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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number eight of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I would like to start by acknowledging that I am joining you today from the traditional territory of the Haudenisaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonton nations.

Pursuant to the order of reference of April 20, 2020, the committee is meeting for the purpose of receiving evidence concerning matters related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. During this meeting, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules.

As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, then you will need to also switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may want to allow for a short pause when switching languages. It's found on the icon at the bottom centre of your screen.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can either click on the microphone icon to activate your mike or hold down the space bar while you are speaking. When you release the bar, your mike will mute itself, similar to a walkie-talkie.

I offer a reminder that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the "raise hand" function. This will signal to the chair your interest to speak. In order to do so, you should click on "participants" at the bottom of the screen. When the list pops up, you will see next to your name that you can click "raise hand".

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute. The use of headsets is strongly encouraged. If you have earbuds with a microphone,

please hold the microphone near your mouth when you are speaking to boost the sound quality for our interpreters.

Should any technical challenges arise—for example, in relation to interpretation or if you are accidentally disconnected—please advise the chair or clerk immediately. The technical team will work to resolve them. Please note that we may need to suspend during these times, as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Before we get started, can everyone click on their screen in the top right-hand corner and ensure that they are on gallery view? With this view, you should be able to see all of the participants in a grid view to ensure that all video participants can see one another.

During this meeting, we will follow the same rules that usually apply to the opening.

It's time for me to welcome our witnesses: from the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, National Chief Robert Bertrand; from the National Association of Friendship Centres, Christopher Sheppard-Buote, president, and Jocelyn Formsma, executive director; from the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council, Larry Frost, president, and Lindsay Swooping Hawk Kretschmer, executive director; and from the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre, Edith Cloutier, executive director.

Chief Bertrand, we are ready to hear your opening statement. You have five minutes, please.

National Chief Robert Bertrand (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples): Good morning, Mr. Chair, committee members and fellow witnesses.

My name is Robert Bertrand, National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, CAP. I thank the committee members and staff for this invitation to share our constituents' concerns.

Mr. Chair, we appreciate this invitation to appear. We also would like to thank Jamie Schmale for his recent work in Parliament and in this committee to ensure that the urban indigenous population is heard.

Since 1971, CAP has been fighting tirelessly for the rights, interests and needs of off-reserve status and non-status Indians, Métis and southern Inuit people. In the 2016 Daniels v. Canada decision, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that non-status and Métis people are Indians under the Constitution. This decision means that our people are without question an area of federal responsibility.

We are proud to be a largely indigenous, women-led network, which is also a rarity, with over 70% of our local friendship centre executive directors being women and five of our six provincial and territorial executive directors also being women. The majority of our board is women, and the majority of our executive is women.

What I really need you to hear today is this. Friendship centres' COVID-19 response has been nothing short of heroic in the face of enormous systemic barriers. They have become food deliverers, elder caregivers and shelter providers.

Among the systemic barriers to this essential work is the distinctions-based approach to COVID-19 relief funding, which left many urban indigenous community members we serve as unseen due to ongoing jurisdictional wrangling between federal and provincial governments; the lack of resources, training and protective equipment; and the fact that we are not being engaged nationally on urban-specific approaches.

Despite these significant barriers, the friendship centre movement has once again demonstrated the effectiveness of its community-driven principles. We remain trusted and culturally relevant, and we continue to provide those holistic supports for all indigenous people living in urban, rural and northern communities from coast to coast to coast.

The NAFC continues to seek funds to ensure that urban indigenous communities are served in this time. We are extremely concerned that reopening parts of the economy will cause the first wave to spill over onto the people we serve. We are still very much in the first wave while trying to prepare for the second wave that may come.

Friendship centres should not be at risk of decimation because we answered the call when others could not or would not, because we spent and served without proper equipment, because we put aside any regular fundraising and social enterprises and because we showed up. This is what's at risk if Canada continues to refuse to develop an action plan based on its own population data.

When this is all over, the communities we continue to serve will still have all the underlying and pre-existing matters to deal with. Properly equipping and resourcing friendship centres to appropriately respond is but one way to invest in restarting the economy. As you know, friendship centres, as civil society hubs, offer or partner to offer supports in such areas as health, education, child care, economic development and training.

• (1120)

The Chair: We're at five minutes, Christopher, so I'll leave it there. If your further testimony doesn't come up through our conversations, it can be submitted.

Now we'll go to Lindsay Swooping Hawk Kretschmer and Larry Frost, representing the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer (Executive Director, Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council): *Sekoh*, good morning, everyone.

Thank you for the introduction. *She:kon*.

It is an honour to be here with you today on behalf of the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council, TASSC, which is a coalition in Toronto made up of 18 not-for-profit indigenous-led organizations.

Thank you for the introduction of our president, Larry Frost, who joins us today. We are also joined in spirit by those other 17 leaders who represent the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council. They're behind me, as you can see.

I want to begin by saying that, since 1995, TASSC has been a coalition of strength, a group of agencies that came together to collaborate, plan and undertake the work of research policy and advocacy toward building a better Toronto for urban indigenous people. Since 1995 they have done and continue to do that extremely well. Each TASSC member represents a unique mandate. We have child welfare, justice, education, employment and a whole host of other services and programs across the spectrum.

You likely know this, but Ontario is the most populous province in the country based on the data from the 2016 census, and Toronto is the most populous area in Ontario. There are an estimated 80,000 urban indigenous people in Toronto, yet there are fewer than 30 indigenous-led non-profits serving the needs of thousands of indigenous people in our city.

It is also estimated that approximately 90% of indigenous children are living below LICO, the low-income cut-off, which would assume that they then are living in poverty.

There's considerable work that these agencies are undertaking individually and collectively to respond to the many needs that our city faces. I will say that the TASSC member agencies, independent of TASSC, are really carrying their responsibility for the people for an entire city. TASSC is a coalition that showcases strength, resilience and the fortitude of indigenous leadership and community agencies with a focus on community, unity and services for people.

At the onset of this pandemic, TASSC member agencies responded without hesitation to the needs of the community. We quickly mobilized and organized to support the community in extraordinary ways. From food hampers to PPE to virtual programming, we have done and continue to do it all. The work has not stopped for any of us. TASSC and its members have risen and will continue to rise to the occasion. We have collectively morphed into a central source of information, coordination, strength and support to the indigenous community. We have elevated our profile, advocacy and fundraising efforts to demonstrate that, despite the enormous challenges presented by this pandemic, we will prevail together.

From the onset of the crisis, we did not wait for instructions or permission. We acted and we acted swiftly and responsibly. In a time when the world is recoiling, we have emerged stronger than ever. We have taken stock of what this virus is teaching us because, make no mistake, it is here to teach us something. The old way was not working; something needs to change. It is here to remind us to act selflessly and to extend our love, kindness and gratitude to all of life and to fulfill our roles and responsibilities with courage.

We honour and stand in solidarity with all those who have worked in the service of others during this challenging time, and we will continue to act without hesitation. We need for our friends, allies and governments at all levels to act swiftly and committedly, as we have done and continue to do. We cannot do this alone. We need you to emerge as change-makers and champions alongside us. We need support in the capacity to plan, coordinate and implement this work in partnership.

It is estimated that there are over 6,000 indigenous-led non-profits across the country in urban areas serving the needs of what, again, is estimated to be near 80% of us living in urban areas across the country.

• (1125)

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer: As we move together into a renewed future, TASSC recommends three essential actions to this committee for consideration.

Number one, act now on affordable housing for urban indigenous families, seniors and singles. The time for action on this issue is now.

