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# Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

EVIDENCE

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Thursday, November 12, 2020

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Chair: Ms. Ruby Sahota





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Thursday, November 12, 2020

• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to meeting number nine of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I would like to start the meeting by providing you with some information following the motion that was adopted in the House on Wednesday, September 23, 2020.

The committee is now sitting in a hybrid format, meaning that members can participate either in person or by video conference. Witnesses must appear by video conference.

All members, regardless of their method of participation, will be counted for the purposes of quorum. The committee's power to sit is, however, limited by the priority use of House resources, which is determined by the whips. All questions must be decided by a recorded vote unless the committee disposes of them with unanimous consent or on division.

Finally, the committee may deliberate in camera provided that it takes into account the potential risks to confidentiality inherent in such deliberations with remote participants.

Today's proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. As a reminder, the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee. To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

For those participating virtually, which is basically everyone today, members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French. Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate your own mike. When you are done speaking, please put the mike on mute to minimize any interference. As a reminder, 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, please use the "raise hand" function at the bottom of your screen. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of a headset with a boom mike is mandatory. Should any technical challenges arise, please advise the chair. Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

With that, we will begin the first panel. We have three panels today and a three-hour meeting. We will be going until two o'clock. Ideally, I'll be trying to end the panels five minutes before the hour so that we have time to transition into the next panel. We'll try to be as efficient as possible with our time.

For our first panel, I would like to welcome—

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC):** I have a point of order, Chair, before we get started. Sorry about that.

I just want to bring forward what we talked about the other day. Perhaps you can give clarification.

We talked about time frames and timelines and looking at when we're going to start the next study. I didn't see it in the notes or see any business opportunity for this today, with these three panels. When are we going to be able to have the discussion on the next study?

**The Chair:** It's not possible in today's meeting, that's for sure, because we have three panels and we already have extended the hours for this meeting, but we are looking. There are upcoming meetings, and I can discuss it at the end. We have a meeting on November 17 with Minister LeBlanc on the main estimates and a meeting on November 19 with Elections Canada on the main estimates, and then we have a meeting on November 24. That one is with the Speaker and the House administration, including PPS. Those are the next three meetings.

All of those meetings have to get done because we have a deadline for the main estimates, but I did say in the last meeting that I will squeeze in committee time before the winter break so that we can plan out our next study, have a discussion as to how long we want that study on prorogation to be and what witnesses we might want. I'm working with Justin Vaive, the clerk, to fit in a committee business portion where we have half an hour or more to discuss that.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Okay. Excellent.

I will be following that up, because I do think this study should be starting prior to the Christmas break. Hopefully, we'll be able to have a meeting before then, so that this is not held off until mid-December.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Ms. Vecchio, did you say the study should start prior to the winter break?

• (1105)

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** We would hope that we would already have something sorted out with plans before the winter break. If we can make sure that we have this all planned.... I would hope that we would not be seeing a meeting in the second week of December to discuss this committee business, and that we actually do it much earlier than that.

**The Chair:** Okay. We would discuss the committee business and the study before the winter break, but we wouldn't be able to begin the actual study before the winter break.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Perhaps we can look at what options are available—that would be awesome—and we can go on with today's panels.

I just want to plant that seed. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Vecchio.

I'd like to continue by welcoming the two witnesses we have with us today. Jason Lee is from the Canadian Association for Long Term Care. Donna Duncan is the chief executive officer of the Ontario Long Term Care Association.

Welcome to both of you. Thank you for being with us today.

We will start with opening remarks by the two of you. You have five minutes each for opening remarks. Those will be followed by rounds of questions from all of the members, and that should take us to 11:55 or close to 12 o'clock.

Mr. Lee, would you start, please?

**Mr. Jason Lee (Treasurer, Canadian Association for Long Term Care):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the members of the committee for inviting me and CALTC to appear before you today.

We're here to discuss seniors living in long-term care and the support needed to ensure that residents can participate fully in our democratic process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My name is Jason Lee and I'm here today as the treasurer of the Canadian Association for Long Term Care, also known as CALTC. As the leading voice for quality long-term care in Canada, CALTC members advocate on behalf of our residents at the federal level to ensure that seniors can age and live with dignity.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that yesterday was Remembrance Day and that this conversation aimed at ensuring accessible and safe voting for our seniors, who built this nation, could not be more appropriate or important.

During a federal election, Elections Canada has the responsibility to ensure that all eligible voters are able to exercise the right to

vote, and it is our collective responsibility to accommodate them to do so. Many of the normal voting procedures used to assist residents in long-term care have significant health risks in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, some of which I will outline.

Outside visitors to long-term care homes must continue to be restricted to essential caregivers and workers, for the continued health and safety of residents and staff. While election workers could fall into the category of essential workers, it is not safe at this time to have an election worker go into a home, facilitate a mobile voting station and then move from home to home. This is especially true as we continue to see more homes go into outbreak or suspected outbreak across the country.

Additionally, any procedures in place that support seniors in leaving their long-term care homes to go to a polling station are simply not feasible, as COVID-19 continues to increase rapidly in communities across the nation. Any staff members who might normally assist seniors in going to a voting station are hindered not just by the risk of transmission, but by the increased staffing pressures in care homes as they continue to carry out new and ongoing infection prevention and control measures on a daily basis. There is simply not enough staff or personal protective equipment to ensure a safe trip outside a home to vote or to have an election worker enter multiple homes.

In my home province of Prince Edward Island, we normally use our long-term care homes as polling stations. I've already been in contact with the election officials for the riding where some of our homes are located, and it has been communicated to me that the polling stations will be moved to other sites. This is completely understandable and necessary, but it also further isolates our seniors from the community. While our seniors would normally be able to walk down to the lobby and vote with others from their riding, they will not be able to do so in the current environment.

However, we must not let this virus interfere with seniors having their voices heard or ensuring that seniors living in long-term care are appropriately engaged in the voting process.

As you know, three provinces have been through provincial elections during the COVID-19 outbreak, including New Brunswick. There are some lessons learned and considerations that I would like to share with you today, and they may help inform the committee and Elections Canada in addressing the challenges and circumstances of the current moment.

