement, would be the most effective and efficient delivery approach. Contribution agreements are not sole-source service contracts, nor are they procurements. Contributions agreements are regularly used under the transfer payment policy of the government—

• (1615)

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The interpreter is having trouble keeping up with the witness. Could she slow down a bit?

[English]

The Chair: I'm not getting the translation for you either, Mr. Fortin. The translator—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I said the interpreter is having trouble keeping up with the witness. Could the witness slow down a bit, unless it's not important, but if it is important, she needs to speak a bit more slowly.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Slow down a little, Ms. Wilson, and I'm told that your mike may be a little too close to your lips. If you could pull it out a little. These are the joys of the new system.

Ms. Wilson, go ahead.

Thank you, Mr. Fortin.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Indeed, and I will definitely speak more slowly. I'm just about to wrap up anyway.

Under a contribution agreement, the government sets the high-level funding parameters, including the objectives, desired outcomes, eligible expenditures and performance measurement. However, the government does not direct or dictate how the recipient will carry out the project under a contribution agreement. Recipients have the flexibility to design projects that further government policy objectives according to their experience and expertise. The use of contribution agreements enables the government to engage a wide diversity of skills and resources.

Mr. Chair, the public service has been working relentlessly to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus and to protect families' health and financial security.

Thank you. *Meegwetch.*

I will ask Rachel to share my time.

The Chair: Ms. Wernick, the floor is yours.

Ms. Rachel Wernick (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Good afternoon.

• (1620)

The Chair: And take your time.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: In order to assist the committee, I will limit my opening remarks to providing the context and rationale behind the department's recommendation to Minister Chagger to enter into a contribution agreement with WE Charity. I would like to underscore that the time frame that I can assist you with is prior to any discussion among ministers of Minister Chagger's recommendation to them. I will steer clear of cabinet confidences.

It is important to note that the Canada student service grant was embedded in an ongoing discussion of a broad package of potential measures to help students and youth deal with the impacts of the pandemic. It was never going to be the only measure.

On April 8, changes to the Canada summer jobs program were announced. Interactions, and the potential for overlap with the design and delivery of existing programs and new emergency measures, had to be worked out. The package came together as policy in the Prime Minister's announcement of April 22.

I was asked in mid-April by my associate deputy minister at ES-DC and a Department of Finance official to provide information, analysis and assessment of potential options for including service opportunities in the student package. The finance official indicated that the Prime Minister would announce the student package in the coming days and cited Saturday, April 18 as the likely date. For these discussions with Department of Finance officials, I drew on work that my team had undertaken in March to assess the potential to enhance programming offered under the Canada service corps.

On April 22, the Prime Minister announced at his daily news conference a comprehensive package of support of nearly \$9 billion for post-secondary students and recent graduates. I learned the final contents of the package from the announcement.

[Translation]

This package included two items related to youth service.

One was additional investments in the Canada service corps program to increase the number of micro-grants available to youth from 1,800 to 15,000 and to provide stipends to participants.

The second item was the new Canada student service grant, or CSSG. The new CSSG program would provide up to \$5,000 to students in reward for service for their education in the fall.

[English]

After the announcement, I asked my Department of Finance colleagues if they could help us flesh out the details. They told me that the initiative needed to be launched by mid-May and that the program parameters focused on two key elements: a web-based digital platform that would allow students to apply for the CSSG program and be matched with volunteering opportunities in their community and track their hours completed, and a grant of up to \$5,000 for volunteer hours completed.

There were several objectives of the initiative. The first was to facilitate the involvement of students in contributing to the COVID-19 response in their communities through volunteering over the summer. The second was to provide a financial award to recognize this contribution to help students cover the costs of their studies in the fall, as well as to incentivize students to volunteer. The third was to provide students with skills and experience that would help them in pursuing their careers.

Members of my team and I met with members of Minister Chagger's staff and with officials at central agencies to further understand the desired outcomes of the initiative. It became quickly evident that there was high ambition not only for the speed of implementation, in roughly three weeks, but also for the scope and scale of the initiative. The minister's staff indicated that volunteering opportunities needed to be available in every province and territory, and in large and small urban and rural communities.

The minister's staff also communicated to the team that it was imperative to ensure that youth from a wide diversity of backgrounds would be encouraged and be able to participate, including racialized, indigenous, LGBTQ2 youth, and youth with disabilities. There was a long list of design and implementation considerations that the team needed to analyze in pulling together advice on how to implement this ambitious vision within three weeks.

First and foremost was the pandemic context, with health and safety top of mind. There were significant concerns about community spread, as youth had been identified as a high-risk demographic for spreading the virus. Public health advisories were being updated daily on requirements for physical distancing. Keeping students and communities safe was the top priority for the team.

The pandemic was also impacting the capacity of the department to provide any form of direct delivery. In late April, the department, including its delivery arm, Service Canada, was completely consumed with other emergency measures. Officials were working around the clock to get emergency payments out to Canadians.

The next significant consideration was the capacity of the not-for-profit sector organizations that were under stress and stretched to deliver on their mandates. Although volunteers can help, they need orientation and oversight, and digital supports to be able to contribute in a safe, physical distancing context, all of which require time, effort and resources for the organization hosting the volunteers.

Interaction between recently announced emergency supports and payments was another key consideration. Given that students could be receiving the Canada emergency response benefit or the Canada emergency student benefit, and that some not-for-profit organizations could be eligible for the Canada emergency wage subsidy, the team needed to determine eligibility that would be fair and equitable without creating disincentives for students to undertake paid employment.

[Translation]

In my role, I had also been working on the proposal to increase the number of jobs available to youth and introduce new flexibilities for employers under the Canada summer jobs program.

[English]

This analysis was also happening in a context where public and media attention was raising concerns about CERB payments and issues of risk mitigation to ensure that no one would get the payment who should not. The team had to ensure that the design maximized the ability for strong oversight and due diligence.

Our experience with the Canada service corps program had taught us many things about the key ingredients for a successful

youth service initiative. First, to engage in service the majority of youth—in particular, youth who are under-represented and who are from groups facing barriers—require additional supports ranging from orientation to mentoring to wraparound supports.

• (1625)

Secondly, the biggest influencers of youth are other youth. The success of the initiative required a strong start, whereby a large number of meaningful opportunities would be available immediately to grab youths' interest, so they would spread the word with their friends. Youth do not come to government websites, no matter how well we build them. There was a need for active outreach to find youth where they were. Promotion and communications tailored to a younger audience and that would reach them through all social media platforms were essential.

[Translation]

The purpose was to create a digital platform that allowed for registration of students and not-for-profit organizations, including directly inputting information, logging and tracking of hours, and matching of students with opportunities.

This required analysis of what technological capability would be required, how it would meet all government requirements for bilingualism, accessibility and protection of personal information, and how to ensure the system [Technical difficulty—Editor].

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, I don't know whether I'm the only one—

[English]

The Chair: I've lost you....

Ms. Rachel Wernick: [Technical difficulty—Editor] the ideal would be an entity that [Technical difficulty—Editor].

The Chair: Sorry, Ms. Wernick. We lost you for a moment.

Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: [Technical difficulty—Editor]. Am I...? [Technical difficulty—Editor].

The Chair: We are not picking you up for some reason. How close are you to the end of your remarks?

Madam Clerk, can we get a technician to get in touch with Ms. Wernick. We're not picking her up.

The Clerk: I'm working on it right now. Someone's reaching out to her immediately, and hopefully we can get this sorted out as soon as possible.

It's entirely up to you if you'd like to suspend the meeting in the meantime.

The Chair: Let's suspend for two minutes in case people want to get a glass of water or something. We'll suspend for two minutes and then come back.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1625) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1630)

The Chair: We will reconvene the meeting and see where we're at.

Ms. Wernick, if you could wrap up pretty quickly, it would be helpful.

Go ahead. The floor is yours.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, Mr. Chair, I did provide my remarks in both English and French to the clerk, and I ask that they be put on the record, please.

The Chair: Okay, so you're ready to go?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, both, for your presentations.

We'll start with—

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Sorry, Mr. Chair. I was going to finish. I was just commenting that I had provided the written text. I would like to finish my remarks, if you permit.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead, and if you can wrap up fairly rapidly, the floor is yours.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: The third party needed massive speed, reach and scale, an ability to quickly mobilize the whole country. The third party needed a demonstrated track record of mobilizing youth for service and to be technologically strong. Some of the bodies we considered and set aside were small advocacy groups with no program delivery experience. Other organizations did not have experience with youth, nor did they have strong technological capacity. Many had never delivered a program of such complexity.

I did engage WE Charity as a potential partner, letting them know the broad parameters of what the government was looking for. They were an obvious option as the largest youth service charity in Canada, with high technological capacity and a Facebook following of four million youth. They had already provided to several officials and ministers a proposal related to social entrepreneurship and indicated it could be adapted as needed.

On April 22, WE Charity sent me a detailed proposal to quickly develop tens of thousands of volunteer placements for youth within a few weeks. Given the need for speed and scale, I determined, with my team and colleagues, that their draft proposal was the best available option in the time we had to work with. The team pro-

ceeded to work up the proposed initiative in a form that could be vetted by central agencies and considered by cabinet.

I sent the draft cabinet proposal to the deputy minister for approval, and her office sent it on to the minister in early May.

To be clear, the department's recommendation was that a contribution agreement with WE Charity to mobilize other not-for-profit partners was the best available option, given the requirement for speed, scope, scale and to reach a broad diversity of youth.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Wernick.

We will now go to questions. It will be a six-minute round. First up is Mr. Poilievre, and then Ms. Dzerowicz.

Mr. Poilievre, the floor is yours.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Ms. Wernick, you said that WE Charity sent a proposal to ministers and officials for a social entrepreneurship program. Then you described how that proposal was converted, through your recommendation, into this Canada student service grant. To how many officials and ministers did WE originally send this proposal?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, I don't have that information in front of me, but I'm happy to provide that in writing to the committee.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who first informed you that WE had made this proposal to the government?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: WE Charity, as I mentioned.... I reached out to them in the context of exploring options, and they told me about the proposal. I was also aware, because we had prepared a briefing note for Minister Chagger, that she had received a copy of the proposal, and WE Charity mentioned that they had shared it with Minister Ng.

I would like to clarify for the committee that this was a separate proposal, but when I was provided a new proposal, it had adapted that one, which had been developed over some time, to adapt to the new parameters set out by the government in the announcement.