Number two, commit to exploring concrete opportunities for federal resource allocation for indigenous peoples who come to urban centres to access programs.

Number three, develop a table or mechanism that formally connects urban indigenous coalitions directly to the federal government that would meet regularly to develop and implement responses.

Lastly, in closing, I want to acknowledge my TASSC colleagues and the leaders who form our coalition. I am proud to be part of this group of incredible heroes, leaders, and change-makers. Their collective gifts, tenacity and wisdom are beyond inspiring. The strength and love they have for our city is unconditional and unstoppable.

Niá:wen on behalf of TASSC.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You're right on time.

We now have, from the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre, Edith Cloutier, the executive director.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Edith Cloutier (Executive Director, Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre): Hello, everyone.

[*Translation*]

I would like to extend special greetings to Ms. Bérubé, the member of Parliament for my constituency.

In appearing before this committee, I would first like to honour the memory of two young men from our community who passed away under tragic circumstances. Mathieu Pageau, age 41, took his own life on April 16, and last Friday...

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I am trying to listen to the English version. They're both at equal volume, so I have trouble hearing. I'm going to switch to French because it's easier for me. I don't know if other people are having the same problem with the translation.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Evelyn Lukyniuk): Ms. Cloutier, if you look at the bottom of your screen, you will see a button for interpretation. When you speak French, you must click on the button and then select "Français".

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Okay. I have done that.

Should I start over? Have you reset the clock?

[*English*]

The Chair: You can start from the top again. We'll reset the clock.

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Thank you.

Chi-meegwetch for having me here. I consider this a privilege.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

My apologies. I will go back to French.

As I was saying, in appearing with this group of witnesses, I would like to honour the memory of two young men from our community who passed away under tragic circumstances. Mathieu Pageau, age 41, took his own life on April 16, and last Friday, Nathan Wapache-Hoque, a young 19-year-old Cree man, was found dead in a dumpster in downtown Val-d'Or.

These lives lost are collateral damage from COVID-19. What did these two indigenous men have in common, other than a tragic end? Previously, their moccasins had carried them to the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre while they were going through a period of profound distress and great vulnerability, searching for an outstretched hand, for a sense of culture and identity.

In Val-d'Or, the Friendship Centre is like a great white pine tree that had served as a landmark for the urban indigenous community for 45 years. Our services cover a wide range of front-line needs in health care, social services, education, child and family services, skills development and social economy, as well as community housing.

Our services, like those of other friendship centres across the country, take a culturally relevant and safe approach that incorporates the world of meanings and relationships among indigenous people.

When the pandemic hit us hard at the Friendship Centre, we did what we have always done: we took care of each other.

As early as the day after the Quebec government declared a health emergency on March 13, we put in place a crisis management measures plan for COVID-19. Our response was local, community-based and immediate: we took action to protect the health, nutritional, physical and psychological safety of families, youth, women, men, seniors, and those who are homeless or have been released from prison.

We adjusted the access to our legal services and psychosocial intervention, and the medical services in our clinic to avoid disruption of our services to our members. We were aware that this unprecedented crisis would bring its share of consequences over the short, medium and long term.

The issue of funding did not guide our choice to take adequate measures to ensure the safety and well-being of our community during the pandemic. We took action because it was urgent and because it was the right thing to do. Fighting this crisis comes at a price. It is reassuring to see that the Canadian government has made efforts to protect indigenous people by setting up a \$350 million emergency fund in response to COVID-19.

[English]

The Chair: You have one minute.

[Translation]

Ms. Edith Cloutier: One of the blind spots in Canada's response to the pandemic is urban indigenous people. It would be unfortunate if the severity of the current crisis made organizations helping the most vulnerable become very vulnerable themselves. Based on our experience over the past eight years in managing public health crises, we can say the pandemic has intensified distress and vulnerability among urban indigenous people. It is wrong to claim that we are all equal in the face of the pandemic. The tragic fates of Mathieu, Nathan and so many others are there to remind us of that.

Meegwetch.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much. You're right on time. That's perfect.

We have six-minute rounds of questions now. My list shows Mr. Schmale, Mr. Battiste, Madam Bérubé and Madam Gazan.

Jamie Schmale, you have six minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the time and the content from our witnesses.

This question is for you, National Chief Bertrand.

National Chief, could you tell me CAP's role in determining community priorities for off-reserve and urban communities under COVID-19 indigenous community response funding?

National Chief Robert Bertrand: As you know, CAP and its PTOs are all democratically elected representative organizations. Our PTOs are the ones that are serving the off-reserve communities, and it's important to note that these communities are the ones that know what their needs are and, if they do get funds, where these funds are needed.

We have been discriminated against because of the distinctions-based approach taken by this government. As you know, in the Charter of Rights and the Constitution, there is no place there that talks about AFN, ITK and MNC. What it does say is that Indians, Inuit and Métis should be included; nowhere does it say there's a three-distinctions-based approach.

It's very important to make it clear to this government, and I think this is what we will be trying to do. It's to make sure that we are all included in the decisions, to better help the indigenous population, whether they are on reserve or off reserve or in urban centres or rural areas or whatever.

• (1135)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: What steps does CAP need to see equal treatment under the COVID-19 indigenous community support funding?

National Chief Robert Bertrand: Well, again, it's to be treated as equal. I don't know if I mentioned it in my opening remarks, but we signed a political accord back in 2018. That has to be worked on. We have been working on it, but it is so slow to get the resources to implement some of these items that were included. The other thing that we could suggest to the government is that they did sign on to UNDRIP, but now we urge them to please not only sign it but to follow up on what UNDRIP really stands for.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Was CAP aware of the government's plan to respond to COVID-19 for indigenous peoples? What was your reaction to the government's announcement?

National Chief Robert Bertrand: I believe CAP was aware of the announcement on March 13. We had already reached out to request that CAP and its PTOs be included in the federal response policies before that announcement was made, but we didn't hear the criteria for the competition for funding until, I believe, mid-April, and the results weren't shared until late April.

We lost a month. People would have had time to prepare, but again, because of this distinctions-based approach, we were left out. We are hoping.... That is one of the reasons why we are here today. It's to make sure that—

The Chair: You have one minute.

National Chief Robert Bertrand: —your committee suggests strongly to the government that not only the three distinctions-based organizations be included, but also all the NIOs be included in their discussions with indigenous peoples.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Let's continue quickly on the distinctions-based approach. Considering CAP represents indigenous people of all distinctions, how can this committee help ensure your constituents are not excluded from distinctions-based policies?

National Chief Robert Bertrand: Again, you can make sure that you follow up on how the political accord is coming along. For any new programs that are announced by CIRNAC or ISC that affect indigenous people, make sure they are not only reserved for distinctions-based groups, but open to everyone.

The Chair: We're at time right there, Chief. I'm sorry to interrupt.

It's time to move on to our second speaker.

Mr. Battiste, for six minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm really happy to have the ability to discuss urban indigenous people today. I think the committee needs to get a better understanding, just as I do, of some of the barriers that exist for indigenous people who are off reserve.

I want to focus a bit on the friendship centres. What challenges has COVID-19 created for your organization? I know that friendship centres are often a gathering place for urban indigenous people. Without that ability to gather, what programs are you currently able to offer during the COVID era? Are they being communicated? How are we communicating with those you represent?

• (1140)

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma (Executive Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): I could jump in and start on that, and then hand it over to some of my colleagues.

Hello, Jaime. It's good to see you.