In New Brunswick, an alternative voting method was put in place that included the returning officer sending a letter to long-term care homes that outlined the instructions for a modified vote-by-mail process. This was a time-consuming process that required two weeks to coordinate and carry out the actual voting, along with many weeks of consultation beforehand. In this instance, administrators or other staff in the homes were deputized and trained to collect and return the mail-in ballots.

- (1110)

Any process put in place for a federal election will need to be cognizant of the time frame, effort and resources needed to assist residents in voting.

In closing, staff not being able to accompany residents outside the home to vote, given COVID—19, the dangers of having a mobile election worker going from home to home and the inability to hold voting stations in long-term care homes mean that seniors living in long-term care will be very disconnected from this process and homes will require support and guidance to ensure they can appropriately engage residents in the democratic process.

I thank you for your time. Obviously, I'm happy to answer any questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lee. We appreciate your statement.

Next we have Ms. Duncan, please.

**Ms. Donna Duncan (Chief Executive Officer, Ontario Long Term Care Association):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair and committee members.

It's a privilege to be here with you today, as per Mr. Lee's comments, on the day following Remembrance Day, when we recognize so many of our residents.

We are grateful to the committee for recognizing the importance of ensuring that voting privileges are available to residents of Canada's long-term care homes during this pandemic. To set the context for today's discussion, I would like to provide an overview of Ontario's long-term care homes.

More than 79,000 people live in long-term care in Ontario in 626 homes, with more than half of our residents being over the age of 85. Approximately one resident in six is younger than 75.

In Ontario, we have stringent criteria for admission into long-term care. Most people are not eligible until they are experiencing significant impairment due to physical frailty and/or cognitive impairment. Ninety per cent of residents have some degree of cognitive impairment, ranging from mild to severe, caused by conditions such as dementia or stroke.

In prior elections, it has been common practice to establish polling booths in the lobbies or other common areas of long-term care homes to enable the resident population to vote, as well as the neighbouring community members. This is not possible during COVID -19 due to Ontario restrictions around access to long-term care homes and the extreme vulnerability of our residents to outbreaks of COVID—19. In most cases, as per Mr. Lee's comments, escorting residents from long-term care homes to voting booths elsewhere is also not possible due to a number of different factors.

First, under our provincial directives and now-evolving regional directives, non-medical absences from the home are not possible at all during an outbreak or in a region that is considered at high risk or a hot zone for community transmission. As of November 10, 15% of Ontario's homes are in COVID outbreak. Several major urban areas remain areas of higher risk and outings are not permitted.

Second, if neither of those factors is in place, non-medical absences need to be approved by the home based on a case-by-case

risk assessment, recognizing the risk to our residents is extremely high and we do not recommend absences.

Third, if an outing is approved, most homes do not have the staffing capacity or support to take residents out of the home to vote. While some residents may have families that can assist, many residents do not have these supports readily available and would be reliant on staff for transportation to the voting site. Our long-term care homes are experiencing a critical staffing shortage that predated COVID and has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. This has implications for staffing capacity to support resident voting either in or outside of the home.

Despite the challenges of COVID, it is vitally important to ensure that voting privileges are available to residents of long-term care. Mail-in ballots may be the simplest option for residents to manage and for staff to facilitate, as per Mr. Lee's comments. We are open to discussions on processes that could facilitate that. There may be other options the committee is considering, including electronic voting in the homes. We'd be pleased to bring that back to our members for review and feedback to support successful implementation.

We are committed to helping our residents exercise their right to vote.

We would again really like to thank you for recognizing the importance of this issue and exploring solutions during the pandemic.

Thank you.

- (1115)

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

We'll start our first round of questions with Ms. Gladu. It's an honour to have you on the committee today substituting in. It's nice to see you again as well.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

We all know about the tragic deaths we've seen in long-term care facilities. I am the chair of the status of women committee and we've just had testimony on long-term care facilities and how understaffed they are. The federal government, in my view, has really abdicated its responsibility to come alongside and help. I worry that if the Liberals force an election in a pandemic, that is going to exacerbate an already concerning situation.

The points you've made about protecting people who are in long-term care facilities, as well as the workers, are important.

One of the concerns I have is trying to make sure that there isn't undue influence. My mother just recently passed away and she was in long-term care. She was as sharp as a knife normally, but she did have days when she was mentally confused or whatever, so I am interested in any suggestions you have on how we can make sure that someone who is deputized is not voting their personal preference through those who are maybe not able to decide.

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** I'll start.

I think it's a great question, especially as we look at how so many of our residents do suffer from advanced dementia and cognitive impairment. Certainly training is very important, including working through Elections Canada to establish parameters in training and ensuring neutrality as we support our residents. How we work with substitute decision-makers as well will be very important for us. Certainly, the right to vote is paramount but I certainly appreciate your comments around the potential for coercion or influence.

I would certainly welcome Mr. Lee's comments, because I know he has been speaking to his eastern Canada colleagues around this as well.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Thank you.

It's a good question and it's actually a topic that I think comes up in every election, not just one around a pandemic.

If a person is unable to physically mark their ballot, they can receive assistance to mark their ballot. There is a process whereby the person has to solemnly declare that they will mark the ballot in the manner in which they are directed. It's a very serious oath and commitment to make, and we expect people to honour a commitment or an oath like that.

We want every Canadian who wishes to vote to be able to vote. I know first-hand, having seen elections take place in our homes, that the staff take a lot of time to be trained on elections and to understand the very complex and thick Canada Elections Act. I think they do an excellent job of making sure people vote, and hopefully the exceptions are very few.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Mr. Lee, to your point, we talked about the amount of time it would take to train somebody to be deputized. One of my ideas is to have rapid testing for the Elections Canada people, who could have a rapid test and receive a negative result before they entered a home, and then not go to different homes. There would be someone different assigned to each one. Do you think that is a feasible option?

• (1120)

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Doing that for one home would work, absolutely. Your team would have to be aware of where they were going to be working and why it would be so important that they be healthy, so the testing would certainly be a part of the solution for that.

Of course in a federal election you're looking at a massive scale. I am not aware of rapid testing even being in place here in Prince Edward Island. It may be more common in other parts of the country, but I don't see why it can't be part of the conversation or the solution.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** You're right that the rapid testing is not where it needs to be.