• (1635)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When did you first hear of the WE Charity proposal?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: When I spoke with WE Charity in the lead-up to the announcement.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: On what date?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I spoke to WE Charity on April 19.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You spoke to them on April 19, and that was the first time you heard about the WE Charity proposal.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: To the best of my recollection.... However, it is true that the proposal had been shared with ministers—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: As I said, Mr. Chair, we will provide those details in writing.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did anyone ever tell you whether any ministers had opinions about the WE Charity proposal, prior to your recommending in favour of it?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I need to clarify, Mr. Chair, that the proposal I'm speaking about is a different proposal, which I believe was adapted following the announcement and submitted.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right, so my question, again, doesn't change. Can you answer it, please?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I'm sorry; can you repeat it? It's not clear to me what the question is.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did anyone tell you the opinions of any of the ministers on this proposal that WE Charity had circulated within cabinet?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I have no recollection of that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: All right.

So now we know that this whole thing originated with WE, and that it was then adapted slightly to meet the political demands of the government. Who was it who told you to work on a Canada student grant like this? Was it your deputy?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, as I explained in my remarks, there were, in a very brief time, in the context of the crisis, back in April, a few days—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who was it?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: If I could finish—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, give Ms. Wernick the time to respond, if you could. We will not take time away from you.

Go ahead, Ms. Wernick.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There was a very rapid period of a few days in which officials were working very hard to quickly assess options and possibilities for a student and youth package announcement. It was in that context that I was asked by my associate deputy minister, in collaboration with officials at the Department of Finance, to provide some options, assessments and information, given my lead on the Canada service corps program file.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: This is way off of my.... It sounds like it was an associate deputy minister who asked you to do that. That was all I needed to know.

There is a proposal from WE. Who first gave you that proposal?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: The proposal—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, I received a proposal from Craig Kielburger on April 22.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It was on April 22. Did he just call you?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I received it by email, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Did he mention if he had spoken to other members of the government about it?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I have no recollection of that.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Was the proposal at that time for the government to provide a grant for volunteer positions?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: To the best of my recollection, no, it was emphasizing still some placements for youth related to social entrepreneurship and additional placements for youth related to service in their communities.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: In the final proposal that went through cabinet, how many positions were going to be created for the proposed budget of \$912 million?

• (1640)

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, as you know, I am not able to speak to cabinet confidence of what's in a cabinet document.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: No, but the proposal was made public. There was a public proposal to spend \$912 million on creating student service grants. How many students would have had positions?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: The way the proposal was designed was that, as was mentioned earlier I think, there was an envelope of funding put against payment of grants. The payment of the grants was going to be aligned with uptake by students and the completion of the necessary hours to get those grants.

The Chair: We're out of time on this round, but, Mr. Poilievre, stick with me for a minute, will you?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yes.

The Chair: I do see some "unclarity". It's not a right word, I guess, but I do see some problems here.

I thought in your remarks, Ms. Wernick, you indicated that you approached WE. In his statement a minute ago, Mr. Poilievre basically said—I might not have this, Pierre, so you can correct me if I'm wrong—that the proposal originated with WE to meet the political demand or desire—I don't know which word was used—of the government. We're miles apart on those two statements.

Is that statement correct that the proposal originated with WE, or did you, as I believe you indicated in your remarks, make the first initiative to talk to WE as one of the organizations? Where are we at here? Let's establish the foundation so that we're actually dealing with facts here, if we could.

Ms. Wernick, can you clarify where we're at?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, Minister...or Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That's okay. I used to be, in the good old days.

Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: As I mentioned in my statement, in the context of working very quickly to input into a student announcement that was going to happen in a few days, we were exploring very quickly potential options and thinking about who could potentially support and help the government in that space. As I mentioned, in the context of developing a student package and assessing options, my recollection is that WE Charity was one of the options that came up in discussions, given their experience as the largest youth-serving organization in Canada.

I called WE Charity on April 19 to seek some input on the program concept. Then, as I mentioned in my statement, I learned the details of what the government wanted for a Canada student service grant through the Prime Minister's announcement. Following that announcement, I received by email a proposal from WE Charity. This is not the same thing as saying what went to cabinet. This is saying that a third party, hearing about the announcement, submitted a proposal.

The Chair: Okay. That clarifies it for me.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: It's not clear, though, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Basically, Ms. Wernick approached WE on April 19. On April 22 she got an email from Craig Kielburger.

I'll give you another minute or so, Mr. Poilievre, because this is important.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: To be clear, you contacted WE on the 19th, and then Mr. Kielburger came back to you with a proposal on the 22nd. Is that the order?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Had he contacted you prior to the 19th?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: No. As I mentioned, I contacted him on the 19th.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You contacted him on the 19th—

Ms. Rachel Wernick: That is correct.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: —to ask him for that, so he had knowledge that this program was going to be announced by the Prime Minister before the public did.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I contacted him on the broad parameters and scope of what we were talking about, how to engage youth to get involved in service and issues around quick implementation.

My recollection of the conversation with Mr. Kielburger on the broad concepts was that he raised lots of expertise and concerns related to youth and engaging youth, and that not-for-profits were struggling, in the COVID context, and that it would be very challenging to keep youth safe, so it would require virtual placements. He gave some expertise, as one of the largest youth service organizations, on the concept.

• (1645)

The Chair: I am going to move on, but I'll give you time to think about where we are here too, Pierre. Maybe you'll have to come back in a little later.

I'll go to Ms. Dzerowicz, and then on to Mr. Fortin.

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

I want to say a huge thanks to Ms. Wilson, and to you, Ms. Wernick, for your great presentation. You were painstaking in explaining to us the challenge that was before you and how little time you had. I'm going to interpret what you've said over the last minute or so, because I want to make sure I understand it clearly.

My understanding from what you've indicated is that there was a student package that was about to be announced on April 22. There was going to be a volunteer or student service component to it, so in advance, there was some discussion about who could be some different options and there was an exploratory phone call made to Mr. Kielburger at WE Charity. It was an exploratory phone call. Then, unsolicited, Mr. Kielburger ended up submitting a proposal to the government on the 22nd when the announcement was made. Do I have that correct?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: That is correct.

Ms. Gina Wilson: I'm just going to add to that. Discussions prior to a public announcement is a regular course of activity. There's nothing strange about it. I've seen it all the time.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I think that was an important addition. Thank you, Ms. Wilson.

It's also important to understand that we were in mid-April, one month after the lockdown. We were going at a very fast pace, doing our very best to provide enormous amounts of supports to Canadians, and the group we were focusing on was youth.

Ms. Wernick, to continue with this, after April 22—and I think you mentioned this, but I want this to be very clear—did you consider other organizations? Did you look internally before making your recommendation that WE was the only one, based on all of the objectives and parameters you have laid out?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, we did consider other organizations.

First, we considered our Canada service corps program partners. My team had been in discussions with them to explore the potential expansion of the program. They had indicated that they were struggling to deliver their existing contribution program in the COVID context. It's important to recall that this programming under the Canada service corps brings groups of youth together and often involves travelling. It was April during the pandemic.

Then we assessed the ability of other organizations that are focused on volunteering, such as Volunteer Canada. In our assessment, we were unable to identify a single organization that adequately met the need for broad geographic reach, technological capacity and experience working with youth, particularly youth from underserved communities.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I also heard from you very clearly that there was a great desire to ensure that we would have a program out by mid-May; I think that was the initial hope. It was to be done in a very short period of time. I think that's appreciated, because most university students and youth were on university break and it would have provided them with an opportunity and time to volunteer.

Can I ask a quick question? WE had provided an unsolicited submission to you, Ms. Wernick. Were there any other groups that provided unsolicited proposals as well, once the announcement was made?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: No.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay.

Then with my next question, I want to clear something up, because I think we were talking about \$19.5 million that was being paid to WE, and then we went to \$43.5 million. Could you maybe clarify this for us a bit?

My understanding is that the whole program was for up to \$912 million and that it anticipated that up to 100,000 students would participate. I think the original \$19.5 million was for the first 20,000 placements. If there were to be a next tranche of placements, then it would be the next amount, so it would go up to the \$43.5 million. Could you just clarify that? I just want to make sure that it's clear to everyone.

• (1650)

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, that is very clear. I think the funding envelope put against it, of \$912 million, reflects the government's ambition to reach as many students as possible and to provide financial rewards to as many as possible. The vast majority of the funding for this was for the grant payments to students and recent grads.

As for the funding for programming supports and delivery and supports for not-for-profits, that was linked to the number of placements. You've described it correctly.

This is a common practice in contribution agreements. Additional payments would not be made until there was proof of uptake and the desired results were being achieved.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Then I have just one more question on the contribution agreement, just for the layperson, particularly given the way the opposition presents it. We went to a contribution agreement because of the expediency of this. However, I don't want to give the public the impression that there was no oversight, no performance measurements and no accountability for the dollars.

If you can, Ms. Wernick, could you just talk to that because I don't want people to feel that we didn't go to service agreements? A service agreement would have to go to an RFP, which would have taken a lot of time. We understand why that option was off the table and we stayed with a contribution agreement.

I want to give confidence to Canadians that there was oversight, there were performance measurements, and what those elements in place were.

The Chair: If you can, make that a fairly tight answer, Ms. Wernick.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, if I could call on my colleague Ms. Hébert to answer, she has the details of the contribution agreement.

Ms. Stephanie Hébert (Assistant Deputy Minister, Program Operations Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to speak to the contribution agreement.

As noted, there were a number of checks and balances that were integrated into the contribution agreement. We did have a clear payment schedule. The payment schedule was very clearly tied to the program activities that WE Charity was to undertake to support the design and delivery of the program. As well, the payment schedule also was aligned to, and very commensurate with, the expected uptake of the program. Therefore, we worked closely with WE Charity to negotiate that and to determine what payments would be made at what moments.

The other point I would like to make is that the contribution agreement is subject to monitoring. It is subject to regular reporting. WE Charity was responsible to provide regular reports to the Government of Canada, like we do in all contribution agreements. Similarly, it was subject to all of the other requirements that contribution agreement recipients are subject to—things like audit, evaluation and different program oversight measures—because it is, ultimately, a performance-based agreement that we are entering into with recipients.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, all.

We're turning now to Mr. Fortin. The floor is yours, sir, followed by Mr. Angus.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Wernick.

Did you know Mr. Kielburger prior to contacting him on April 19?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Good afternoon.

I had worked with WE Charity in the past as part of the Canada service corps program. I worked with him in that context and came to know the organization through the program.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I see.

Did you contact other organizations, prior to April 22, to inquire whether they'd be willing to administer the program?