There are a few things. I think immediately once the pandemic was declared, friendship centres and their partner organizations leaped into action to ensure that the community was okay by finding out where people were and finding out what was needed. As to

the immediate needs that were met as people were being isolated, they made sure people had food and supplies, including cultural medicines and home-cooked meals, those kinds of things.

What we've found is there are challenges being faced right now in the quick transition of programs and services. As you said, we were used to coming together at a building, bricks and mortar, and a lot of friendship centres have now had to transition to virtual-based supports. Access to protective equipment for those who are still doing direct outreach to folks.... They're still meeting with people one on one. They're still trying to help youth in care, for example, so they can still see their families.

There's still some one-on-one, in-person service delivery, but there's also the virtual stuff: being able to access equipment and technology and hitting data limits, and, for some in the north, accessing Internet packages or just Internet service at all. It's about being able to lend out equipment to community members so they have a point of access for their family members for the friendship centres to check in. We have looked at program adaptation and technology.

Mental health has also been a huge challenge. As we said, we have a large number of indigenous women leading our network. They are not only the caretakers of the community, but also the caretakers at home. We can deal with the mental health challenge, leading through and making decisions on behalf of the community. Many feel like they're not doing enough or are feeling guilty about what is and is not being done.

On the coordination of resources, we know that in the urban spaces not a whole lot of resources were made available from the federal government. There has also been a challenge with provincial, territorial and municipal funding. It really hasn't materialized, except for in a few provinces.

Then there's the ongoing challenge of goods, like food, sanitation goods and other kinds of infrastructure supports to renovate centres into safer spaces for the community.

I'll just pause there for now. Those have been the immediate and ongoing challenges.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I'll stick with the friendship centres. There are barriers right now for indigenous people who are living in urban settings. For a lot of the programs that we provide for municipalities or urban locations, we believe that indigenous people would be included in those, but often there are challenges so that they can't access the programs. Are you hearing a lot about that during the COVID era, or do you feel like the programs that we've rolled out in urban settings have been easy to access for first nations and indigenous people off reserve?

The Chair: One minute.

Ms. Jocelyn Formsa: I'll just make one quick point on that. What we find is different from what first nations are able to offer. I can't make a blanket statement on that because there are some exceptions, but the friendship centres really have offered that culturally appropriate wraparound support. It's a bit more than what you might be receiving if you were getting financial aid, or if you were able to get access to a food bank, or something like that. Friendship centres have the trust with the community members so they're able to do a lot more with a single interaction. I think that's what's unique and what's really been missing. I know a lot of first nations are doing their best to try to do outreach and support their off-reserve members, but often they're just physically not able to offer that full wraparound support for those members. I think that's where we need to partner and work together to ensure that we're not leaving those gaps for off-reserve first nations.

• (1145)

The Chair: That's our time. Thank you very much.

Next we go to the Bloc Québécois, with Sylvie Bérubé, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses with us at this committee meeting.

My question is for Ms. Cloutier, from the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre.

Welcome, Ms. Cloutier. I would like to know, what is one of the biggest obstacles you must face right now that makes it harder to take meaningful and humane steps on the ground for the native friendship centres?

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Thank you for your question. Ms. Bérubé.

I agree with my colleagues on the issues facing native friendship centres.

Actually, the federal government currently does not recognize urban realities—I believe we have heard the various stakeholders speak eloquently about it. Urban indigenous needs are being ignored. We saw this with the funding provided to First Nations in response to COVID-19. We have also heard it, and I think we will hear it again, in terms of taking this distinctions-based approach to service delivery. This approach focuses on recognition of the unique characteristics of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. As a result, a large segment of the indigenous population, the urban indigenous, is invisible. This is evident in the field, given the difficulty of ac-

cessing funding methods specifically designed for the urban environment.

When we have to cope with and are engulfed in a global crisis, we see that access to limited funding—and indigenous Services Canada uses this distinctions-based approach, for example—makes it difficult to structure an adequate response in terms of services, which need to be reorganized and reviewed, and more importantly, reviewed as a matter of urgency. As a result, people are left without a voice, as it were. That is why we are grateful for this forum. It is a privilege to be able to bring that currently silent, unheard voice to you, because we want to be able to provide direct services.

A program specific to native friendship centres existed until about 10 years ago. Unfortunately, the program was merged into a broader program, which made funding for native friendship centres more precarious.

One of the government's key responses would be to bring back a program focused on supporting native friendship centres as front-line service organizations in over 100 cities across Canada.

This recognition would come with adequate funding so that we could provide answers to the community, front-line answers to an organization that is a pan-Canadian movement, let us not forget. Mostly governed by women, friendship centres are the largest community service infrastructure responding to the vast and very specific needs of people who are marginalized. The centres serve many people.

The restructuring that eliminated the native friendship centre program had disastrous consequences. This is even more evident in a pandemic.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Ms. Cloutier.

I have another question.

What are your biggest concerns during this COVID-19 pandemic?

It goes back a little to what you mentioned earlier.

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Yes, I mentioned that in my presentation. It is totally wrong to claim that we are all equal in the face of a pandemic.

For example, how can you stay at home if you have no home?

How can we cover basic needs in a time of crisis when we are already struggling to do so in normal times?

How can we feel safe staying at home when that same home harbours violence?

• (1150)

[*English*]

The Chair: You have one minute.

[Translation]

Ms. Edith Cloutier: We have mentioned this before: when your mental health is fragile, how do you cope with anxiety and depression?

The pandemic will be transitory, but social inequalities will always remain. A number of studies have brought highlighted gaps in health care. In fact, in terms of health and quality of life, we know that this pandemic will just exacerbate the inequalities.

Friendship centres provide leadership. They have organizational agility that allows them to act swiftly, to take charge of an emergency situation and to act directly on the ground. I feel that, while we are dealing with this crisis, we also must look at the post-COVID-19 issue, because we will still have to meet needs once the pandemic is over.

As I said earlier, the social inequalities will become more and more pronounced.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Ms. Cloutier.

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Thank you for your question.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're perfectly on time.

Now for six minutes, we have Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Chair.

My first question is for the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council.

Lindsay, according to the Aboriginal Housing Management Association, systemic impacts of colonization, including the forced incarceration of children in residential schools, and systemic barriers including institutional racism, patriarchy and higher numbers of indigenous children aging out of care has resulted in indigenous people being eight times more likely to experience homelessness when compared to the rest of the Canadian population. This has become even more pronounced with the COVID-19 crisis.

Do you think the current federal response is adequate to address the crisis of urban indigenous homelessness? If not, can you identify some of those gaps?

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer: With all due respect, if the current federal response were adequate, I don't know that we would be having this conversation. I don't know that, if we represent about 3% of the population here in Toronto as indigenous people, we would represent over 16% of the homeless. I don't know that the litany of plight statistics that currently face our people would remain such if we had solutions. We do need capital. We do need swift, actionable responses. We're past the time for consultation, the time for talking. We need some land, quite frankly we do. In line with reconciliation, with MMIWG, we need to coordinate with each other to start thinking about some of those vacant properties, carving off some land and returning it to indigenous groups to build affordable housing for indigenous peoples, to respond to these issues.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My next question is for Christopher or Jocelyn from the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Prior to 2018 the government provided \$54 million for the entire country for urban organizations and communities, which I believe is completely inadequate. This has also been noted by your organization, which has called for more funding for services to meet the needs of urban indigenous people. Given the large number of indigenous people living in urban centres, how could the government better support culturally and socially relevant services and programs to respond to the distinct needs of certain indigenous groups? Can you identify some of the current systemic gaps that make urban indigenous populations more vulnerable?