I have one other question. Normally in an election the candidates get to go into the long-term care facilities and they can hand out their brochures and leave them all over the place so everyone will vote for them. I can't see that happening in a COVID-19 situation, so do you have recommendations about how the residents will be able to be informed about the issues and the candidates in the campaign?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Communications certainly have been key. As we've been navigating this COVID-19 environment, certainly in Ontario we've been taking advantage of the benefit of our residents' councils. Our homes and front-line staff have been working very closely with residents' councils to share the information, even today around changing directives and around infection outbreaks and communicating around visits. We're working with the family councils as well and ensuring that everybody is well educated.

We have been sharing information from our local representatives through those councils as well and making sure that every home is meeting the test of communication and how information is posted and shared in each home. It certainly was a challenge early on in wave one, I have to confess, as we tried to navigate that, but we have far better processes now, I would argue, including how we use technology to communicate with our residents through our front line and our volunteers.

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

Next up for six minutes we have Dr. Duncan, please.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses this morning.

I would like to begin by saying thank you for providing care during a pandemic and how difficult that is. I am deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on long-term care and doing everything possible to protect resident and staff health and safety while ensuring residents' right to vote.

Ms. Duncan, if I could begin with you, I have limited time, so in many cases I'll be asking for a number or a yes or a no, please.

How many Ontario long-term cares are currently in outbreak?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** We have 94 in outbreak right now.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

How many staff COVID cases at this time are there, please?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Currently, we have 435 staff cases.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

How many resident COVID cases are there, please?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** We have 695 resident cases today.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** When did COVID cases start to increase? When did you start to see or have you started to see deaths going up in long-term care in the second wave in Ontario?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Since September 14, we have now experienced 200 deaths in long-term care, so the date would be September 14.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you, Ms. Duncan. I'm so sorry to hear that.

With hundreds of staff cases, do you have staffing shortages? I'll start by asking a yes-or-no question.

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Yes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** What is the percentage staffing shortage you have in Ontario, please?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** The Ministry of Long-Term Care estimated this summer that we would need to replace 6,000 PSWs, and we have critical shortages of RPNs and RNs as well.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table with the committee the shortages across the various care groups, please?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Yes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Has Ontario put in place a staffing recruitment scheme? If so, what's the target for the province to hire, and by what date, please?

• (1125)

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** The province released a staffing review study in the summertime. We anticipate that a staffing strategy will be tabled at the beginning of December, so it is still very much a work in progress.

However, the Province of Ontario has launched a number of initiatives: a return to service program for PSWs, where they hope to attract 2,000 PSWs, and this past week they've announced—

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could I stop you there for a second, Ms. Duncan? You said 2,000. By what date, please?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** It was an application process where the application deadline was in October, with the intent that the individuals would be in place in November or December of this year.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Are you seeing those numbers in place?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** No, we are not.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you. I'm very sorry to hear how difficult this is.

If I could go to Mr. Lee, please, could you table with the committee how many care homes are in outbreak across all provinces, please? I'm looking for a yes or a no.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I will get that information and table it with the committee.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Could you table how many staff COVID cases there are at this time across all provinces, please.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Again, I'll do my best to gather and table that information.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you...and resident cases as well, please.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Again, we will work to gather the information and table it.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Sadly, can you also do that for deaths?

Since Ms. Duncan mentioned September 14, I'll use that date, please.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** We will.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** I believe that Quebec committed to hiring 8,000 people by mid-September.

Can you tell me if that happened, please, yes or no?

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I can't answer yes or no to that question. I'm not aware.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Would you be able to table with the committee how many people have actually been hired in Quebec, please?

Is there a way to find that out?

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Our organization may not have access to that information. I will promise to provide it if we can.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

I believe the B.C. government announced that it would train up to 7,000 people to work as health care aids in long-term homes.

I would have the same question. Could you look to provide that information please?

I will ask you, Mr. Lee, what outreach has been done by Elections Canada to you? Have you had meetings about how to have elections in long-term care homes?

**Mr. Jason Lee:** We have had discussions with the local returning officer for the riding of Charlottetown.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Could you table with the committee what meetings, and the dates of those meetings with Elections Canada, not for the local riding but with your organization, please.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I understand.

I will seek that information and table it.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

I'm now out of time.

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

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you both.

**The Chair:** Mr. Therrien, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ):** Good morning, everyone.

I'm going to ask a question. One or both of you can answer, as you prefer. I see no problem either way.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but in Quebec, when an individual is considered incapable of voting, they are removed from the voters list. Does it work the same way at the federal level?

[*English*]

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I would have to investigate further, but it's my understanding that names are not removed from the federal voters list for that reason. We would have to confer with Elections Canada, look in the act and get back to you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I asked someone at the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer the same question, and his answer was no. I wanted to see if it could happen. That's why I am asking you. I don't mean to put you on the spot.

I will give you an example. If my mother lives in a long-term care facility and she is incapable of voting, I cannot ask that her name be removed from the voters list. I think that could cause problems in the current pandemic situation, for two reasons. You can let me know what you think. Let us say you cannot remove someone's name from the voters list. First, in some cases, care staff will have to do the work of election officials, and second, more people will vote by mail.

I know so little about this, but I believe it could result in more cases of fraud. What do you think?

• (1130)

[*English*]

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** It's a great question, and it's an important question and a concern.

How do we make sure we're balancing the rights of the individual, because our residents are still individuals with rights and legal rights under the legislation? Similar to Mr. Lee's comments, it's something that we would welcome an undertaking on to have more clarity to ensure that we're ensuring the integrity of the voting process while also recognizing the rights of our residents.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** You are talking about training individuals to manage the voting process. You are talking about training the care staff working at long-term care facilities. Is that who you are going to train? Did I understand you correctly?

[*English*]

**Mr. Jason Lee:** The training, in my mind, is provided through Elections Canada. They would work with the individual homes to identify the elections officers and who would be deputized, or whatever term they want to use. It could be people coming in from outside the home who have been cleared to enter the home, or it

could be staff who would be trained. As to the training itself, I would be looking to Elections Canada to provide that training.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Will a component of the training teach people to give up when they can see that an individual is incapable of voting because they are confused or they have severe cognitive issues? Do you think that will be part of the training?