• (1655)

Ms. Rachel Wernick: As I've repeatedly explained, it's important to consider the context in mid-April, with the crisis caused by the pandemic. We had a few days to discuss—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did you contact other organizations? Please keep your answer short, because I don't have much time.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: We considered a number of organizations, as I said earlier.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Do you have a list of those organizations?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, I can name a number of them off the top of my head.

[*English*]

The Chair: If we could, both of you, let's allow time for an answer here.

Ms. Wernick, did you talk to other organizations? I think that was the question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Rachel Wernick: At the beginning of my statement, I mentioned that we had considered Canada service corps.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I can't hear, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: That encompasses 12 organizations, including Apathy is Boring-RISE and Big Brothers Big Sisters. I don't know all the organizations' names in both languages.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Can we have the list?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: We consulted with all the organizations—

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Sorry, but I don't want you to list them off to me.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Am I allowed to answer?

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Yes, but all I asked you was whether you had contacted other organizations and whether you had a list of them. I don't want you to name them, because it will use up all of my six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I can provide a written list of the organizations we contacted. My apologies for taking up extra time.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: That's kind.

Thank you, Ms. Wernick.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Fortin, Ms. Wernick, if both people are speaking at the same time, the interpreters cannot translate.

We'll go to Mr. Fortin and then come back to Ms. Wernick.

Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Wernick, when you recommended Mr. Kielburger's organization, WE Charity, were you aware that the Prime Minister's wife had been an ambassador for the organization in the past?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I made the recommendation to my deputy minister, who presented it to the government. Yes, I was aware that the Prime Minister's wife was an ambassador for the organization on the issue of mental health.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Were you aware that the Prime Minister's mother and brother had been paid by WE Charity to speak at its events?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: No, I wasn't.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Very well.

Did you talk to the minister about the relationship between members of Mr. Trudeau's family and WE Charity?

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Wernick: The department did not conduct or provide any assessment of potential conflicts of interest by public office holders. The onus is on the public office holders to uphold the guidelines.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I know. Pardon me, but all I asked was whether you had spoken to the minister, Ms. Chagger, or another minister about the ties between the Trudeau family and the charity you were recommending at the time.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: No. I didn't have any discussions on that.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: If I understood the explanation earlier correctly, the distinction you make between a contract and a contribution agreement is this. For a contract, you put out a call for tenders, whereas for a contribution agreement, you put out a call for proposals. Is that right?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: That's not quite right. Once again, I'm a bit too nervous to keep going in this language, so I'm going to switch languages.

[*English*]

There's a big difference between transfer payment policy and procurement policy. Under the transfer payment policy, we negotiate agreements with partners, and there are various mechanisms for entering into those negotiations. It can be through an open call. It can be through a solicited proposal. It can be through an unsolicited proposal. Here again, I take you back to April and the context of the crisis the government was in, when a determination was made that negotiating a contribution agreement with a partner was the fastest and most appropriate path forward, particularly as this was involving programming for youth and the government does not do direct delivery—

● (1700)

The Chair: This is your last question, Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Don't you still have to put out a call for proposals to seek submissions before awarding a contribution agreement?

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Wernick: There is no specific *exigence*—I'm sorry, now I'm talking Franglais—requirement to hold an open call for proposals.

I will ask my colleague, who is an expert in this, to provide the committee with additional information.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Stephanie Hébert: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When we receive a proposal directly from an organization, even when it's not related to a call for proposals, we always have to make sure it meets the program criteria and can achieve the program objectives. That analysis always has to be done.

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did you put out a call for proposals? That was the question.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Fortin. You're out of time.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Mr. Chair, I'm trying to find out whether there was a call for proposals. Aren't you listening to the questions? I asked a straightforward question. They beat around the bush for five minutes.

Sorry, Mr. Chair, but I want to know whether a call for proposals should have been put out. They explained that the proposals were analyzed, and I have no doubt they were, but I want to know whether there was a call for proposals.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, I can answer that. There was no call for proposals.

[English]

The Chair: There was no call for proposals, Ms. Wernick said.

Did you finish your answer, Ms. Hébert? Okay.

Then we'll turn to Mr. Angus. You have around six minutes, Charlie. We've been running over a fair bit.

Go ahead. The floor is yours.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Are we going to go with the standard we've been using in the House? I'm going to keep my questions short, and if we could get short answers, that way—

The Chair: I will try reasonably. Keep in mind that I do not mind committee members browbeating politicians—we're used to it—but I don't want to see that happen with public servants.

Go ahead, and we'll give it a try. The floor is yours.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you so much.

Thank you, Ms. Wernick.

Prior to the announcement on April 19, if I understand you, there was a proposal from WE that was circulating. It wasn't the same proposal, but it was a proposal. Is that correct?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: That's correct.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Do you know where that proposal was circulated?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: As I mentioned previously, I would prefer to provide that to the committee in writing, to ensure completeness and accuracy of information.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Certainly. Would you provide the proposal as well?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, this is possible.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you so much.

We're here for two reasons. One is, certainly, the connections to the Trudeau family, which raised a lot of alarm bells, but also the sense that because of the close connection between the Kielburgers and the Prime Minister they got the inside track. If there was a proposal that influenced the Prime Minister and you were doing your due diligence as a civil servant—

The Chair: Charlie, I don't want to interrupt, but hold up your mike. The translators are having a bit of difficulty, and we want to hear the pureness of your voice.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Wayne. I'm so sorry. Who has ever said that I wasn't loud enough? You're the first.

The question is whether or not WE got the inside track. If there was a proposal that the Prime Minister loved and then he laid out the basic parameters so that, when you called three days later, Kielburger already had the ideas and was set to go.... Is it possible that, because they had already circulated this, the Prime Minister set it up and you dutifully followed through?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, I cannot speculate, but I can tell you that, in the context I was in, mid-April in a crisis situation, I gave some options and assessments to inform the announcement by the Prime Minister on April 22, based on my expertise and experience with various organizations and based on an understanding that there was a desire to launch this initiative within three weeks, because it was a summer initiative that students needed to start taking advantage of as quickly as possible.

• (1705)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you for that. I just wanted to really clarify your position in how this has played out, because Minister Chagger said a number of times that this was your idea, that you came up with it, and I don't want you to be wearing this if this was a political decision. I wanted to just clarify that, so I thank you for that.

The question was raised again about the Trudeau family links. I asked Minister Chagger if this was raised. It seems to me something that would have been red-flagged, because of the close connection with the Trudeau family and the fact that his mother, brother and wife were closely involved.

Did you raise the Trudeau family connection as a red flag?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, I don't have any direct knowledge of that. As I mentioned, the department does not provide assessments of potential conflicts of interest by public office holders. The onus is on those office-holders to uphold the guidelines.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I understand that. When you're making a proposal, you're going to have pluses and minuses and this blew up in the government's face, so I was wondering who raised those red flags.

Now just about the financing, because we heard of \$19.5 million and then of \$43 million.... I'm not interested in that number, but in the per-student placement, the other values that would have been identified. The minister said it would come out later.

What was the agreement for onboarding fees and training that we would do? How much could they get per placement?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned and as I think my colleagues have mentioned, contribution agreements lay out the funding and the broad policy objectives and desired results. Then it is for the third party to make decisions about how they achieve those results.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Were there other fees? This is what I'm concerned about: due diligence and performance measures. You said you needed a website that had a lot of bang. We found out that when it opened, there were 1,500 bogus placements on it.

Did you do due diligence on that, or was it something that came up from WE?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I think there is not a sufficient understanding of the digital aspects of this.

When we were asked by the government to create the "I Want to Help" platform, our first reflex was to look at our job bank technology. ESDC had made significant investments in the job bank infrastructure and it met security and official language requirements. That was the first phase of work on the platform. In the course of—

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay—

The Chair: We'll give you time, Mr. Angus.

Please finish, Ms. Wernick.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: In the course of negotiating the contribution agreement, there were additional requirements that came forward with respect to registering students' desire for the tracking of hours. There were also issues around validating not-for-profits, such as, whether they were registered charities.

There was a lot of desire to collect data about the students so that we could report.

The Chair: Okay—

Ms. Rachel Wernick: As I mentioned in my statement, there was significant technological capacity required to ensure both the program requirements and eligibility requirements, and that due diligence was being done to vet and ensure that students were going to safe, legitimate placements.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll have to go back to Mr. Angus.

Go ahead.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you. I'm thankful for the answer.

I was asking about the 1,500 bogus placements and due diligence in that regard, but my final question would be in response to what I asked Madam Chagger about the possible illegalities of paying post-secondary students well below minimum wage to do work that would be considered paid work, which would put charities into issues of legal liability because they cannot transgress the—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: There's a point of order, Charlie. Just hold on.

Mr. Fortin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Sorry, Mr. Angus and Mr. Chair.

The interpreter is indicating that she can't interpret what Mr. Angus is saying. I think the problem is that his mouth is too far from the microphone.

• (1710)

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. I think, Mr. Angus, you're not holding your mike up again. The translators were having trouble and were telling Mr. Fortin that, which is good.

Start over.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay. I'll just finish the question then.

This plan that would have had post-secondary students making well below minimum wage and calling it "volunteering" would have put charities at risk of legal liability if a student said it was actually paid work. Therefore, I asked the minister if she had done due diligence and gotten a legal opinion on that. She said, "I'm confident that the public service would have done their due diligence and would have requested legal opinions."

Madam Wernick, did you get a legal opinion that this plan paying students so much below minimum wage would meet the legal tests under provincial labour laws?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, Mr. Chair, I need to clarify that this was a lump sum financial award like a bursary at the end of the summer. It was not an hourly wage.

That was the nature of the grant.

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's not how you presented it. You presented it that if they did 100 hours, they got \$1,000. If they did 170 hours, they still only got \$1,000. They got paid by how much work they did. That's an hourly wage. That's the legal question.

The Chair: Okay, we'll have to conclude it there. I'll let Ms. Wernick answer.

I thought Ms. Hébert wanted in earlier, but go ahead, Ms. Wernick.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Very quickly, rewards are like that. Like Air Miles, you have to reach certain levels before you get a reward.

In terms of the legal advice provided, I am not able to speak to that, as you know, because that would constitute advice to ministers and solicitor-client privilege.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Oh, it's advice to the minister.

The Chair: We're well over time on that round as well.

We have four questioners and we'll give five minutes each to them, or four and a half: Mr. Barrett, Mr. McLeod, Mr. Poilievre and Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Barrett.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Ms. Wernick, did anyone suggest that you call Mr. Kielburger on April 19?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: In the context of the mad rush to consider what could be done for the April 22 announcement, several different organizations were talked about. It was in that context that I offered to reach out and speak to WE Charity given that I had....

Mr. Michael Barrett: Did you call the head of any other organization around the same time?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I personally did not.