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I'm being told that everyone on the phone-in line is not able to hear the latest questions and answers.

• (1155)

The Clerk: Yes. We were told there was a problem with the phone lines being scrambled. They are resetting the phone lines right now.

The Chair: I'll suspend.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1155)

The Chair: You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard-Buote: There is a lot of talk about distinctions-based and what that means. Anecdotally, we look at how the government interacts with three large indigenous representative organizations. A policy paper on the challenges will soon come from NAFC, taken from a feminist, queer perspective that looks at the intersectionality of urban indigenous people and also looks at challenges to the government's stance on GBA+ analysis. If you look at the COVID-19 financial response and whether that was truly put through a GBA+ analysis—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, sorry, I'm not trying to be interrupting everybody, but the people on the phone lines still can't hear.

The Chair: Gary, who's on the phone line?

Mr. Gary Vidal: It's a bunch of staff from our side.

Some other people have people on the phone line as well.

The Chair: I'm not sure how much longer we can hold off, because we have all our witnesses and committee members here.

Madam Clerk, can you advise?

The Clerk: Perhaps we should suspend for a moment while I try to get this sorted out.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, if we have all the members present and the witnesses are able to answer the questions, could we not just continue? All the people who are supposed to be here are on Zoom now. Can we not just give the others a written transcript of what was said? They have no speaking role in this anyway.

The Chair: The clerk has the floor now.

Go ahead, Clerk.

The Clerk: I'm told that the languages are working well on ParIVU right now, if staff wish to listen there.

The Chair: Can you pass along that information? Hopefully, someone has picked that up.

Given that they are able to access it through ParIVU, I think we should continue.

I will give Ms. Gazan two minutes to complete.

• (1200)

Mr. Christopher Sheppard-Buote: We've also done that GBA+ analysis of some of the announcements, because we feel that they are not responsive.

Specific gaps are in employment and training, considering the massive budget that Canada has for indigenous employment and training, the lack of that for urban people, the fact that there's no urban indigenous or indigenous youth-specific funding support or program, which did exist when friendship centres had a unique core program as my colleague Edith spoke about, and just generally appreciating and acknowledging our 70-year history in this country as the majority of us don't live in Inuit Nunangat, Métis homelands or first nations. The funding should just be reflective, and Canada needs to follow its own population data in creating policy and programs.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you very much.

I have one final question. This is for the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples.

Chief Bertrand, you indicated in your opening presentation that the \$15-million government allocation in response to COVID was not adequate, given the fact that, as you had mentioned, prior to this we've known that indigenous people have higher rates of poverty and experience greater homelessness.

How has that impacted nationally the ability to respond to the diverse needs of indigenous peoples?

The Chair: Could you do that in 30 seconds, please?

National Chief Robert Bertrand: The little amount of money we have received has created quite a bit of, how should I put this, uneasiness with our PTOs, so much so that the board of directors met. The \$250,000 is an insult, and we will be sending the money back.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

National Chief Robert Bertrand: Mr. Chair, I would just like to inform the committee of news from CAP this morning.

The Chair: We'll wait for that opportunity to come up later.

Right now, we're going to go to Mr. Viersen, for five minutes. This is a five-minute round.

Mr. Viersen, go ahead, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Mr. Bertrand, please finish your thought.

National Chief Robert Bertrand: The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples has been left with no choice but to initiate legal proceedings against the Government of Canada on behalf of the off-reserve and urban indigenous peoples over ongoing inequitable treatment in violation of their rights.

Government continues to underfund, deny their rights of self-determination, and violate rights under the Constitution and UNDRIP through their policies. We have highlighted these inequities before and will continue to do so, but since political leaders have not taken action, we have no choice but to seek a remedy through the courts as we did with the Daniels case.

That's what I want to bring to your attention this morning.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: On a point of order, is anyone hearing a high-pitched buzzing when Chief Bertrand is speaking?

Chief Bertrand, do you have a pot of tea on? I'm getting a really high buzzing.

Is anyone else getting that?

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes, I get a little bit of it as well.

National Chief Robert Bertrand: No, everything is turned off here.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Viersen, go ahead, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

One of the issues I've had is this. I've now had two constituents speak to me, Renée and Rodney. They are concerned about inconsistencies, both in the enforcement of the rules and in the way the benefits have been rolled out. They both live on reserve but have family who live off reserve. They have family members who are struggling to pay for groceries and things like that. They're frustrated with the fact that they're unable to get the benefits they have on reserve to their family members who are off reserve.

I'll start with you, Mr. Bertrand, and then I'll go to the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council.

Is this an experience you're hearing more about, and is there a solution that you could recommend?

• (1205)

National Chief Robert Bertrand: I'm glad that you brought it up, because just what you said shows the inequalities of what we—and by “we”, I mean CAP and our PTOs—are living through right now. With the distinctions-based approach that the government has been using, most of the help and resources are going to those on reserve, while the people off reserve are being denied access to programs, financial help and resources.

What we've been asking for, from the beginning, is just to be treated equally. As you mentioned, the people who are off reserve want the same help and the same resources that those on reserve are getting.

That is what we are asking, Mr. Chair, and by appearing before your committee this morning, we are hoping that you will also be able to stress to the government the inequalities that I mentioned before.

The Chair: You have one minute, Mr. Viersen. Go ahead.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'd just like to hear a response to that from the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council.

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer: If I may, I'd like to turn it over to our president, Larry Frost, to have a chance to speak.

Mr. Larry Frost (President, Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council): What was the question? I had a little problem with my mute button about three minutes ago and I just got back on.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: No problem at all.

I'm hearing from constituents in my area, where I represent 14 first nations. Particularly a lady named Renée was contacting me, frustrated with the fact that there seemed to be quite an inconsistency in the rollout of services and also how the lockdown has been affecting them in terms of getting groceries. That's just one of the things.

On reserve, the chief and council take care of their families fairly well. Off reserve, people who belong to their band but don't live on reserve are unable to access any help through the band.

I'm just wondering if you have a solution for that and if that's something you're hearing about.

The Chair: Please answer very quickly.

Mr. Larry Frost: Is the question about on reserve or off reserve?

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That's the challenge. It's the difference in the rollout of services.

Mr. Larry Frost: On-reserve tasks would help anyone, which we're doing with food hampers as I speak. On reserve, if we can work together somehow, it's all about helping each other, right?

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'll have to interrupt at this point, because we're well over time. Perhaps you can flesh that out later in a further question or send us a written submission.

Mr. Powlowski, you have five minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Thank you very much.

Thanks to all the witnesses.

I am from Thunder Bay, which I think has proportionately the largest urban indigenous population of any major city in Canada, so this conversation is very pertinent to us.

I'm trying to figure out the financing of the urban indigenous population. Am I right or wrong in thinking that if you're from somewhere like Pikangikum First Nation or Webequie First Nation and you're living in Thunder Bay...? A lot of people from these communities are living in Thunder Bay. Do they not continue to remain part of the Webequie and Pikangikum first nations and still get some benefits from the band?

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: I could speak to that a little bit.

Yes, you're right, and I know that many first nations, but not all of them, have extended the support funds that they've received to their off-reserve members, but I guess it goes again to what's available off reserve that they can access. I guess \$100, \$150, \$200, or \$75, whatever it is, is not going to go very far to buy groceries for a couple of weeks so you don't have to go as often, if there's any transportation, if they're still working, if there are children in the home.