[*English*]

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Yes, I believe it would be. The individual would have to be able to clearly identify their preference. They may have cognitive or physical impairments, but if they can clearly articulate their choice, it would be the duty of the elections officer to ensure that their vote is cast to their wishes and to nobody else's.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Okay, you will understand that I have a great deal of fear about the risk of fraud. It's not because people are ill-intentioned, but the risk is already there in a situation like this. I fear that the risk of fraud is much higher because of the pandemic. It's not your fault. It's simply a concomitant issue that could lead to more cases of fraud.

Time is running out and I have one last question.

You said that in the past it was possible to take individuals out of these facilities to go and vote outside. Before the pandemic, there were polling stations outside these facilities where people could go vote.

Did I understand correctly?

• (1135)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Reply in just a few seconds, if you can, quickly.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I would never want to say anything is impossible, but clearly to mobilize across the country to be able to have people leave long-term care to go to external polling stations would be a tremendous drain and strain on the staffing and personal protective equipment supplies. It's possible but difficult.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Blaikie, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP):** Thank you very much, and thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

We've heard from a number of elections officials and a number of public health officials who have said they're confident they can deliver an election in a way that is safe in principle. That is, if everybody follows the appropriate procedures, nobody should have anything to worry about in causing a COVID outbreak as a result of a vote.



What they've been reticent to comment on and haven't really tried to quantify is the extent to which we might see people simply choose not to vote because of a level of discomfort with voting, and the disenfranchisement that might occur. This is simply because people, for all of the proper precautions that have been taken by public health officials and election officials, just simply don't have that comfort level.

In terms of your membership, do you think there is a real risk that many people in long-term care, or many seniors more widely for that matter, will just simply be too worried about the potential health consequences of voting? That's whether it's voting in a personal-care home with outside staff who are coming in for that purpose, leaving their home to vote or not being sure they can navigate the application and implementation of a mail-in option. Do you think there's a real risk of seniors and people living in long-term care being disenfranchised if we hold an election during the pandemic?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** I'll start on this one.

Certainly historically, Elections Canada would set up the polling stations in our long-term care homes. If we look at the physical capacity of so many of our residents—and in Ontario, it's 79,000 residents—to be able to go outside to vote, it would take a lot of resources: staffing resources, family resources as well as personal protective equipment.

Also, what we have seen in our long-term care homes among our families, our residents and staff is a much diminished mental health capacity and resilience. There is tremendous fear in our homes in Ontario, fear and anxiety amongst our residents and their family members. We have certainly heard it from our family councils. So having some mechanism to vote within the home is ideal.

We heard from some of our members in Toronto where we had by-elections earlier this fall. There was a certain reticence of people to go outside, as they were wanting to contain all activities in the home.

However, again, having more people come into the home creates fear when you're in a hot spot. We know about the tension even with having family visitors. We know it comes in from the outside. We're open for visitors now. We have far more foot traffic, and the risks are far greater.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you, Ms. Duncan.

Mr. Lee.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I would just add that I think Donna is quite right that people are very cautious. It's incumbent on all of us here to make it as easy and transparent as possible for people to vote in their homes. That's mostly what people are used to in long-term care. They don't go to other locations to vote in most cases; they get to do it from the comfort of their home. We need to find ways to do it that are safe and allow them to be fully engaged.

Your question is a good one, and it should be top of everyone's mind.

• (1140)

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** If you don't mind, maybe we could get a brief answer to this question.

We have heard from the Chief Electoral Officer that the federal writ period can be between 37 to 51 days. He is of the view that it should be longer.

In your opinion, do you think that a longer writ period would have a salutary effect on voter turnout within long-term care facilities and the senior population generally?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** We certainly, as an association, would advocate for a shorter period, just given the demands on staff. The more condensed and more defined the process can be, the more contained it can be. Certainly we think that the easier it can be, the better. We would prefer something that is not overly prolonged, given the demands on staff time around communication and support and education in the homes, recognizing that there may be more time required up front to put mechanisms in place.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I would echo that. I think we're less concerned about the duration of the actual election campaign than we are about what we're doing here now, which is the pre-planning to make sure that we have thought of all the scenarios and that we have a plan in place that, hopefully, is communicated clearly in advance from Elections Canada across the country. If that's the case, then we could probably manage an election campaign of any of those durations.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** When we talk about training for people to be able to assist in care homes, we have heard that it's often done by returning officers, and returning offices, once they are set up within the election window.

Do you think it would be good for Elections Canada to begin offering training even in advance, so there are some people within long-term care facilities who have training to be able to assist when the writ drops, as opposed to trying to do it all within the election window?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Yes.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Yes. I would agree.

Speaking to our local returning officer, he was commenting on how it seems to be getting more difficult to find people to work in polling stations during elections. If that has been a challenge in the past, I expect it will continue to be a trend and a challenge, and in the middle of a pandemic, it may be exacerbated and even harder. Maybe getting to work on getting their workers lined up and maybe trained as well, as you say...

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Vecchio, you have five minutes, please.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Thank you very much.

Today's conversation is going extremely well. We're hearing a lot of different information, starting with Dr. Duncan some of the information she's looking for, and then specifically on the issues Daniel is bringing up.

When we're looking at some of the easiest ways to make sure that we are not disenfranchising the voters but keeping safe the long-term health care facilities, starting with Donna, what would be some of the most positive things you could see Elections Canada doing that would have all people voting safely? What are some of the suggestions you have?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** There's keeping voting in the home, whether that be through mail-in voting or using technology. Certainly through the pandemic, technologically enhanced engagement of our residents has escalated exponentially.

There's ensuring that public health is very much involved in working in partnership. I think Mr. Lee mentioned the stress and strain on personal protective equipment. We know, certainly in Ontario, that homes experiencing an outbreak would have access to N95 respirators, which we know are not easy to come by and very difficult to use, and that could increase the spread of infection. Certainly there's training, ensuring that anyone going into their home has infection prevention and control education themselves, so as not to put a greater burden on the staff and the volunteers who would be supporting the process in the homes.

There's thinking about the layout of the homes. Again, how we do this in a way that avoids contamination is going to be really, really important, and the sensitivity is important. I would say it's important that anyone supporting this process have empathy.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Jason, I'll move to you very shortly here as well. As you indicated, we have staffing challenges. I was speaking to people at a long-term care facility in our area. Because of the changes and people only being able to work at one place, they lost 30% of their employment from some of these homes, so we have that issue.