Mr. Michael Barrett: That's a yes or no question.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: No.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Okay, great.

Is it typical that partner organizations are notified that they have been successful in becoming a partner via the Prime Minister's Office as was stated in this case by Mr. Kielburger?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I cannot speak to that.

The Chair: That was a media report, I believe, and Mr. Kielburger clarified that, but surely there must be somebody in ESDC that can clarify that.

Ms. Hébert, Ms. Wilson or Ms. Wernick?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Mr. Chair, if the question is whether or not somebody else talked to somebody else, I am afraid we cannot speculate or provide opinions on things that we do not have direct knowledge of.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Mr. Chair, that was non-answer.

The question was this: Is it typical that partner organizations are notified that they have been successful in becoming a partner via the Prime Minister's Office and not by the ministry, as was stated in this case by the partner? Is it typical, Madam, that it would be the Prime Minister's Office and not you who would contact them? Is that typical?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Let me take a shot at that—

Ms. Stephanie Hébert: I would be happy to help after Senior Associate Deputy Minister Wilson.

Mr. Michael Barrett: Just one short answer would be great.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Okay. Sometimes it occurs; sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's a minister. Sometimes it's a staff person. Sometimes it's an employee. It varies. Nothing is particularly typical.

Mr. Michael Barrett: In this case, who notified Mr. Kielburger that they were the successful proponents and on what date did that occur?

• (1715)

Ms. Rachel Wernick: The WE Charity was informed that the contribution agreement had been approved on June 23.

The Chair: By whom?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I do not have a recollection of who directly notified them.

Mr. Michael Barrett: It's interesting, Mr. Chair, that on June 12 the WE Charity announced during a webcast that they were recruiting for this program. That timeline is inconsistent.

Will you submit to the committee the email that you received from Mr. Kielburger that you referenced in a previous answer?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, Mr. Chair, we are collecting all of the information that the committee asked for with a deadline, I believe, of August 8. We are moving as quickly as we can to pull it all together and get it to the committee.

Mr. Michael Barrett: I want to circle back to my last question. How is it that there are multisourced reports and it's documented that Mr. Kielburger was recruiting for this program on June 12 if he was supposedly notified weeks later?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Again, in negotiating and working on a contribution agreement with partners, it is not uncommon that partners begin to reach out to other partners, especially in a third party model, to develop the program, to consider what needs to be in the contribution agreement, and in this case, given the very tight timeline for launch, to basically advance work as much as possible in order to meet the tight timelines required by the government.

The Chair: We'll have to go back to Mr. Barrett for his last question.

Mr. Michael Barrett: To your knowledge, was anyone else in government communicating with WE in the days between April 19 to 22, or around that period?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I have no direct knowledge of that. I can only speak about my own communications.

The Chair: Thank you, all.

We'll go to Mr. McLeod, and then on to Mr. Poilievre.

Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the presenters here. There have been some very tough questions indeed.

I want to start by thanking Gina Wilson for using the word *meegwetch*. We hear a lot of French and we hear a lot of English, but it's not very often we hear indigenous words. Thank you for that.

I want to also say that I think we're in a very difficult situation with a lot of unknowns. The pandemic has caused a lot of issues to come forward. I heard a lot from the students in my riding initially, so I was very happy to see some very important measures come forward: the moratorium on Canada student loan repayments, the doubling of the student loans program, the increased student loan program funding and the work placement program. I think they were all well received across the country. Our young people are certainly facing their share of challenges.

We've also seen a lot of other programs that are helping young people, especially in my riding. I think a lot of indigenous communities would say the same, with the indigenous community support and the on-the-land program. Everybody wants to get involved; they want to play a role.

I was quite happy that these placements were coming forward. It's really unfortunate that it looks like these placements are going to be on hold for a bit now. I'm hoping that our government's objective remains the same, to continue to try to connect the skills and abilities of young people who are looking to improve their skills with service opportunities to help in our communities, especially when it comes to healing.

I understand there was a lot of uptake of the program. I think the minister mentioned there were 35,000 applications.

As we move forward, as the government moves forward with administering the Canada student service grant, what steps are being taken to ensure that indigenous youth in rural and remote northern communities are able to access this program? That's my first question.

• (1720)

The Chair: Ms. Wernick, do you want to take that, or Ms. Wilson?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, Mr. Chair, I can speak briefly to that.

One of the key objectives of Minister Chagger, as she stated in her role as Minister of Diversity and Inclusion, was to ensure that a broad diversity of students would be involved. As part of the program design, we were seeking active outreach into indigenous communities, including funding for digital and technological supports to ensure connectivity, because, as I mentioned, we're talking about the COVID crisis and virtual placements for the most part.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I always struggle when it comes to decision-making and forming an opinion on a lot of things, because the north never seems to get included in some of the tracking mechanisms of the government and other agencies. I'm wondering what other demographic information on the CSSG applicants the government will be tracking.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: We had a very robust registration form that was provided to students as they entered the program. Obviously, all of the demographic information is voluntary. We based it closely on working with our Statistics Canada colleagues to capture the maximum amount of information related to background, population, etc.

WE Charity, as part of the contribution agreement, was to provide real-time reports, on a bi-weekly basis, on both the not-for-profits—where they were, what the placements were, what they were of—as well as the students who had registered, with much demographic and other information about the students who had been applying.

The Chair: This is your last question, Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod: We're not talking about WE Charity anymore. I'm talking about going forward.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: My apologies.

Mr. Michael McLeod: As the government moves forward with the administering of this, I want to make sure, first of all, that indigenous youth have the opportunity we expected with WE Charity. Are we going to continue with that? Are we going to track some of this?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: It's the government's decisions that will determine that, but we always provide what we call “diversity analysis” in the work we put forward.

The Chair: Thank you, all. We'll end that there.

Mr. Poilievre, are you there?

Go ahead.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Ms. Wernick, who told you to call Mr. Kielburger on April 19?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: As I have mentioned, there were conversations with finance officials, and in that context of those discussions about potential organizations—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. Who? Who asked you to call him, which led to your call of April 19?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: In those conversations, WE Charity came up. I volunteered to call them because of my prior work with them and because they were an obvious choice as the largest youth-serving organization.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry, I just asked a very specific question: Who brought them up? You said they came up. Who brought them up?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: We were having conversations with the Department of Finance, and different organizations were mentioned in that context. I said, I know WE Charity; I can reach out to them.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Were you the first person who brought up WE Charity, or did someone else bring it up before you in the conversation?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: To the best of my recollection, it was raised by the Department of Finance officials.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Do you have a name?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: The lead official I was working with was Michelle Kovacevic at the Department of Finance.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Was that the person who brought up WE Charity?

The Chair: That's—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Sorry. It's just taking a phenomenal amount of time to answer a very simple question.

The Chair: Well, yes, but we want proper, accurate information on the record and not speculation.

• (1725)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: She was there, Chair. She was there. It's not speculation.

The Chair: I know she was there, and I know it was a group discussion. That's basically what she said.

Ms. Wernick, do you want to answer?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes. That's correct, Mr. Chair. It was a group discussion—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Who?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: —and to the best of my recollection, it was in those group discussions that the name came up.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That wasn't the question. You've given the name of a finance official. We'll have to assume, unless you later correct the record, that this official was the one who brought up the name of WE.

Now I am—

The Chair: Pierre, I'm going to correct the record. She said that the individual was the “lead” for finance, so let's not speculate too far.

The floor is yours.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I'll ask one last time, and then, if not, we'll have to consider whether we pursue this further and more formally.

Was this official the one who asked you to contact WE, yes or no? If not, I'll move on.

Is it yes or no?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I have to come back to the April context. We were working 12-hour days—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right. That wasn't the question.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: —and I remember several conversations. I am not comfortable at this point—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You said that the minister—

Ms. Rachel Wernick: —specifying a direction. My recollection—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair—

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I'm not being allowed to answer, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're not allowing yourself to answer.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: No, I am trying to take you back to mid-April.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I don't want to go back. I want to go forward.

The Chair: Listen, this is not a court.

If we go over time on this panel, we will. I don't want to see the witnesses browbeaten. Ms. Wernick is doing her best. Give her time to answer.

Ms. Wernick.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the context is important: 12-hour days, lots of different conversations, everybody working at home, mostly on conference calls. I know that the official I mentioned was the lead on the student package at the Department of Finance, but my recollection is

that I volunteered, in the context of going through many organizations, some of which I have mentioned, such as Canada service corps partners—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: This is an extremely long answer for a very direct question.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Again, Mr. Chair, I'm not allowed to finish my answer.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Right, because you're not answering the question.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: I am. I'm answering—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You're very evasive.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Poilievre, go ahead with your next question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: All right. We know we're on to some trouble there.

Moving on to the next question.... You said that WE Charity had circulated a proposal, and that proposal had gone to ministers. This was in mid-April. How did you know that?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: My recollection is that I would know it for two different reasons. One, Mr. Kielburger told me that it had been shared, particularly with Minister Ng; that's my recollection. But I also recall approving a briefing note for Minister Chagger to meet with WE Charity, which spoke of the proposal, and I do recall some emails from other government officials at PCO and ISED also referring to this proposal.

I would prefer—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When would you—

Ms. Rachel Wernick: If I could finish—

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: When would you—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre, let her finish her answer and then we'll go to the last question.

Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: As I said earlier, I would prefer to provide the committee with more accurate and complete information about that, the best I can contribute, in terms of that proposal and who had it.

The Chair: We look forward to that information.

Mr. Poilievre, go ahead with your last question.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: You claim that the contribution agreement was only approved on June 23, yet there is evidence that WE Charity was advertising internally its plan to administer this program on June 12, 11 days earlier. How is it possible that WE Charity knew 11 days before the contribution agreement was approved that it would be administering this program, unless it was communicated to them by a back channel?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: We entered into a negotiation of a contribution agreement with WE Charity in mid-May, and, as anybody familiar with this knows, it takes many weeks to negotiate a contribution agreement. Any activities that WE Charity took on during the period leading up to this finalization and approval of the contribution agreement were completely at their own risk.

• (1730)

The Chair: We will have to end that series there.

The last questioner is Mr. Fragiskatos. We'll go a little over on this panel.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I want to ask more about third parties, just in general terms, because obviously this was a third party that was looked at.