I think the piece is yes, they're very much still a member, like I'm a member of Moose Cree First Nation and living here in Ottawa. The benefits that are extended to off-reserve members are limited from the first nations, which is why we're saying the friendship centres are there to provide not just the services, but also accessibility to urban indigenous community members so that they're better able to access food. The centres help them to navigate and apply for the CERB or seniors benefits. Some friendship centres have actually installed computers inside, but the keyboard is outside, so people can come and apply for federal benefits at the centre in a safe manner. They're providing that full wraparound community support that I think is very crucial for anybody. Isolation, like mental health, is affecting our people. I don't want to say more than COVID, because I know our people are either infected with COVID or have passed away from it, and we don't even really know about it because we aren't collecting the data.

I think there's a lot to what you've asked, but yes, we're still very much members of our communities, but the wraparound community support that we're able to access is very limited when we're not living on reserve, and it's the same for Inuit living in the south. Friendship centres serve tens of thousands of Inuit who are living in urban settings and it's the same for the funding that Inuit land claim organizations receive. From what we're hearing, the access for urban Inuit isn't as robust, and our president would be able to speak more to that if there's a follow-up question. We talk a lot about first nations, but I think that population also has a lot of very unique needs, which we've been doing our best to meet without necessarily the support from the regions. In some cases, yes—

• (1210)

The Chair: One minute. Go ahead.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Okay. I think you already mentioned something else I was going to ask. I think the urban indigenous population and the indigenous population as a whole are still able to claim the CERB, the wage subsidy. I assume that part of what the friendship centres are also doing is trying to help the urban indigenous community to access those other programs and other sources of funding.

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: Yes.

Maybe Edith could speak a bit more to that.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds. Go ahead.

National Chief Robert Bertrand: If nobody is answering could I just chime in?

The Chair: I'm not sure, Madam Clerk, whether we lost Ms. Cloutier or whether she was on mute.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): I think she was on mute, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay, 30 seconds, please, Ms. Cloutier.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Native friendship centres help community members access special programs, but not just during a pandemic. This is something we do every day. So the connection we have with the community helps us to get that far. Just to give you an idea, I know Thunder Bay very well—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Madam Cloutier, we're way over time. Perhaps you can conclude that in a further part of the meeting. Right now it's Mr. Vidal's time for five minutes.

Mr. Vidal, please go ahead.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is going to be for either Jocelyn or Christopher, or maybe both if they're interested. As I'm sure you're aware, the northwest region of Saskatchewan is the absolute hotbed of COVID-19 in indigenous communities. We have first nations, Métis and municipalities all working together and affected by the crisis there. Earlier on MP Battiste asked about the needs being met by friendship centres across the nation. In northwest Saskatchewan we have at least three friendship centres right in this region, in this

hotbed of activity right now, and we don't think of northwest Saskatchewan as being an urban centre.

Relative to the comment that Jocelyn made earlier about a quick transition to providing services, what are these friendship centres in northwest Saskatchewan able to do as far as contributing to this crisis on the ground and in the hotbed of activity right now?

• (1215)

Mr. Christopher Sheppard-Buote: I have the benefit of living in Saskatchewan during this time. This is, I think, the crux of what some of the visibility problems are. Our members are in over 100 communities in this country, from metropolises to 1,000-person communities. Sometimes the mid- to small-sized communities may be the community hub for indigenous people.

When we think of La Loche—La Loche comes up a lot—we think of the amazing, incredible friendship centre there led by an amazing team of people. Understand that there is this assumption that many of their members are getting support from multiple sources of funding when they're actually not.

Some of the biggest challenges we're experiencing right now are food, diapers and formula. When we reach out to large distributors, we're treated as if we were any small organization contacting them, even when we're representing, say, 10 organizations.

Our office has already sent multiple boxes of PPE to that region just to try to enable the employees to continue to do their jobs.

We have the benefit, in Saskatchewan, of having a really good relationship with the Office of the Treaty Commissioner and FSIN, and we've been trying to collaborate to do this. Not every region has that relationship and the PPE and other emergency supplies are just not available. It's extremely frustrating when you have staff who are on the front lines trying to support people and all they want is a mask. And there is no direct mechanism, even if you have a listing of distributors, to get food or diapers or formula.

When these communities are extremely close together, like, for example, Buffalo Narrows and La Loche, you get situations where communities become nervous having people travel in, say, for food.

The centres may seem like they're in a remote area, but I grew up in the Arctic in a town of 200, that was fly-in only. That's remote. La Loche is a drive, yet it's still cut off from even some of the most basic supplies. If we don't try to provide the resources and even access, it's just going to continue to harm communities and we're going to lose more and more elders, which that area has already seen.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

I know I don't have a lot of time left. This is just a quick follow-up, maybe to Christopher.

I know there is some frustration that your organization expressed with the process involved in the application and getting the money out. We're now a few more weeks down the road. We heard your comments a few weeks ago at the health committee, I believe.

Would you maybe just follow up with a comment on how the process has now played out, three or four weeks down the road, beyond where your comments were at that time?

The Chair: You have less than a minute.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard-Buote: We finally did receive resources, but I'll reiterate what I said back then.

You've forced the largest portion of indigenous people in this country to compete for the smallest amount. I don't have another way to describe that. Now we've moved beyond that as an organization and we're looking post-COVID-19, and for an opportunity to help rebuild a community that was fractured and not supported prior to this.

That's what we offer. We have a massive network that we would like to use to help the largest majority of indigenous people after this is said and done, hopefully.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go now for a five-minute round of questioning with Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

I want to start by acknowledging that I am sitting today in the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Edith, I want to extend my condolences to you on the loss of the two people you mentioned.

I want to thank all of you for the work you're doing, in particular, adapting your services in unprecedented times to be able to deliver much-needed services to urban indigenous peoples. I think we knew there was a gap before and this pandemic has just highlighted issues that exist in urban settings.

The ministers acknowledge that the \$15-million fund is not enough. That's in addition to funding that went out through Reaching Home, the Canada child benefit and the CERB, which I know a number of your organizations are assisting people to apply for.

Lindsay, you mentioned that there needs to be an urban indigenous coalition of organizations like yours. I know that prior to this happening there was a meeting in Ottawa, which I attended and the minister spoke at. I'm just wondering if you could speak to whether or not that coalition has been in touch with one another during COVID-19 and how that is coming in terms of getting you to come together as an organization to speak as one voice.

• (1220)

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer: *Niá:wen*, Pam. Thank you for your question. I can't speak to whether or not coalitions have been connecting independently. The national coalition scope right now is

made up of 32 other cities across Canada. We do have provinces and territories coming together in an effort to form what we hope will be a voice for urban indigenous organizations that may not be represented under some of the current constructs that exist.

To be fair, I think there have been tremendous efforts made to date. The national coalition has been forming for the better part of the last two years. We do have a governance structure led by Mark and Charlene, whom I think you met when you were in Ottawa. I think it's a really good opportunity for us to think about how we might do better to connect with one another to get a sense of the landscape, but at this time I can't accurately answer whether or not that is in fact happening.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I want to talk a little bit about connectivity. We tend to think of connectivity as being a rural issue only, but it's actually an urban issue as well. I've had these conversations with TASSC, so I wonder if we could maybe start with TASSC and then go to the friendship centres.

It has really pointed out a socio-economic divide in accessing programs and services that have been offered during the pandemic when people who don't have Internet or devices and who normally go to community centres, libraries and friendship centres just can't access them.

TASSC and then the friendship centres, what are you seeing on the ground in terms of connectivity?

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer: On the ground, we have collectively been advocating for a fully connected city. We have been working with different levels of the city and province in trying to advance the issue around connectivity and device acquisition, in order to put devices into the hands of those who need it most. Member agencies have actually gone out to purchase minutes for cellphones and purchase devices for those who are the most vulnerable, particularly seniors and students.