As you indicated as well, there's the issue of trying to find people who will work in these elections. The statistics show that the majority of people who are working as poll workers are seniors themselves, and many of them may be vulnerable to this disease as well.

Also, in talking about what you said, I just saw that the cost of a box of vinyl gloves has gone from \$16 to \$96 a box. That is what the County of Elgin is now having to pay. I think those are huge concerns as well.

One thing we've talked about is that, because of the current shortage of workers and the concerns about rapid testing—and I know that Marilyn Gladu talked about this—what are the protocols to enter one of your homes at this time?

I'll start with Jason. Do you use rapid testing? Do they need to show negative results? What are your requirements at this time?

• (1145)

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I'm located here in Prince Edward Island. We're probably not the best jurisdiction to use as an example because we've been very fortunate, with COVID-19 being very limited in the number of cases we've had. We've had no cases in long-term

care homes. We currently have, I think, three cases across the province. We're very fortunate. As a result, our restrictions to the homes have probably been reduced to the lowest level you're going to find in the country.

Right now each of our residents is allowed to have three partners in care, which includes close family and friends, and they can more or less come and go from the building as they please. In addition to that, they can visit with people through a visiting schedule at a safe distance of six feet or more while wearing personal protective equipment. The access here in P.E.I. has really not gone back to the way it was, but we've been very fortunate and we are probably not the norm across the country, for sure.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Donna, I only have a few seconds. Can you add your thoughts on that?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Yes. We have two essential visitors who do an attestation—but not testing. Only staff are being tested every two weeks, and residents are tested when they become symptomatic. Essential visitors have to schedule visits, and there's only one essential visitor permitted at a time.

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

Mr. Gerretsen, you have five minutes.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Duncan, I guess I'll start with you and pick up on the conversation you were having with Ms. Vecchio.

You said that the ideal scenario would be to have voting mechanisms inside the home. We've discussed a little bit the challenges with having polling locations set up inside a home. In your opening comments you said that mail-in ballots may be the simplest option for residents to manage and for staff to facilitate. Can you think of a mechanism that might be simpler than that, or would you say that this would be your preferred choice?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** It's a great question.

Perhaps sometimes the oldest formats are the easiest formats. If you could pursue it more as an advance ballot or an advance polling process rather than having it exactly on voting day, that might be preferable, to work things out ahead of time. Perhaps there is some sort of online tool or mechanism that could be overseen and incorporated into the home. We recognize that not all communities have access to broadband, but certainly our residents, our family members, our volunteers, our staff and others have been using technology.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** We've talked a lot about the safety of the residents, but what about the safety of the employees and what they have to be involved in to help to facilitate the voting, such as escorting residents to various locations? Do you believe that a mail-in option would also be the safest from the employee perspective?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** I believe it would be easiest. It would reduce the amount of contact an employee would have with other people, certainly with the residents. They work at supporting the residents on a daily basis. They are accustomed to screening visitors; that has now been built into their role description, but less contact is better, and less foot traffic in the home—certainly in an outbreak situation—is ideal.

• (1150)

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** I want to change gears for a second.

There has been some discussion over the last hour here and there about fraud and the possibility of fraudulent activities. For starters, neither you nor Mr. Lee has studied this or looked into this, right? Any information that you're giving is anecdotal at best; is that fair to say?

Ms. Duncan.

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** That's fair.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Mr. Lee.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Yes, that's accurate.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** As a follow-up question, given the vulnerability of many seniors notwithstanding the pandemic and the potential for fraud or people not voting or assisting others to vote in a way that properly reflects that individual, isn't that something that happens already, correct? It doesn't require a pandemic for that to occur. Would that be right, Ms. Duncan?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** As per Mr. Lee's earlier comments, the people who are assisting swear an oath. We would hope they respect that oath.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Right, and that's where I was going with this. Are you aware of any widespread occasions where people don't represent properly?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** We've certainly not heard of it in our homes in Ontario.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** How about you, Mr. Lee?

**Mr. Jason Lee:** No, I have not.

**Mr. Mark Gerretsen:** Those are all of my questions.

Thanks, Madam Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Monsieur Therrien, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I have a very simple question for our witnesses.

We know that rapid testing kits will soon be distributed, at least to some extent. How will you be able to use these tests to further secure the voting process?

[*English*]

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** Certainly in Ontario, rapid tests are being introduced for staff in long-term care, and they are challenging. We do not, as of yet, have a less invasive test. In fact, it will be a deterrent because it is a deep nasal swab. In Ontario—as these swabs are now being incorporated in our province—if you have a positive antigen test, then you will have to do the more traditional deep nasal swab. These are deterrents. Certainly we've seen it, just from a general staffing perspective. The tests now being used, the NP swabs, are a deterrent to our staff and have contributed to our staffing issues.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** From my personal point of view, having more options available will be helpful, if we're faced with an election during a pandemic. They might be used, as one of your colleagues mentioned earlier, to test election officials coming into the homes to provide greater comfort that people in the homes are COVID-free.

I don't have first-hand experience with rapid testing. I don't believe they're in use in our part of the country just yet.

**The Chair:** Monsieur Therrien, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I understand. Rapid tests will allow for quicker testing of election officials, which will make it easier for them to go to voting sites.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

**Mr. Jason Lee:** My first assessment would be yes, that would be something that would provide greater access for people to long-term care, if the comfort level was there for everybody involved, that the rapid testing was going to give assurances that they're COVID-free.

• (1155)

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

Monsieur Therrien, I've tried to provide some flexibility each time for you because I know whenever there's translation there's a delay that cuts into your time a little bit.

Mr. Blaikie, you have two and a half minutes, and then this panel will end and we will start with our next panel.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

If we look at some of the provinces where there have been elections recently, in Saskatchewan it was four and a half years between elections; in B.C. three and a half years; and in New Brunswick, which I think was the shortest period, it was two years. I'm wondering if you think that the risk of disenfranchising people in long-term care homes is a factor that politicians ought to be considering whenever there's talk of a snap election on the Hill, whether it's the government or the opposition driving it.