How common is it for governments to rely on third parties? I know that in the context of COVID-19 the federal government has partnered, for example, with United Way and with Food Banks Canada. WE was suggested; obviously, that's not going ahead. How common is it for third parties to carry out work that the government has prioritized, and what are some of the reasons that lead in that direction?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: The primary vehicle used in grants and contributions programming is to work with third parties. We have 13 third parties delivering service programming for us under the Canada service corps, so we are funding organizations to do direct delivery of programming on the ground. The government generally does direct-deliver benefits and payments, as we've talked about with the CERB, pensions and things like that, but when it comes to delivery of programming in communities across the country, we're very much dependent on third party organizations to deliver that programming and provide those supports on the ground.

The Chair: Ms. Hébert, did you want in there?

Ms. Stephanie Hébert: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To build further on the response provided by my colleague, yes, we do work very closely with third parties in the context of contribution agreements. I would just like to put on the table some of the factors we would consider. As my colleague mentioned, there's the time frame in which we need to work and the volume of desired recipients whom we ultimately need to reach. We would want to leverage their networks, leverage their experience and leverage their knowledge in this space.

My colleague mentioned partnerships and the work we do with organizations in the context of the Canada service corps. We have also done this in the context of the emergency community support benefit, the emergency community support program, where we're working closely with the Red Cross, Community Foundations of Canada, as well as United Way Canada. Again, to support funding to seniors in their communities, we also established a contribution agreement with United Way Centraide Canada. This was to enable us to be able to disburse funds and really reach Canadians in their communities.

We were really able to leverage the expertise and the networks of the third party organizations to ultimately help us achieve the poli-

cy and program objectives that had been set out in these different programs and these different initiatives that we were funding.

The Chair: As I did for others, Peter, I'll give you some of that time back. Go ahead.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: That's appreciated, Mr. Chair.

This is for either Ms. Wernick or Madam Hébert, whoever wishes to take it. This is in the context of COVID-19, with a public service that was squarely focused on helping as many Canadians as possible, millions of Canadians, and had devoted itself in that way, reorganizing itself particularly around things like CERB and other programs. Is it fair to say that the public service found itself in, if not an overwhelmed position, then certainly a challenged position? The context helps us to understand, in particular, the need to reach out to third parties.

If in the best of times third parties are looked to, then certainly one would think that during COVID-19 third parties would certainly be looked to. Is that a fair statement?

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Yes, that is a fair statement. As we said, depending on the requirements and the speed of implementation, a third party is used. In the COVID context, as I think we've all mentioned, the capacity of this department and Service Canada was stretched to the absolute maximum.

• (1735)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: This is my last question, Mr. Chair.

Are calls for proposals issued for every contribution agreement?

Ms. Stephanie Hébert: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to take that question.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Stephanie Hébert: We don't issue a call for proposals for every single agreement. In the vast majority of agreements that we do manage, if they're annual calls and we're dealing with a high volume, such as in the particular instance of Canada summer jobs, we do a call for proposals. Members will also recall that in the context of Canada summer jobs this year, we also solicited proposals. We also invited members of Parliament to bring proposals forward to our attention, so that we could work with organizations who were delivering emergency community supports and critical services within their communities. I think that's an excellent example of where you have a call for proposals but where concurrently we also invited and solicited proposals from employers to assist us.

The last point I would make, Mr. Chair, is a point I made earlier. At the end of the day, we have to assess all proposals. The proposals must be eligible. The proposals must meet the terms and conditions of the program. The proposals that we ultimately fund and the agreements we enter into have to advance our program objectives.

Thank you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, all.

We will have to end it there. We're a little beyond our end time.

I believe there were a number of questions that we would expect some answers to in writing, for clarity. If people are monitoring from the department, there are some answers that we do need, I think, for clarity. I know that everything will be provided in the call for documents by August 8, but if there are some things you can provide related to today's discussion, that would be helpful.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Chair, can I say something for 10 seconds?

The Chair: We'll give you 12.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Okay. I just want to thank the officials because I remember what it was like in April. The workload was crushing. You were working seven days a week and I really appreciate your work.

The Chair: That's a very good point to make, Elizabeth.

I was going to say, in conclusion, that I know that as public servants you've been working extremely long hours during the COVID-19 pandemic, seven days a week, under a lot of pressure. We understand that. Public servants in all departments have done tremendous work for Canadians and the country, and we understand that.

I also understand that we've probably added to some of that pressure on you today, as a result of some decisions that got made somewhere. That's our right as parliamentarians to look further into those, as we will be doing. Nonetheless, I do know that everyone appreciates the work you've done for this country, and we certainly appreciate your appearing today and answering our questions at this committee. I know it's not easy, but we appreciate your appearing today.

Ms. Rachel Wernick: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: With that, we'll wish that you at least find a little time for a break this weekend if you can.

Thank you, all. We will suspend for two minutes and go to the next panel.

● (1735) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1740)

The Chair: We will again call the meeting to order and reconvene. Welcome to the third panel of meeting number 41 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance.

I know that the witness knows, but we are meeting on government spending, WE Charity and the Canada student service grant.

With that, we'll welcome our witness for this panel. We have about an hour.

Paula Speevak, president and CEO of Volunteer Canada, I expect that you have an opening statement. We'll go to that and then turn to questions. The floor is yours.

Ms. Paula Speevak (President and Chief Executive Officer, Volunteer Canada): Thank you very much.

Hello, members of the finance committee. My name is Paula Speevak and I have the pleasure of serving as president and CEO of Volunteer Canada. Our organization is pleased to respond to your request to meet with you this afternoon and to answer your questions.

Volunteer Canada recognizes the support that has been provided to Canadians, businesses, non-profits and charitable organizations through the Government of Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our organization also appreciates efforts to provide financial support to students and others during these difficult times.

The issues that Volunteer Canada has raised about the Canada student service grant program were about the elements, scope and timing of the program, and not the process for selecting WE Charity or WE Charity itself. I will address these program issues after providing some brief background information.

For those unfamiliar with our organization, Volunteer Canada provides national leadership and expertise on volunteer engagement, in collaboration with more than 200 local volunteer centres, provincial and territorial associations, as well as corporate community engagement leaders, educational institutions and federal departments. This includes our past work with Public Safety Canada on issues related to screening volunteers working with vulnerable populations; Statistics Canada on the general social survey of giving, volunteering and participating; the CRA on the advisory committee on the charitable sector; and Employment and Social Development Canada on a range of topics, including youth engagement and the contributions of volunteers in achieving the UN's sustainable development goals.

In the first three years of the Canada service corps, Volunteer Canada and volunteer centres created the pan-Canadian volunteer matching platform that provided a central place for youth to search, prior to the pandemic, an average of 73,000 volunteer opportunities from around the country. This work also involved the production of tools for youth to explore their passions, values and skills to identify transferable skills for their educational and career paths, and to reflect on critical social, economic and environmental issues. Both the platform and these tools are now publicly available on our website.

Many volunteer centres have taken on the role of mobilizing volunteers as part of the pandemic response. Several provincial and territorial systems were designated by their governments to serve this purpose, including *Jebenevole.ca* in Quebec, Volunteer Connector in Alberta, Volunteer Yukon, Volunteer Nova Scotia and many others. These COVID-19 volunteer opportunities are also accessible through our platform.

On April 24, two days after the Government of Canada's announcement of the Canada student service grant program, Volunteer Canada got in touch with the office of the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth, as well as Canada service corps, to offer support and advice on the design of the program. Volunteer Canada mentioned the pan-Canadian volunteer matching platform and the youth engagement tools that had already been developed with government funding for Canada service corps that could be used for the program.

On April 27, Volunteer Canada had a meeting with senior staff of the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth's office and expressed the following issues that Volunteer Canada and our stakeholders felt needed to be addressed for the program to meet its objectives.

The first issue was not equating the number of hours with the amount of financial support. Our organization had concerns about paying an hourly rate for community service that is below minimum wage, and calling this "volunteering". This could create the wrong message about volunteering and potentially undermine volunteer engagement in the future.

The second issue was the importance of having a range of opportunities, not only COVID-19 direct response roles, in order to make the program accessible to a range of organizations and students.

Our third issue was the capacity of organizations to engage students and to carry out appropriate screening, including vulnerable sector checks, for those working with vulnerable populations.

The fourth issue is the current lack of available service opportunities and the potential pressure on organizations to create placements in order to support students.

The fifth issue was the importance of building on existing social infrastructure, as I mentioned earlier: community-based volunteer matching systems in local volunteer centres, and provincial and territorial associations connected to the pan-Canadian volunteer matching platform.

- (1745)

Between April 27 and May 19, Volunteer Canada initiated several calls with the minister's office to share our concerns and to get an update on the program. However, little information was available while the program approval was still pending.

On May 20, Volunteer Canada was contacted by WE Charity to explore our potential role in the Canada student service grant program. Between May 25 and June 3, we had four virtual meetings with WE Charity, during which Volunteer Canada expressed the five concerns I mentioned earlier and provided advice on creating a more comprehensive and flexible community learning program. Over the course of these meetings, we understood that the target

grew from 20,000 students to 100,000 students. Our board and staff were clear that the service component of the program ought not to connect the number of hours served with the amount of the student's grant.

The "I Want to Help" program description provided to us on June 3 indicated that for every 100 hours of service, a student would be eligible for a grant of \$1,000, essentially paying students \$10 an hour. As I mentioned, of greatest concern to Volunteer Canada was the notion of paying people to volunteer or paying people below minimum wage.

On June 4, Volunteer Canada met virtually again with WE Charity about our concerns and learned that it was not possible to modify the scope of the program and these elements of the program, within the parameters of WE Charity's contribution agreement with ESDC.

On June 5, Volunteer Canada had a virtual meeting to let WE Charity know that we would not be working with them on the program.

On June 11, Volunteer Canada invited WE Charity to present the Canada student service grant program to local volunteer centres so that they could decide for themselves what their involvement might be. Volunteer Canada respects the autonomy of each organization to decide for themselves what is right for them and their communities.

Following the cancellation of the government's contract with WE Charity to administer the program, Volunteer Canada sent a message to the office of the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth with some suggestions—not requesting any financial compensation or a role for Volunteer Canada.

Since the Canada student service grant program was announced at the end of April, our team has been inundated with calls and emails looking for information about the program and assuming that we were involved. On the day the program launched on June 26, we had 25,000-plus visits to our website. Volunteer Canada posted a link to the "I Want to Help" platform to assist those seeking information and indicating that Volunteer Canada was not involved.

In closing, Volunteer Canada's concerns were about the elements, scope and timing of the program, and not the selection process or the charity contracted to administer the program. To recap, our concerns were paying people to volunteer or paying people below minimum wage; the scope of the program focusing on pandemic response; the capacity of organizations to meaningfully engage students this summer; the lack of available opportunities; and the importance of building on existing infrastructure.