As you know, most provinces have rolled out curriculum from their respective ministries. For us, in the context of urban indigenous people being able to access that information.... I mean, every parent got an email. I got one. If I didn't have a device or Internet, then my kid currently would not be doing their homework, in theory.

We've been trying to respond by word of mouth and through a variety of other mechanisms across social media channels, through different forms of outreach electronically and otherwise, to try to reach folks who do need the supports. We've been doing it on a sort of case-by-case or as-needed basis, but it would be great to have a fully connected city here in Toronto.

Niá:wen.

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: Maybe I could quickly add to that.

Certainly, in the early days we did reach out to some of the staff of the coalition tables. In our conversations with Indigenous Services, we called for a mechanism to fund the urban coalition tables and friendship centres, recognizing that a lot of them work in partnership with each other to provide that community support. I definitely echo what Lindsay said.

Nationally, we've been talking to some companies about trying to get a national purchase of equipment, mostly cellphones and tablets that are data-enabled as well as Internet boosters. We're calling for that connectivity piece, because it's an issue all across the country in terms of making sure that people have access to the things they need to be able to finish school and to be able connect with their family members and the community.

It's a huge issue, and certainly one that's not been resolved yet.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're at time.

We'll go now to a two-and-a-half-minute round.

The next speaker on my list is Kristina Michaud from the Bloc Québécois.

Please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I'd like to thank the witnesses.

I would like to extend my sincere condolences to the loved ones and families of the two young men from the Val-d'Or area who passed away.

I feel that most would agree, from what we are hearing today, that the distinctions-based approach to service delivery to indigenous people does not allow friendship centres to properly carry out their mission.

My question is for the representatives of the National Association of Friendship Centres.

How should the government have rolled out financial assistance to ensure that friendship centres could provide services to the community?

Ms. Cloutier could answer on a perhaps more local level, that is to say, regarding the situation in Val-d'Or.

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Thank you for the question. As I said in my presentation and as many of us have said, this approach that Indigenous Services Canada and the government have adopted silences the voice of urban indigenous people. The way to highlight our realities is through action. From a more local perspective, and I feel it also applies to the national level, the action taken by native friendship centres clearly demonstrates that some needs are not being met.

In the 50 days that we have been managing the COVID-19 crisis, in Val-d'Or—with a population of 35,000—the Friendship Centre has been the main, the only, organization to provide more than 4,000 boxed lunches to homeless people. We run a day centre, where more than 500 food baskets have been distributed. Through our first response services, we receive over 100 calls a week allowing us to help communities. This is a reality that will need to be maintained after COVID-19; we will have to show that we were here before COVID-19, that we are here now and that we will be here afterwards. So the reality and the needs are going to be reflected in the work we are doing on the ground.

I am sure my colleagues at the national association will be able to provide more details.

[*English*]

The Chair: You're just about out of time.

Go ahead.

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: I'll be quick with a little sneak peek on the policy paper we're going to be releasing.

We say that first nations, Inuit and Métis living in urban settings have multiple, intersecting diversities that make up their identities. We are looking at when you're applying a distinctions-based lens you're not just looking at first nations, Métis, Inuit, you're looking at where they're geographically located and their residency, as well as a gendered lens, so looking at the effects on women, as well as two-spirit, LGBTQ+ individuals. We're saying by applying these lenses, you'll be able to see people a lot better and have better policy decisions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Qaqqaq.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq (Nunavut, NDP): *Matna*, Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for sharing with us here today on this committee.

My question is for the president of the National Association of Friendship Centres. I think we haven't been talking much about mental health during COVID-19. In my riding in particular, Nunavut, resources for mental health are scarce and much needed. Can you talk more about some of the mental health supports you are providing during COVID-19, the challenges you're facing and what you're still hoping to implement? Take as much time as you'd like.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard-Buote: I'm from a specific part of the north that, for most of my high school education, had the highest rate of suicide in the world. Canada talks about mental health, and yet when there are opportunities to truly make an impact, it doesn't happen.

As a specific example, our entire national youth council developed a suicide awareness and training program for young people that could be delivered across the country, and submitted it during a proposal call; it was not funded. Young people developed this directly for each other. I think we talk a lot about health and mental health, but I have yet to see a response that isn't reactionary and that is truly developed with the community.

In my own experience, being a young, gay Inuk in the north, I understand how isolating it is to be a young person who's indigenous, who already feels isolated. I understand how easy it is to get into a space where you are so sad and so alone that some of those more negative outcomes are a possibility. I think if Canada really wants to work on mental health, it should probably reach out to some of the friendship centres that are getting 47 times as many calls right now on domestic violence.

● (1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to a five-minute round, with the first speaker up from the Conservative party, Bob Zimmer.

Bob, go ahead.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for Mr. Sheppard, and it's really for all of the witnesses today. It's based on my role as shadow minister for northern economic development. That's how I'm going to frame my questions.

I would agree with all of you that one of the big concerns, when we talk about an economic recovery, are the elders, especially those at risk of not having the proper PPE and other abilities to shield themselves from COVID. I will preface my question with that.

Mr. Sheppard, you had spoken about the difficulty of accessing PPE. Again, with the economic recovery in mind, I know a lot of our young people want to get back to work, but they obviously don't want to put their elders and any of their community members at risk. We've seen, locally, that one of our reserves had a few cases of COVID, and we all know that the living conditions aren't always the best.

What would you see as being necessary to get to the next step? I know some of us would agree that right now isn't even adequate. What do you see that we need going forward to get to that place where we can so-called get back to normal?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard-Buote: I think there's a huge.... We talk about our network a lot. However, in my opening statement, I talked about the sheer number of physical urban indigenous buildings and spaces across this country. Canada has a built-in network of agencies and infrastructure that it could use as economic stimulus. If there were a national urban indigenous infrastructure fund that wasn't just \$5 million this year, \$8 million next year, that they looked at as part of the economic recovery but also looking to the future....

If we truly want to plan appropriately, maybe we look at how these infrastructure spaces can be properly designed, built to be—in the event that this happens again—way better designed and pre-

pared moving forward. That doesn't just do good things for service delivery; it also does good things for having isolation spaces, gathering spaces that are safe, but also is an economic driver in over 100 ridings or communities in this country. That is an amazing opportunity for Canada to get stimulus to the ground in local economies while also looking to the future.

I think Canada needs to stop looking at friendship centres as the people who help the most vulnerable and more as a partner. That can truly shift how we look at our demographics, economies and sustainability moving forward.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Absolutely. I have an old friend I used to work with who heads up the local friendship centre. It's absolutely great for the youth, and trying to get the youth to that next step and to a great life.

I have to interrupt my question. I have a motion to table, Mr. Chair:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, adopt the following motion, that, in the light of COVID-19 pandemic and how it has negatively impacted on the governance of Indigenous communities, including the postponement of elections and gathering of traditional decision making bodies, that the committee call the Wet'suwet'en elected Chiefs to provide testimony on how the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected their ability to enter into open and transparent negotiations regarding land rights and title with the federal government.

● (1235)

The Chair: Are there any comments on the motion?

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I'm not sure I understand it.

Marcus, you go first.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I didn't understand it.

You're asking to have a session to debate this issue. Is that what you're asking?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: We're asking to have the Wet'suwet'en elected chiefs, as the motion said. I can reread the motion if you wish.

Let me just do it again. It won't take that long.