Do you think that that's something that should weigh in the considerations of parliamentarians when we're determining whether we go to the polls or not?

**Mr. Jason Lee:** Speaking on behalf of the Canadian Association for Long Term Care, I'm not sure that we're really in a position to answer that question. It's out of our hands when elections are called. I'm sure that and a multitude of other things are taken into consideration when making such a big decision. We're just happy to be here to discuss the potential of an election and putting the time into planning and making sure that those seniors are not disenfranchised, that we've given them the proper thought and consideration to make sure they have every opportunity to vote whenever that opportunity arises.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you.

Ms. Duncan.

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** We certainly support the process, and really, we're unable to speak to that. We know that governments are elected by the people and it's a much broader population that the government should be taking into consideration.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** If an election had been called a few weeks ago, do you think there would have been a substantial risk of disenfranchisement of people in long-term care, or do you think the long-term care system is election-ready?

**Ms. Donna Duncan:** I do not think the long-term care system in Ontario is election-ready right now. We are navigating massive outbreaks and emerging outbreaks and hot spots, and certainly we have a lot of work to do, I would argue.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Mr. Lee.

**Mr. Jason Lee:** I would agree.

I was talking with Elections Canada officials. I know that they've been working on this scenario for the last several months trying to get ready. I don't think they're there yet so thankfully we're not in that position just yet, but every election that comes along catches some people off guard. They get ready when they have to, and we'll do the same if forced to.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

**Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC):** I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Yes, Mr. Tochor, I was just about to reply. We have no more time for this panel.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I believe what was submitted to the clerk included a two-minute round for me.

Can the clerk confirm?

**The Chair:** Yes. What was submitted would be Mr. Tochor and then Ms. Petitpas Taylor for five minutes each, but there is no more time in this panel, so we have to cut it off whenever the hour ends and move to our second panel.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** We have two minutes right now.

**The Chair:** You can talk to your Conservative members and maybe have yourself slotted in for one of the other panels.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** My question was for this panel, but all right.

• (1200)

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Mr. Lee and Ms. Duncan, for taking time today to be here with us. We want to make sure that our

seniors and their civic rights are respected if an election were to occur.

Now, in the second panel, we have Amber Potts, a representative from the Assembly of First Nations.

We welcome you to this committee. You have approximately five minutes to make opening remarks. That will be followed by probably two rounds of questions from the different party members in this committee meeting.

Thank you, Ms. Potts. Go ahead.

**Ms. Amber Potts (Director of Policy and Research Coordination, Assembly of First Nations):** Thank you, Madam Chair, for inviting me to speak today. I'll try to go quickly through my remarks.

The Assembly of First Nations has worked closely with Elections Canada for a number of years to alleviate barriers to first nations' participation in the electoral system. In the wake of COVID-19, there are a number of new challenges to protecting the safety, rights, jurisdiction and opportunity to participate of first nations. However, many of these challenges are long standing and just exacerbated by the pandemic.

First nations have a long history of disenfranchisement by the federal government, but work is being done in coordination with the AFN to address the issues pertaining to elections. Indeed, first nations' right to vote was not recognized until 1951. This legacy and first nations' understandable mistrust of the colonial systems of governance are barriers to participation.

After a significant increase in first nations' participation in 2015, there was a large drop in the 2019 election. On-reserve registered electors in 2019 turned out at a rate of 53%, which is 14 points lower than the general population and nine points lower than the 2015 on-reserve turnout. This drop must not become a trend. First nations need to be able to participate in the federal electoral system to help shape the COVID-19 recovery. We've borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic and should have a leading voice in ensuring the recovery reaches our communities.

Elections Canada and the federal government need to ensure the safety of first nations communities when conducting an election. While I'm sure that considerations for mail-in voting have been made, first nations living in communities with different address systems or unique housing and living arrangements need to be considered when distributing and accepting mail-in ballots. This process needs to be clear and accessible.

As for polling on-reserve, the utmost priority needs to be placed on procuring the necessary supplies for a safe and sanitary voting environment for both staff and electors. First nations have dealt with the issues of procurement due to their remoteness or the cost, and this is a serious concern for us when it comes to a large-scale federal election that may come on short notice.

Preparations and training should be made at the earliest feasible time. A window of 30 or 40 days from writ drop to election day will mean there will be a lot of moving parts, and the COVID pandemic has shown that first nations are often an afterthought.

I want to touch on the importance of respecting first nations' jurisdiction in regard to polling stations on reserve and in outreach for our participation.

The COVID pandemic illustrated once again that there is a disconnect between federal, provincial, municipal and first nations' leadership on who determines safe practices within our communities. It needs to be clearly outlined by the federal government and by Elections Canada that first nations' leadership have the jurisdictional authority to say when something is unsafe or unwelcome in their communities.

In our most recent work with Elections Canada, we published a report with a number of recommendations, and I want to share a couple with you today because they remain relevant. Some of the key recommendations that can be implemented relatively quickly are introducing self-identification options in Elections Canada hiring and application processes to better gauge first nations representation and access to paid employment positions offered by Elections Canada during an election. Another recommendation is ensuring that staff running polling stations are adequately trained on acceptable forms of ID. There was evidence that polling stations staff turned away first nations voters who had adequate ID in 2019. Of course, we can't know if this was an act of individual racism or if it has to do with training. We ask you to ensure that there is access to polling stations on-reserve where requested. In 2019 some first nations were refused polling stations.

When it comes to sharing information among staff about acceptable forms of ID, there must be training for Elections Canada officials on the history of disenfranchisement and the importance of first nations' participation. First nations should be hired to staff polling stations and other vital Elections Canada positions. These are relatively impactful yet easy options to ensure participation.

Ultimately, first nations need to be a part of the federal electoral process, should we choose to engage. First nations have felt the impacts of disenfranchisement and the pandemic deeply. We cannot let COVID-19 exacerbate the issue.

First nations need to be able to have a say in the direction the federal government takes in the COVID-19 recovery effort. That means ensuring our safe participation in the electoral process, ensuring the procurement of supplies for first nation polling stations, implementing AFN recommendations on reducing barriers to the federal electoral process, and doing so while respecting first nation jurisdictional authority will stem the possibility of first nation voices being stifled.