Volunteer Canada continues to work in collaboration with a network of more than 200 local volunteer centres, the corporate community engagement council, and not-for-profit and charitable organizations around the country to support volunteer engagement, especially during this time. We continue to be in awe of the local leadership of local volunteer centres, the many non-profit and charitable organizations, managers of volunteers and, of course, those who step forward to volunteer and those who stepped away to keep themselves safe.

Thank you very much.

● (1750)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Speevak, for that quite clear presentation.

The roundup for the first round will be, first, Mr. Cooper, and then Ms. Dzerowicz, Mr. Fortin and Mr. Julian.

We will have to go to five-minute turns because we're tight on time, in order to give the second panel enough time.

Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Speevak, you had indicated that Volunteer Canada contacted the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth on April 24 and then had a number of conversations with the minister's office. I presume that at all times it was Volunteer Canada that initiated contact with the minister's office.

Ms. Paula Speevak: That's correct.

Mr. Michael Cooper: At no time did anyone from the minister's office, ESDC, the Prime Minister's Office or anyone in the civil service contact Volunteer Canada to ascertain their interest in administering or assisting with the program. Is that correct?

Ms. Paula Speevak: That is correct.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You indicated that from April 27 to May 19 Volunteer Canada initiated calls, but there was really very little information provided, radio silence. Is that fair?

Ms. Paula Speevak: I understood that the approval process for the framework was still pending and that it was not possible to make information public.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Volunteer Canada first came into contact with WE Charity on May 25. Is that right?

Ms. Paula Speevak: On May 20...yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It was May 20—sorry.

How did that come about?

Ms. Paula Speevak: WE Charity contacted us, wanting to explore the potential for us to serve as what they were calling a strategic partner for the program, and to explore a potential role.

Mr. Michael Cooper: At that time, what did WE Charity represent their involvement in the program to be?

Ms. Paula Speevak: On May 20, they were in final negotiations of the contribution agreement but wanted to ensure that they were being prepared to implement the program, so they were letting us know that they were likely to be implementing the program.

Mr. Michael Cooper: There were four meetings that took place. Who was involved in those meetings?

Ms. Paula Speevak: There were the executive director, someone in charge of partnerships, someone in charge of programs, and other staff members who would be involved in creating training and other elements of the program.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Were the Kielburgers involved?

Ms. Paula Speevak: No.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Were you involved?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

● (1755)

Mr. Michael Cooper: You were, okay.

In terms of some of the work, or the scope of work that WE was interested in Volunteer Canada undertaking, I'm just going to go through a list of things and you can confirm whether or not those items were discussed.

Creating training content...?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Promotion of the program...?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Connecting WE with volunteer organizations across Canada looking for volunteers...?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Potentially connecting to volunteer centres—yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

Screening...?

Ms. Paula Speevak: No.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Onboarding...?

Ms. Paula Speevak: No.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Training...?

Ms. Paula Speevak: No.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

Is it fair to say that WE was approaching Volunteer Canada because of the extensive network that Volunteer Canada has with not-for-profit organizations across Canada?

Ms. Paula Speevak: I believe they were interested in our connections with the network, as well as expertise in volunteer engagement.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Volunteer engagement—that would be experience that, it would be fair to say, WE didn't have a track record of. Is that fair?

Ms. Paula Speevak: My understanding was that their experience was in youth engagement and connecting with schools, and that they were looking to us for that additional expertise in volunteer engagement.

Mr. Michael Cooper: They didn't have a track record of connecting young people with not-for-profit organizations, and they were looking to Volunteer Canada and your experience, your expertise. Am I correct?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Expertise in volunteer engagement—that's correct.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Would volunteer engagement include things like volunteer matching?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Possibly. I can't speak to their experience with volunteer matching.

Mr. Michael Cooper: In a June 28 Globe and Mail article, you were quoted as saying, "There would have been fees for that" in relation to work for which WE was offering to pay Volunteer Canada. Could you elaborate on what you meant by "fees"?

Ms. Paula Speevak: They indicated that there was a fee of \$100,000 to serve as a strategic partner within the program.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Would that be a flat fee? Could you elaborate on what that payment would be?

Ms. Paula Speevak: We did not start to negotiate a memorandum of understanding. That would have been the next step, but given the fact that we had concerns about program elements, we weren't pursuing that.

The Chair: This will be the last question, Michael. We're a little over. Go ahead.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay.

What was the explanation provided by WE as to why they didn't take you up on any of your recommendations in terms of some of the questions you had about the program delivery and the elements provided therein?

Ms. Paula Speevak: My sense was that there were some things where there was the flexibility to incorporate, for example community learning and other elements. However, with the key issues that were of concern to us, which I've outlined, there was no flexibility to modify those.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

As a point of clarification, what do both of you mean—either of you can explain it—by "onboarding"? What do you mean?

Mr. Michael Cooper: That's a type of training. It was in the government's press release in relation to work that WE was undertaking.

The Chair: All right. We'll have to ask the government, then. Maybe they can define it for me.

We'll turn to Ms. Dzerowicz and then go to Mr. Fortin.

Ms. Dzerowicz.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Speevak, thank you so much for being here. Thank you for your leadership and for everything you do with your organizations to create stronger communities and a better Canada.

I want to talk about your point that volunteers should not be paid an hourly wage. You know, just in terms of a lot of the information that's come out today, and I think just in understanding what our government's been trying to do, when we go back in time to mid-April, we didn't know the details of how things would unfold. We were urgently trying to support big groups of Canadians. There was this huge desire to make sure we were helping our youth.

The \$9-billion program was created. There were four key elements, and there was a very strong desire to have a service or volunteer component as part of it. There was a huge desire to ensure that we were providing as many opportunities as possible to support our youth. We knew that for those in university or college, their year was ended very quickly. They probably weren't going to be able to access many of the opportunities or jobs that they were thinking about for the summer, and we had no clue what would actually be happening in the fall. All four programs were meant to try to give as many opportunities as possible for youth to gain experience, to do something meaningful and to earn a little bit of money in order to continue to support their ambitions in terms of training and more education.

My understanding about the service or volunteer component of the program was that it was always meant to, one, help provide some of those opportunities across Canada for our youth, and two, help a lot of our not-for-profits. We were hearing and getting information that they were desperate to get some additional help to support maybe some COVID-related additional need that was in various communities right across this country. The third component was to try to provide some additional extra dollars to students, because we knew that many of them were not going to have the opportunity that they would normally have to apply for jobs. That grant component was actually a small portion of it, but it was an important component.

My question to you is this: Would you say there's mixed opinion within the charity and not-for-profit sector around whether or not it's okay to provide stipends or grants versus not providing them?

Before you even answer that, I want to stipulate that, for us, I don't think the intention ever was to provide an hourly wage. It really was a stipend or grant. It really was to provide some additional financial support. It was never meant to be an hourly wage. That was never the intention at all. Again, it was part of a huge bucket of \$9 billion, in multiple programs, to be able to do everything we possibly could to help our youth not to be at a complete loss or at a detriment because of this COVID, and to do everything we could to provide them with as many opportunities as possible to grow their skills and try to earn some dollars while trying to serve their respective communities.

Would you say there's mixed opinion within the industry around whether stipends and grants are appreciated?

• (1800)

Ms. Paula Speevak: I can't speak for all organizations in the sector, and of course you would always find mixed opinions. However, I want to get back to the three things you raise: the desire to provide meaningful opportunities to students, the desire to support students financially and the desire to help non-profit organizations with their need for volunteers.

I think that in April many things were new to many organizations. As weeks went on, things quickly changed. For example, many organizations switched from an in-person service to virtual services and were able to help volunteers make that transition as well. In addition to that, many governments had announced a call for volunteers to come forward to help.

In terms of the condition you're referring to in early April, when the thought was about helping organizations with their need for volunteers, I think that changed drastically as time went on. That's not to say that there are no organizations still in need of volunteers or no communities that do need that, but I think that's one thing that's changed.

In terms of opportunities for youth, I want to point out that youth have always had the highest volunteer rate of all ages and are very generous and committed to community. All year round, they have been involved in volunteer opportunities, so I would question the idea that we need to provide an incentive for youth to volunteer. In many cases—in most cases—youth are very generous with their time.

In terms of support to the sector, I think, again, that has changed. The opportunities that are available now... You've probably all heard about these sites where people have come forward and registered their willingness to volunteer and have not been called back. Some have, and some haven't. We do know that the available opportunities and the volunteer needs in organizations are changing.

• (1805)

The Chair: We are going to end that slot there.

We'll go to Mr. Fortin, followed by Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Ms. Speevak.

Given your experience with Volunteer Canada, and the organization's expertise in volunteer service, do you think there's another organization that could have administered the program?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: I think there are many organizations in the sector that have different areas of expertise and experience related to elements of the program. For example, there are those that have experience serving youth and working with youth, those that have experience with the administration of grants and financial assistance, and those that have experience creating community learning opportunities. There are also, of course, organizations that have the experience of matching people, their skills and passions, to opportunities in organizations. I would say that there are many organizations in the sector that have some of the experience and expertise that could be required for that type of program.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Have you worked with Canada service corps in the past?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes, for the first three years of the Canada service corps program, Volunteer Canada did create this platform for connecting youth to opportunities around the country. We worked for the first three years of the program, Canada service corps, to create that, along with 200 local volunteer centres.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Do you think Canada service corps could have done the same work to administer the program?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: I'm aware of the expertise and quality of the work that many of the partners involved in Canada service corps are doing. I also think that many of them would have been and could be available to provide their experience, advice and expertise around student placements and youth engagement, as they have been doing.

Given the fact that there are various components, such as administration of financial assistance and grants, as well as providing community service learning and placements in volunteering, I think that, again, a consortium of organizations—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: It's a team effort, then.

Ms. Speevak, do you think the Canada summer jobs program, which funds summer jobs for students, could have benefited from an additional \$900 million to achieve the same objectives—perhaps even doing a better job in terms of paying these youth while adhering to minimum wage and other applicable rules?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: For those non-profit organizations that needed extra support by students over the summer, adding additional summer jobs could be a very good solution for those organizations that would need part-time or full-time positions filled in the summer.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: In March or April, did Volunteer Canada receive a call for bidders to administer the program from the federal government?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: Received calls from who...?

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Did a member of the government contact you to ask you to administer the \$900-million program?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: No.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Had you been contacted to do the same work as WE Charity, would you have been able to do it?

• (1810)

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: There are two parts to my answer.

First, about the philosophical issues I raised, our organization feels strongly about that and would have wanted to ensure that the program design respected the philosophy of volunteering and was also meeting a real need within the non-profit sector for help.