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, adopt the following motion, that, in the light of COVID-19 pandemic and how it has negatively impacted on the governance of Indigenous communities, including the postponement of elections and gathering of traditional decision making bodies, that the committee call the Wet'suwet'en elected Chiefs to provide testimony on how the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected their ability to enter into open and transparent negotiations regarding land rights and title with the federal government.

The Chair: Mr. Zimmer, is this a notice of motion or is this a motion?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It is a notice of motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Battiste.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Just to add to this, I appreciate the member's wanting to understand the internal ratification process of the Wet'suwet'en nation. I just don't see how this is COVID related, and I don't see how, during a discussion about off reserve with the witnesses we have available to us right now, that we'd pivot and go back to on reserve and aboriginal title lands, which they're not here to listen to. I'm wondering why.

The Chair: I'm going to interject at this point and call the motion out of order because it doesn't relate to the mandate of the committee.

It is 12:38, so that means we're going over to Ms. Zann for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Excuse me. I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm not sure it's the prerogative of the chair to decide what's relevant and not with regard to a motion. I think that's the decision of the committee. It is clearly a COVID-related issue with the motion. I'm not sure that it's at your discretion. I think it's up to the committee to decide that.

The Chair: As I noted, it's not—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have a point of order, Chair.

I think we've had, in meeting after meeting, ongoing discussions about this matter. I propose that since some of the Conservative members want to meddle in internal community politics, perhaps if we do put that on the table we should invite all parties involved in this discussion. I would say that it's probably not a good use of time given the nature of things we're discussing, but I think—

The Chair: Ms. Gazan, I'm going to interrupt. I'm sorry. A notice of motion is not debatable. We're moving on with the meeting at this point. We're also using up valuable time from some of our other questioners. We were going to be very nicely on time at one o'clock. Now we're a bit sidetracked, so I want to get us back on track.

Ms. Zann, you have five minutes. Please go ahead with your question.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I'd like to acknowledge that I am sitting here on the unceded land of the Mi'kmaq, very gratefully, thanks to them.

I'd like to ask a question of you, Madam Formsma, regarding friendship centres and what you are noticing with regard to violence against women and domestic violence. We are told that numbers show that statistically across the country in times like this, in this shutdown, violence and domestic violence have risen in many parts of the country, even up to 30%. It is why our government has put money into shelters and transition houses, with \$207.5 million to support many organizations, \$40 million to the women and gender equality centres and \$26 million to women's shelters, etc.

What is this helping in your communities and in indigenous communities across the country, if anything? Are the friendship centres

across the country able to access any of that funding? If so, how do you use it? If not, what do you need?

• (1240)

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: Thank you. Maybe I could speak to what we're hearing nationally. I don't know if members from TASSC or Edith from Val-d'Or have any comments about what they're experiencing locally.

We have heard that there are increases in calls to friendship centres for support with violence in the home. What's happening because of the isolation measures is that where we put people, or where we can remove or move people, is very limited for shelters that friendship centres are running or partnering with.

Again, I'll go back to how availability doesn't always mean accessibility. Just because the funding has been available—and theoretically friendship centres should have been able to access some of that—I can't say there's been widespread access by friendship centres. A lot of the first nations funding for shelters went to on-reserve funding, very rightfully so. Also, then, the funding for women's shelters just generally went to a lot of the mainstream shelters, women's shelters within the urban spaces.

We end up in that jurisdictional gap again. If there's something available off reserve, because we're seen as indigenous non-profits, they think the federal government has given us money for something, or that it's the federal government's responsibility, and the federal government is saying that this money is available to all organizations, we should be able to access it through those means and we don't need a specific amount for urban indigenous.

Yes, we definitely have heard about the increase. The ability for friendship centres to access the funding has really been quite piecemeal across the country. Certainly, nationally we haven't been able to get anything cohesive through our office, not to say that we should, but that's been our experience.

I don't know if Edith or TASSC might have more localized experiences.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Does anybody want to respond?

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer: At the local level here in Toronto, we've mobilized very quickly across member agencies. In particular, Native Women's Resource Centre; Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society; Aboriginal Legal Services, ALS; and Council Fire have worked collaboratively to try to get a crisis line together, put funding proposals in to the province and work with the city on getting accommodations.

We've been actively moving, but we do need governments to move with us at all levels because right now some of these agencies are, in fact, out-of-pocket for the expenditures of trying to put people up in a hotel to make sure that they have a safe place to land.

While we're all sorting out, as my colleague Jocelyn said, our jurisdictional issues, I think what we're finding is that the work doesn't stop, the need doesn't stop. If a woman needs to leave her home with her children, that needs to happen now, whether agencies have the money to support that or not. Those are transportation costs, food costs, laundry costs, relocation costs and accommodation costs. Then, where is the permanent housing to place them when this is over?

The Chair: We're at time there. Thank you for that.

We'll go back to the Conservative Party.

Mr. Schmale, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again to the witnesses.

I'll go back to National Chief Bertrand.

National Chief, this morning on the news there are many articles about your organization starting a lawsuit against the federal government. Is there anything more you'd like to say about that?

National Chief Robert Bertrand: The only thing that I could add is that we have tried on numerous occasions to reach out to the federal government—to CIRNAC, to ISC—to try to increase the funding because the amount that CAP has received for its constituents across Canada is a slap in the face. After hours of discussion at the board of directors level.... We hate to have done it, but in our opinion, it was the only option left to help our constituents. Yes, CAP is out there—the executive is out there—to try to help out, but never forget that we are there for our constituents. We are there for the people in P.E.I., Winnipeg, Prince Albert and Edmonton. We want to help our constituents, and we felt that this was the only way. You know when you're stuck in the corner and have no place to go? This was the only option left open to us.

• (1245)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Maybe just to give the committee—I know that many people know these stats, so maybe anyone listening in or viewing.... Maybe you could talk about the number of people who have affiliations with your organization who you could be assisting, if given the proper resources.

National Chief Robert Bertrand: I just mentioned a few of them a while ago in my opening remarks. You know, in P.E.I., the organization there helps the youth with housing. In the other maritime provinces, they have commercial fishing. The organizations that we have, they have communities in each of the provinces, and they are so close to the population. These people know what is missing.

You can come up with all kinds of programs—people sitting in Ottawa in their offices—but it's these people out there who have seen the problems, who have seen the misery, who have seen what COVID-19 has done to the elders, to the youth, to the kids. These are the ones we have to be reaching out to and have the resources to help, the programs that they've deemed necessary for their area—because I am sure that what would work in Saskatchewan would not necessarily work out in Labrador—

The Chair: You have one minute left.

National Chief Robert Bertrand: —for instance; I will be the first one to admit that. These are the people out there. These are the people on the ground. These are the people who the federal government, through CAP's help, should be reaching out to.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Mr. Chair, before my time is up, I would like to congratulate the friendship centres and all the other organizations working so hard to provide services for their members. This has not been easy. Based on the testimony we've been hearing today and in previous meetings, every organization is trying to make the best of the situation for their members, their families, the children, the communities, the homeless people and people with disabilities and pre-existing medical conditions.

Thank you for everything you're doing. Keep up the good work, and hopefully we will be able to get through this. I know that together we will go back to normal, whatever that normal looks like at the end of this.

Thank you, everyone.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. van Koeverden, you have five minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to the witnesses. Your feedback and perspective on these matters are essential, and strong indigenous voices indeed add to the work that we are doing on this committee in such relevant ways.

Chief Bertrand, thank you for your advocacy and for fighting for your community. I echo your sentiment with regard to the importance of UNDRIP, and I know many members of this committee share that sentiment.