• (1205)

Thank you for allowing our participation today. I look forward to your questions.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Justin Vaive):** Members of the committee, we've just lost the chair temporarily. She is attempting to reconnect. If I could ask Mr. Doherty, as the vice-chair, to preside over the meeting until the chair is back, that would be great.

Mr. Doherty, are you there?

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** He probably would not be available right now. I know he's been in and out.

[*Translation*]

**The Clerk:** I can ask Mr. Therrien to take over, as he is the second vice-chair.

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** So you want me to replace our chair.

**The Clerk:** Exactly.

You may give the floor to the next member on the list, Mr. Tochor.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Alain Therrien):** The floor goes to Mr. Tochor for the first six-minute round of questions.

[*English*]

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Thank you very much, and thank you to our witnesses for appearing here today.

Ms. Potts, what would be the different challenges with regular on-reserve voting versus urban reserve voting?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Thank you for the question.

Of course, there are fewer polling stations on reserves. There's the issue of remoteness for the people who have to travel long distances to get to a polling station. That's the obvious one that is top of my mind.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** What would be some of the challenges with elders, as you see it, versus average-aged individuals?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Obviously elders are a critical concern in the context of in-person voting during a pandemic, because they're more at risk to contract the virus, but in regular elections their participation is challenging as well because they need support to get to the polling station. They may need language support; English may not be their first language. Their first nation language may be their only language, so issues of language, remoteness and the issues of accessibility with regard to disabilities are of course always a concern.

• (1210)

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Thank you very much.

Also, can you just unpack a little bit your concerns about self-identification, or what you would like to see changed on that front?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** On the issues of identification, Elections Canada has really extensive lists of acceptable ID for people to participate in an election. However, we've seen anecdotal evidence that the polling station staff are not adequately trained on acceptable ID. So, a person who used their status card during the 2019 election, which is an acceptable form of ID, was not allowed to vote until that person, of course, challenged the election staff and was able to speak to the site manager. Then they were allowed to vote. Again, as I said in my remarks, it's not clear to us if this was an individual act of racism, or just inadequate training.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I have a quick question on the election of chiefs. We've had a number of elections held on first nation reserves over the last nine months. Do you know of any reserves that are actually using mail-in ballots right now for those elections?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I'm not aware.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] they're all in-person voting and, just as it is with anyone who is being introduced to a new method, there are going to be.... We just had a panel on seniors before you testified, and we were talking about how the tried-and-true paper ballot and pencil is the easiest way for seniors to cast their vote.

Would there be some trouble with mail-in ballots if reserve voting for chiefs and band councils is usually done in person? If they haven't utilized the mail-in ballot, there could be some challenges. Could you see that happening with our first nations across Canada as well?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I don't know if I understand your question clearly, but I am aware that first nations have undertaken elections using protocols to prevent the spread of the virus and have done so successfully. I'm not aware that first nations use the mail-in ballot system [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Yes. People could question the outcomes.

There are many first nations that for health reasons, unfortunately, aren't allowing people on their reserves. Would you be suggesting that these polling locations in the next federal election be managed totally by the community? How would you see this rolling out for reserves that aren't allowing non-members to enter that reserve?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Our expectation is that the outreach workers from Elections Canada would work closely with first nations leadership in preparing for the election with regard to whether they want a polling station or don't. If they don't want a polling station, it must be ensured that those individuals who want to participate are aware of how to participate through other means, like mail-in ballots.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Thank you very much.

I think that's my six minutes.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'm sorry about the technical difficulties. You won't believe it, but my computer overheated because of all the sun was coming through the window. I guess it's a good problem to have in November in Ottawa.

Next up we have Mr. Alghabra for six minutes.

• (1215)

**Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and welcome back.

[*Translation*]

My thanks to Mr. Therrien.

[*English*]

for stepping in as well.

Thank you, Ms. Potts, for being here. It's really important to include your perspective and input in our study.

We've been asked to offer recommendations to Elections Canada in preparation for a potential election, whether it happens during a pandemic. We want to make sure that we examine all circumstances and, certainly, making sure that first nations have access to exercise their right is a fundamental element of this process.

I want to ask you to expand a bit on what you said about the unique circumstances on reserves for mail-in ballots. Can you expand a bit on that and tell us what you think the challenges are there?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Generally people use a post office box as an address, not a legal land description. In the city, obviously, my address is really clear here in Ottawa, but back home I use a PO box, and it's difficult to understand how to participate via mail-in ballot without a legal land description and if you have a rural address.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** Would your recommendation be that we ask Elections Canada to accept a PO box address?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Absolutely.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** Do you have any thoughts on the mechanics of mail-in voting? I'm examining the mail-in ballot option because it might be one of the most efficient ways of ensuring that everybody, especially in a pandemic, has a simple way to access their rights. Can you also describe or offer your input on how the process should be for soliciting a mail-in ballot and how an individual would mail it back? Should there be an intermediary on reserve? Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I don't have specific thoughts on how Elections Canada should manage it, other than to say that it's important to let band administration know so that they can share with their community members how people can participate in the election. If there is an opportunity to participate via mail-in voting, I think Elections Canada needs to let first nations know how that process will roll out and how they can register for the mail-in ballot, and that there be support locally so that people can register. It is difficult to engage in bureaucratic systems. Particularly elders and people for whom English isn't a first language need support to navigate that bureaucracy, so it should be as early as possible and with as much support as possible.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** I should also have asked if you agree that mail-in ballots are a good option, given the circumstances.

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I do agree that a mail-in ballot is a good option, should it be accessible to rural and remote voters.

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** You made recommendations as well about making sure that Elections Canada recruits members of first nations and trains them. Obviously, there's giving a heads-up as early as possible. Are there any other recommendations that you think we should incorporate in our report?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I'll just revisit what I mentioned in my remarks. There's making sure that first nations have access to PPE should they have polling stations on reserve. Making sure our first nations staff are supporting the election is one of our key recommendations, and recognizing first nations' jurisdiction to say yes, they want a polling station, or no, they don't. Those are the key considerations from the perspective of the Assembly of First Nations.

• (1220)

**Hon. Omar Alghabra:** Okay. Thank you very much, Ms. Potts.

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Monsieur Therrien, you have six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome, Ms. Potts, and thank you for being here.