Second, did we have the capacity, and do we? As mentioned with regard to the various components, we have not worked directly with students ourselves as an organization, nor have we administered financial assistance. Those two components have not been things that our organization has done in the past. Our expertise is with volunteer engagement and creating the pan-Canadian volunteer matching platform, which has the capacity for individuals to—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Has Volunteer Canada ever managed a budget of that scale in partnership with other organizations, to administer an initiative or deliver other services, say?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes. Volunteer Canada has been involved in a number of large-scale projects that have been carried out in collaboration with others.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: Would you have been able to administer the program, in partnership with other organizations?

[English]

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Fortin. We're over time.

We'll go to Mr. Julian next. Then we'll go to Mr. Cooper and Ms. Koutrakis. I believe Ms. Gaudreau wants in, and then Mr. Fragiskatos. We'll close after that.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Ms. Speevak—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The interpreter can't hear you clearly.

[English]

The Chair: It's no wonder. I have my mike up on top of my head, hidden all amongst my hair.

Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Fortin: We like to hear you loud and clear, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you for that, Mr. Chair. My right ear will take some time to recover, I think.

Ms. Speevak, thank you for your very detailed presentation. I wish the minister had been as forthright in laying out the timelines for the course of the last few months. It's very useful.

Of course, we hope that you and your family will continue to be safe and healthy in this pandemic.

We've learned a lot of things from this first meeting. We've learned that WE would be getting, as part of its benefits, up to \$43 million out of this program. That's something that people were unaware of before this meeting. We've also heard that the proposal from WE came in exactly the same day as the Prime Minister made the announcement of the student grant program, even though public servants admitted they didn't have the details of the announcement. These are facts that we're going to have to delve into more deeply.

As you pointed out, Ms. Speevak, the alternative would have been to put more money into the Canada summer jobs programs, and of course the number of positions has been reduced, and that's something the government is going to have to answer. Why did it divert money that should have gone to providing jobs around the country through the Canada summer jobs program, which has had a massive funding shortage during this pandemic, instead of into this program that obviously is extremely controversial?

You mentioned earlier in your testimony your concerns about the volunteer provisions—the paid volunteerism and the fact these salaries or wages are actually below minimum wage right across the country. Is part of your concern the liability issue? We're not talking about volunteers. We're talking about students who are being paid less than minimum wage, which brings with it a whole range potentially of liability issues.

Ms. Paula Speevak: We have heard from individual non-profit organizations about their concern with engaging students in this program because of that, and some of them have been consulting with getting legal advice and also exploring their own philosophical views on the matter. There are also issues related to insurance and confusion about whether a volunteer is covered as an employee and how that works. We certainly have heard feedback on that.

• (1815)

Mr. Peter Julian: Yes, I come out of the non-profit sector myself, and you can't simply run roughshod over labour laws or liability issues. There is no doubt this is half-baked at best, and those concerns don't seem to have been dealt with.

You mentioned that your first contact was on April 24. Just to clarify for the record, during the previous days when ministry officials were apparently reaching out to give advice before the Prime Minister made his announcement, at no point were you contacted by any government officials prior to April 22. Is that true?

Ms. Paula Speevak: That is true. We learned of the program at the announcement.

Mr. Peter Julian: Even though you had put forward very legitimate concerns or suggestions about how to configure the program, both in a way that wouldn't be legally dicey and wouldn't put organizations at risk of liability issues, from what I understand, at no point, either in your discussions with the ministry from April 27 to May 19 or in your discussions with WE from May 25 to June 3, were your suggestions incorporated into the plan. Is that correct?

Ms. Paula Speevak: My impression from my conversations with the senior staff at the ministry was that there was an appreciation for our bringing those issues forward. Again, because it was confidential, I was not given information about whether or not they would be incorporated into the program design, but I had the impression that the advice and input was well received.

Similarly, in my discussions with WE Charity, there was an appreciation and understanding for the issues we were raising. In fact, I would say that the initial design of having learning and community exploration as part of the program seemed to have been incorporated.

Mr. Peter Julian: At no point when you spoke with the ministry officials did they mention...?

I ask because we heard in previous testimony that there needed to be a network across the country, both rural and urban. Of course, your organization has contacts across the country, and so does the impartial public service, which is how the Canada summer jobs program is administered. At no point did they raise concerns about whether or not, with this sole-source contribution agreement, over-all federal laws around bilingual service, for example, or ethics, the Auditor General, and issues of privacy....

At no point were any of these things raised. Is that correct?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Those are not things that we discussed in my conversations either with WE Charity or the minister's office.

Mr. Peter Julian: Okay.

You were offered—just so I understand, because I may have misheard it—a flat fee contract of \$100,000?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

My understanding is that they had created a budget for a number of organizations that were being called “strategic partners”, who would be of assistance in different ways. That was the amount that was suggested. When that was suggested to us, again as we were exploring what the elements of the program were, we suggested that we get a better understanding of what role and the tasks we would be performing so that we could cost it out and see what was feasible in terms of compensation. That was the amount that was mentioned to us.

The Chair: We are going to have to end it there.

Mr. Peter Julian: Could I have a final question?

The Chair: Peter, we have you at the end again.

Do you want to take it now or leave it for later?

Mr. Peter Julian: I'll take it now.

Are you aware of how many other organizations were approached? Was that figure ever mentioned to you?

Ms. Paula Speevak: No.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll turn next to Mr. Cooper.

Just to give you the lineup here, it will be Mr. Cooper, Ms. Koutrakis, Ms. Gaudreau—I believe she wanted in—and Mr. Fragiskatos. We'll end it at that.

Mr. Cooper.

• (1820)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Speevak.

Ms. Wernick, in her testimony, stated that Volunteer Canada was considered for the administration of this program.

Do you know what she could have meant by that if Volunteer Canada was never approached?

Ms. Paula Speevak: No, I don't know. I don't know what happened with us.

Mr. Michael Cooper: You don't. Okay, thank you for that.

Now, in terms of matching—an area that Volunteer Canada has extensive experience with—would you not agree that it's a pretty significant component of the Canada student summer grant program, matching students with not-for-profit organizations?

It's pretty integral.

Ms. Paula Speevak: If I could clarify one of the things about the network of 200 local volunteer centres, the reason this is an important model to us is that in each community where there is a volunteer centre, that centre knows the organizations. Therefore, when they post an opportunity on their systems, they verify whether the organization is a legitimate organization.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Right. That is one of the things that, again, is important for the purposes of this program.

Ms. Paula Speevak: Exactly. They vet the quality of the opportunities as well.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I get it. I appreciate that. Thank you for that.

You noted in your answer that some of the things that Volunteer Canada doesn't have expertise or experience in include working directly with students, administering funds or disbursing funds. On the other hand, you noted in your answer to me that the WE organization doesn't have the kind of experience with matching and with youth engagement.

It would be fair to say that there's no one organization that could do it all in terms of administering this program. Is that fair?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Again, I can't speak to WE's capacity in that sense. Knowing there are various components, it would seem that whether the government itself or an organization is administering the program, collaboration with others would be a good thing.

Mr. Michael Cooper: WE was coming to Volunteer Canada because of its specific expertise.

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It was presumably going to other organizations to establish strategic partnerships because of their expertise.

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That was expertise WE didn't have. Is that right?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Again, I can't speak to what the others were about.

Mr. Michael Cooper: But certainly in terms of the areas that WE had approached Volunteer Canada, that would be fair. Is that right?

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Okay. Thank you for that.

In answer to a question posed by Mr. Fortin, you indicated that Volunteer Canada had led or partnered in large-scale projects that had been carried out with others. Could you elaborate on what those are?

Ms. Paula Speevak: We have been involved in a national educational campaign on screening, wherein materials related to screening volunteers, particularly those working with vulnerable people, a handbook and a training program were created, and a number of local volunteer centres then provided training in their local communities. The Canada service corps project creating that pan-Canadian volunteer matching program, again, involved looking at both technology and relationships in creating a pan-Canadian, large-scale initiative that essentially took individual matching systems from individual volunteer centres into a data hub and created one portal.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Volunteer Canada first approached the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth presumably because you thought that Volunteer Canada had some expertise and might be able to provide some assistance in the delivery of the program. Is that fair?

Ms. Paula Speevak: What was most important was to get a sense of the design of it, because of some of our concerns, and in addition to that, to make sure there was awareness that the government had already invested and paid for the resources around youth engagement and this platform, which could be used and be a benefit to the program.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That's the platform that can connect youth to up to 75,000 volunteer positions.

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Those would be volunteer positions across Canada: rural and urban, a large, diverse range of volunteer opportunities to cater to a diverse range of student volunteers. Is that all fair to say?

● (1825)

Ms. Paula Speevak: Yes, except that was before the pandemic. As I mentioned, as the pandemic emerged, organizations either closed or cancelled activities and moved to more virtual services, that significantly decreased.

The Chair: We will have to end it there. Thank you, both.

We turn now to Ms. Koutrakis, followed by Ms. Gaudreau.

Annie.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Speevak, for coming before the finance committee today to discuss this very important issue, and to your team for all the work you do.

I'd like to touch a little bit more on the pay issue.

Over 35,000 students applied for the CSSG, and they understood the model used to determine their pay and the general roles and responsibilities they would take on with charities. I'd like to understand a little more why you are so opposed to this program, given the fact that students who were looking to serve their communities knew what they were signing up for and were happy with the compensation they would receive for their work and all the good they would do to fill in the gap that cash-strapped charities are not able to fill.

Ms. Paula Speevak: There are a few aspects of your question that I could address.

The first one is that there's no question that students want financial assistance, and this is one of the ways, one of the opportunities, that was offered for students to receive assistance. It is certainly understandable that students did apply. Many of them, of course, are interested in the community service aspect primarily, but it is understandable that students who need financial assistance would be applying.

In terms of their wanting to help, there are many volunteer opportunities available. What we have heard from students directly, and in my contacts with some student associations, is that many students have multiple responsibilities this summer. They may be caring for younger siblings so that their parents can work. They may have children themselves. They may be helping with elder care or helping neighbours in their community with shopping and other things, providing lots of informal assistance and volunteering. In addition to that, some are catching up with their education that was interrupted during the pandemic, and so on. Therefore, with regard to students wanting something to do, there are some opportunities available, but as I mentioned, in terms of large numbers—100,000 or even 20,000 opportunities for 20 or 27 hours a week—those do not appear to be available.

We recently did some research with IPSOS Public Affairs, asking organizations about how their volunteer programs are going. Half of them said they've had a significant decrease in volunteers. In many cases it is because they have had to close programs and cancel activities, and in some cases older volunteers have had to step aside.