Mr. Sheppard-Buote, thank you, as well, for sharing your very relevant story.

Mr. Frost, Madam Cloutier, Ms. Formsma and Ms. Kretschmer, thank you very much, as well, for your essential work across the country. I extend my condolences to your communities for the loss you've experienced.

I am also speaking to you from ancestral lands, the land of the Mississaugas of the New Credit Nation here in Halton, Ontario.

My question is a short one, and I'd like it if Mr. Sheppard and the others who provide services on the front lines could answer.

With respect to indigenous people who live in suburban areas—my riding is primarily suburban and not in close proximity to some of the friendship centres as in Toronto—there are families in my riding who are indigenous and require services as well. Could you elaborate a little on the suburban aspect? I apologize if I cut you off, but we're going to try to stay on time.

Could we start with Madam Cloutier?

• (1250)

[Translation]

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Can you hear me?

[English]

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Yes.

[Translation]

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Thank you for your question.

As I understand it, you are talking about indigenous families who live outside major urban centres and how we can foster relationships and provide services.

That is kind of it. Friendship centres like the Native Friendship Centre in Val-d'Or, a city with a small population compared to Toronto or Winnipeg, are a crossroads and meeting place for indigenous communities, which brings the presence of indigenous people to the fore.

It is often in small communities like Val-d'Or that the native friendship centre becomes an outreach hub. We are not in the business of political representation. We are organizations providing front-line community services. That helps us to establish community contacts and foster a community, cultural and identity connection between families. With a pandemic like COVID-19, those families turn to a native friendship centre because the centre has already established a relationship of trust and communication with them.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you very much, Ms. Cloutier.

[English]

Ms. Kretschmer, could you provide any context on the suburban indigenous population that you undoubtedly serve?

Ms. Lindsay Kretschmer: I'll pick up in just a moment. I'd like to turn it over to Larry to respond further.

I would recommend that you familiarize yourself with what the friendship centre is in your respective neighbourhood. For Halton, I suspect that you're sort of sandwiched between Peel, Hamilton, Niagara and Fort Erie, where there are friendship centres.

As to how to respond to the needs in the context of suburban, I think it's organizing transportation, communicating virtually, thinking through how to approach this differently and allowing for those local self-determined needs to emerge through contacting those leaders directly.

I'll turn it over to Larry.

Mr. Larry Frost: To add to what I said earlier, we're willing to help everyone. We all work together. But if you want to contact TASSC and if funds are available, we're always going to help anybody who needs food or even housing.

The Chair: We have two more questioners. We have barely enough time to get them in.

Ms. Bérubé, you have two and half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Cloutier, your centre was already organized, but what has the COVID-19 crisis changed in terms of the types of services you provide and how you provide them?

What steps has your organization taken to maintain essential services while meeting public health guidelines?

Ms. Edith Cloutier: Thank you for your question, Ms. Bérubé.

Indeed, it has been a great challenge to develop front-line services while maintaining essential healthcare services, as well as social and psychosocial services, and providing support to the homeless and vulnerable women. However, since the friendship centres are organizations that have developed organizational agility and play a leadership role in our communities, fortunately we have been able to reorganize the services, while also providing services remotely using technology.

We have, however, maintained some direct services to the community, including home visits and services from a day centre for the homeless, which we had to relocate because of the physical distancing order and the health guidelines required because of the pandemic. Fortunately, we were able to count on the municipality to support us with these measures. It is also a matter of working in partnership with public health and our other partners to ensure that we provide adequate responses.

Native friendship centres, particularly the one in Val-d'Or, have been on the front lines because we have a culturally relevant approach. We connect with people. So we have had to reorganize all these services to ensure effective front-line services. Thanks to the relationship of trust we have with people, they have been able to use technology. According to the statistics, we do over 100 support sessions per week in our communities, where we are in contact with just over 100 families when we deliver food. This helps us to keep the contacts.

However, the challenges do remain, that is for sure.

• (1255)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Ms. Cloutier.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gazon, you'll be up.

Mr. Schmale has his hand up.

Do you have a point of order or something that the committee should know, Mr. Schmale?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I'll let the witnesses finish, but before you adjourn, I would like to talk about a few things. I don't want to make a point of order because I don't want to take up the time but I would like to talk about some things.

The Chair: Ms. Gazon, you have two and half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazon: Thank you very much.

My last question is for Jocelyn with the National Association of Friendship Centres in regard to data collection.

Accurate data is essential to determine specific needs. This has been identified as an issue by many urban indigenous organizations that often lack the resources and the support to compile proper research. This includes gaps in census data, especially in relation to homeless populations.

How can the government better support research and data collection to provide a more accurate depiction of the funding needs of urban indigenous populations?

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: We started working with Well Living House, with Dr. Janet Smylie, putting together a bit of our own national coalition of organizations that would be able to do the data collection. We have some follow-up calls in the coming days, also building on the work the Yellowhead Institute recently published on what they found by scrolling through obituaries and by talking to folks.

The data piece is huge. We've been talking to Indigenous Services about what else we can do on the data collection piece. They know it's a gap. I'm hopeful when we start this work with Well Living House that ISC will come to the table to support it.

Ms. Leah Gazan: How could the government better address that gap?

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: Again, it goes to that jurisdictional quagmire. National health policies for indigenous people are set at the federal level. A lot of the data collection is happening in hospitals or at the provincial level. What is collected doesn't truly reflect what, maybe, the national data needs are.

I think we really need to push the provinces to ensure they're collecting the disaggregated data. Then, with public health at the local and regional levels, we need to be instilling how important this disaggregated data is. If we don't know who the people are who are being affected by this, I don't know how we even have a hope of addressing this at the community level.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have one last yes-or-no question. Do you feel that the lack of support around data collection is impacting your ability to access proper support required to service the community, yes or no?

Ms. Jocelyn Formsma: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses. This has been a very informative meeting. From the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, National Chief Bertrand; from the National Association of Friend-

ship Centres, Christopher Sheppard-Buote, president, and Jocelyn Formsma; from the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council, Larry Frost and Lindsay Swooping Hawk Kretschmer, executive director; and from the Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre, Edith Cloutier, executive director, thank you all.

Before I adjourn the meeting, Mr. Schmale, you had an issue you wanted to bring up.

• (1300)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, just in terms of procedurally going forward, I know Bob Zimmer dropped a notice of motion.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: It wasn't an actual motion so it wasn't debatable. Having said that, I hit the "raise hand" button immediately. Other people went ahead, which is fine, but—

The Chair: I'm sorry.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: No, no, I'm just saying this. Going forward, is there a way in which we can get the attention of the chair to speak without unmuting our mikes? I tried to do a chat with the chair just to say I'd like to bring up an issue, but there was no way to do that, no feature I could reach you at other than turning on my microphone and interrupting the meeting.

The Chair: What I would suggest is that we have an informal meeting coming up and we can do that with the clerk and determine that. I'm beside myself trying to juggle all of these things and then look for a small blue hand, and I know you understand that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I absolutely do. Yes.

The Chair: Let's pick that up offline. It's a very good point and I appreciate that.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Yes, because you could see how it could come to trouble if we had an actual motion and the speaking order got out of control.

The Chair: I think the raised hand is the best way. It's on the far right-hand side of my screen and it's small. I'll do my best to pay more attention to that. This is the first attempt at solving this.

I did, actually, solve the problem of getting Ms. Bérubé her proper place in the speaking order, which I did do.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Baby steps.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, all. The next meeting will be Friday, May 15, from 2 p.m. until 4 p.m.

This meeting is adjourned.

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