I just wanted to address the issue of what the sector needed by way of help. In some cases, some organizations certainly are welcoming students and others to volunteer. In many other cases, they are overwhelmed with the number of folks generously coming forward to offer to help and don't have the positions available.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Turning to what the officials said today, they indicated that they needed a third party for the CSSG to provide direct support to youth with special needs, with the capacity to evaluate quality opportunities and the ability to make grant payments to students in a short period of time, etc. It sounds like a pretty tall order to me, and I think that everybody on the committee and anyone who's watching us would agree.

Would your organization have been able to do something like that? If so, would it have required some financial support from the government, or would you have been able to do it out of pocket and on your own?

Ms. Paula Speevak: As I mentioned earlier, there are many elements of that program that Volunteer Canada does not have expertise or experience with. Therefore, from the beginning, we did not have in mind its being something that we would be offering to administer. Our assumption was that it was going to be administered directly by government or by the Canada service corps. We weren't aware that it was being contracted or that there was a contribution agreement with an external organization, although that, of course, is an option. That was not something Volunteer Canada was putting its name forward to do.

• (1830)

The Chair: This is your last question, Annie.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: In the alternative to providing financial compensation as an incentive to volunteers, do you have any suggestions as to how we can attain the same objectives of benefiting youth while also assisting our communities that need it most?

Ms. Paula Speevak: For sure.

In terms of providing grants to students, I think that students can apply for the grant, indicating their need, and if part of the program then includes saying to students that this allows you the time to do a number of things, including attending to family, helping out in neighbourhoods, furthering education, healing from illness, a number of things, then students could indicate that. The financial assistance could be available and they could attend to the things that are important to their lives this summer.

In terms of providing opportunities and promoting the availability of all actual volunteer needs in organizations, that can be done separately as well. As I mentioned, there are many volunteer centres. There is the volunteer matching platform, and those who are interested could certainly find opportunities that exist within organizations.

In terms of helping non-profit organizations in the sector, that's a matter of looking at the resiliency fund that Imagine Canada and others have mentioned, which this sector has been requesting for recovery and resilience, and that can be done separately.

Therefore, I think that attending to students' needs for financial support can be handled with a grant. Providing opportunities to volunteer, where they exist, can be handled through the existing infrastructure, and helping the sector can be handled through a resiliency fund.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

Ms. Speevak, are you okay with another five-minute series of questions by two members each? We're a little over our end time.

We'll go to Ms. Gaudreau for five minutes and then wrap it up with Mr. Fragiskatos.

Ms. Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Ms. Speevak. It's very nice of you to give the committee more of your time.

We're talking a lot about volunteering and compensation, so I'm going to start by asking you this. How does Volunteer Canada define volunteering?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: The definition of volunteering has evolved, for sure, but essentially when somebody assists others outside their household without financial compensation and for the public good, that's considered volunteering.

Over time there's been an acceptance that there's a spectrum of involvement, so it could be somebody who keeps themselves informed about an issue. If they're interested in recycling or youth homelessness, they keep themselves informed on the issues. Further along, they may actually do something to support that issue, and further along they may actively participate with an organization or informal—

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

Would you agree that volunteering is something a person does on a voluntary basis, depending on what they're interested in?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: Volunteering is done on a voluntary basis, absolutely, yes.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Great.

Here's where I'm going with this. Earlier, we talked about the time constraints and the need to find solutions quickly. Nevertheless, the process to award the work was flawed.

I'd like to ask you a question about the fact that the young people doing the volunteering will be compensated.

Unfortunately, the Canada summer jobs program was delayed, as was mentioned earlier. That hurt youth, who could have acquired work experience. I don't want to take away from the benefits of volunteering, but I'd like to know whether you think funding could have been allocated quickly to an existing program to help youth.

• (1835)

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: I'm not sure I understand the question. I'm sorry.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: In a pandemic situation, it's important to value volunteer work, which should be done on a voluntary basis. It's also possible to compensate those who volunteer. That being said, would it not have been advisable to enhance the existing system right away?

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: In Canada and in many countries around the world, we are really fortunate that people are very generous of spirit, particularly in emergencies and difficult times. An abundance of individuals have stepped forward, willing to volunteer. As I mentioned, many systems have been set up by provinces and

regions and locally, where there's been a call to volunteer, and thousands and thousands of people have come forward. It's human nature that when you can do something to make the world better, you want to do it. The motivation and inspiration for volunteers is to help others.

In terms of an incentive, my sense is that people do not need an incentive in order to come forward and that people, including youth, are doing that. Youth are very generous in wanting to ensure that the communities where they live and the planet they live on are thriving. I don't think an incentive is needed. My sense is that we are very lucky to have thousands and thousands of people coming forward to volunteer.

For students who need financial assistance, I think that can be handled, again, through grants separately, thereby also giving the message to those who are interested in volunteering that there are some opportunities that can be checked out, but not to connect them.

The Chair: You have time for a quick question, Ms. Gaudreau.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Speevak. You did a great job answering my question. That brings me to my next question.

As far as administering volunteer opportunities is concerned, how is government assistance perceived versus support provided otherwise? Volunteering is something a person wants to do voluntarily. You just said it was an incentive, but it wasn't necessary.

[English]

Ms. Paula Speevak: My sense is that, again, when we look at the three things that seemed to be put forward as good intentions—helping communities in need of volunteers, helping students in need of funds and making volunteer opportunities accessible to youth—those are three things that many of us would support wholeheartedly. I think in intermeshing them the way they have been, that has created the problem.

My sense is that we could find a way to provide a grant to students, based on their needs and circumstances or based on the availability. At the same time, make the opportunities known to youth. If that's a possibility, students certainly can be involved in communities. For organizations that need help, we could consider the resiliency fund for organizations.

The Chair: Thank you, both.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Ms. Speevak.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: That's no problem, Ms. Gaudreau.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you'll be wrapping it up.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Speevak, for being here and for the work that you are doing and that the organization has done.

I want to pick up on this topic of incentives. I take your point that you would hope that volunteerism would be based on an understanding of goodwill and calling folks to service just because of the need to give back, that there shouldn't be an incentive to draw them towards volunteering, that there shouldn't be an incentive in place and that we should act on a very different sort of ethic. I understand that argument, but isn't it fair to say that COVID-19 is a unique phenomenon, a unique experience, that has given rise to many new and unprecedented social challenges and economic challenges. Can we really count on the goodwill of people to step forward and fill all the various needs that exist?

I mean, many will do that just because they want to contribute. Many existing volunteers, for example, would do that, but what happens when we have all these challenges that exist? Wouldn't an incentive like the one that was built into the Canada student service grant serve a good purpose in attracting many young people to get involved in their communities and, if they were to get involved, perhaps to understand more about the importance of volunteering, an understanding that maybe they didn't have before? What do you think of that kind of argument?

• (1840)

Ms. Paula Speevak: I think you're correct in saying that the pandemic has really caused us all to question what we consider to be a normal state of affairs, absolutely. In the case of the needs in communities, it can be handled in two ways: one, provide more funding for student jobs to fulfill the needs in communities so that people are paid a decent wage and are working part time or full time through a program; and two, make volunteer opportunities available.

I don't think they need to be put together in the way that has been suggested. I think we could have decent wages and good work opportunities that are meaningful to help out in the pandemic and make volunteer opportunities, where they exist, available as well.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Ms. Speevak, in that case, then, are you of the view that Volunteer Canada could have ensured that there would be, say, 100,000 placements of young people to volunteer? That was the intent of the Canada student service grant program. Could Volunteer Canada have helped ensure this for the Government of Canada if they in fact were the organization chosen to administer the program rather than WE?

Ms. Paula Speevak: My view is that there isn't the need for 100,000 placements in non-profit organizations, from what I've been hearing from colleagues in various regions. Again, I'm not speaking for all organizations or all communities. There is certainly still a need. What I did hear since the launching of the program, and from those who were being approached prior to the program being launched, is that people were feeling pressure to create opportunities that were not necessarily essential or things that were furthering their mission, but really were to fulfill the requirements of a program that needed placements for students. It isn't, in my view, the way the non-profit sector and anyone ought to be interacting that it needs—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Here is my last point.

The needs are great, though. I know you've heard from others that 100,000 placements wouldn't be needed, but I can tell you that

I hear from organizations in my community that are in desperate need of volunteers. That's just the few organizations that I've talked to over the past couple of weeks. London is a big city, but it's not the biggest. If I'm hearing it in London, we can be sure that other communities are faced with the same sort of concerns. I don't want to belabour the point, though. You hold that position and I might respectfully disagree with that.

The last point I want to put to you is really an important one. It's about reach. If Volunteer Canada was the organization working with the government to help find opportunities for young people and to help place young people in pure volunteer roles along the lines of what you would hope for, with no incentive but just pure volunteer roles, what would be the reach of Volunteer Canada? What would be the number of young people your organization would be in contact with?

WE, I understand, has the ability to reach out to about two and a half million young people. It also has ties to around 7,000 schools across the country. Does Volunteer Canada have that kind of reach? Is it comparable or not?

• (1845)

Ms. Paula Speevak: Just to make it clear, Volunteer Canada wasn't presenting itself as having the capacity to implement the program in any way, and nor did we question.... As I said at the beginning, our issues were with the program itself, not the selection process and not the selection of WE Charity as a—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No, I understand that. I'm just trying to understand this whole question. One of the questions that's at play here is why the WE organization was selected and why public servants decided to advise that WE should be chosen. If that's the question, then there's another question, logically: Was there another organization well placed to carry out the administration of the program? WE apparently has the ability to have a huge reach. I'm just wondering about Volunteer Canada's reach.

Ms. Paula Speevak: Once again, we were not considered or considering administering the program. I can't comment on the capacity of other organizations and how many others could have had the capacity. I can simply comment, as I am, on the philosophy and values that we had concerns about—

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Respectfully, Ms. Speevak, I'm not making the point—

The Chair: We'll have to end it there. We're well over.

With that, Ms. Speevak, we certainly want to thank you. I think one key point you made was about the generosity of spirit of volunteers, and we certainly see that across Canada. I know we see a lot of it in P.E.I. Thanks for appearing. Thanks for the work that your organization does, as well.

Thank you, to committee members, for the questions you've asked today and the research you've done, and certainly to the analysts and the clerk. A series of meetings in July is not the usual thing, but here we are, and we will do it again on the 21st, when we'll have the Clerk of the Privy Council as a witness at that point, among others.

With that, thank you all. Again, thank you, Ms. Speevak, for coming and answering our questions.

To all the members, have a good weekend.
The meeting is adjourned.

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