We often talk about indigenous nations. Unfortunately, some feel that these nations are all the same. So they will come up with things like an overall percentage for voter turnout. However, we know—you know even better than I—that indigenous nations are distinct from each other and sometimes have huge cultural differences. For example, in my constituency, members of the Mohawk community vote in far fewer numbers than you mentioned earlier.

Have you done any studies to shed light on the variations between indigenous nations, to explain why some vote more than others, and to try to better understand the variables that influence voting habits?

[*English*]

**Ms. Amber Potts:** That's a hard question, but yes, I think there are studies that can be done. Obviously, the position of some nations is that they don't participate in the federal electoral process because they consider themselves sovereign, such as the Mohawks. That's a well-documented position.

Where we have some more information is on individual motivations, and I think that is an important area of study. In addition to political motivation, we've seen studies showing that if there's a first nation representative running, there's more likelihood that first nation voters will turn out.

It's an area that definitely needs more study. We have a lot more questions than answers, and I'll just mention that in addition to individual motivations and positions of nations generally, there are also other impacts, like the timing of the fixed election. The timing of

the fixed election in October falls right in prime hunting season, and this is the period when people are out on the land and not thinking about going to the community hall and casting a vote, because they're busy filling up their freezers and making sure their families have resources for the winter. That impacts first nation participation in the election as well.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I feel that we could talk about this for hours, because it's so interesting to determine each nation's motivations.

If I may, I am going to talk about the reality of the Mohawk nation in my constituency. I live very close to their territory. I have noticed that the Mohawks do not vote on their territory, but they do travel to Sainte-Catherine to vote.

I wonder if they had the opportunity to vote at home and declined, or if no one has offered them the chance to vote on their land.

[*English*]

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I think Elections Canada would be better placed to answer details on the question, but I will say that through our outreach work with Elections Canada, through the AFN communication channels and through contacting band administrators, we reach out to every first nation to ensure they're aware and their administration is aware of how to participate in a federal election should they choose to do so.

There's an awareness there, but a decision not to participate for a variety of reasons I would leave to the Mohawk to better explain or share with you.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I understand that, since the beginning of the pandemic that is sweeping through Quebec, our Mohawk friends and colleagues have been more inclined to stay home to protect themselves from the virus, something we understand very well. That's what I have heard, but I would not want to say anything inaccurate.

In your opinion, if they have to vote outside their territory during the pandemic, do you fear a dramatic drop in voter turnout, which is already very low in their case?

[*English*]

**Ms. Amber Potts:** This morning I heard from one of our elders in Mohawk territory that there is real concern about people being affected by the virus on both sides of the border. Certainly the community has taken measures to protect itself, and that's why I mentioned in my remarks the importance of mail-in ballots and making sure that this process is accessible to first nations people living on reserve.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Potts. That's all the time we have.

Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie, for six minutes, please.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

In your opening remarks, you emphasized the need for jurisdictional clarity in ensuring that first nations are able to put in place the kind of public health measures they feel are most appropriate for their communities.

I wonder what you think the best mechanisms for obtaining that clarity would be. Does it require legislation? Is it something that could be done with a ministerial statement? Is there a need for some kind of joint statement by various levels of government, including first nations governments themselves, or an MOU or something?

What do you think is the simplest and most direct method for getting that kind of jurisdictional clarity?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** With regard to the election and participating in the election, simply I think first nations have the jurisdiction. I don't think any type of agreement is needed to recognize that—anything formal—because our jurisdiction to govern our communities is inherent.

Clarity with Elections Canada staff and the electoral process is really important for them to understand that first nations have the authority to dictate the conditions for safety for their community members.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Do you believe, then, that there is a role for the federal government, even if it is just contacting Elections Canada to remind them of that jurisdictional authority and to encourage them to respect it?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Absolutely, and I hope this committee's report will help buttress our recommendations around jurisdiction to Elections Canada and support their staff in delivering an election that respects first nations' rights.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you.

For first nations that may well be interested in establishing polling stations in their own communities, are you aware right now if there is any dedicated contact person they can reach out to at Elections Canada to begin some of that groundwork now, or is that something that only begins once an election is called?

• (1230)

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I understand that Elections Canada has changed the role of what I believe are called ROs, but generally the outreach is only available once an election is called. We had challenges in the last election in making sure that first nations and Elections Canada staff and those regional outreach officers were connected to coordinate polling stations in first nations communities.

My comment earlier around making sure information is available clearly relates to making sure that those staff members or contact persons are available as early as possible for first nations to reach out to, to discuss setting up a polling station and making sure the necessary supports for PPE are in place.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Would you say that should also include training for local people, if there are people living on reserve who are interested in being poll clerks or occupying some of those positions? Would it be useful to have Elections Canada make some of those resources available outside of an election period so that there

are some people on the ground who are ready to do those jobs from within the community?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Absolutely. As I said in my remarks, a 40-day or 50-day period is not enough time to do the recruitment and training needed to deliver service for voters adequately.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** What advice would you have for political actors, whether political parties or individual candidates, who are interested in campaigning in first nations communities, who obviously are not going to be able to do it in the traditional way because they're not going to be able to campaign anywhere in the traditional way? What advice would you have for political actors who want to reach out to first nations voters during the pandemic in terms of things they should bear in mind? How do we go about that in a good way?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I think it's by respecting first nations' authority to determine who comes in their territory. I would recommend that Elections Canada staff and political actors contact first nations administrators directly to ask how they want to engage with the political actors.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Gladu, you have five minutes.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Potts. You're providing excellent input.

I noted the issue about the mail-in ballots, with not having an actual address in some cases for people to use. Do you think having a polling station on reserve would address that situation for those individuals, or is it still too far for them to travel?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** In some cases, I think mail-in voting and making sure it is accessible is really important for the next election if it occurs during the pandemic.

As for polling stations on reserve, sometimes people have to travel too far to vote in person.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** It may not address all of them, then.

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Yes.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** One of the things that's really going to be important if an election is called in a pandemic is to make sure we have protection for the people who are voting and the people who are working in the polling stations, etc. I'm concerned that a government that can't even provide safe drinking water on reserve.... I'm not sure if proper support has been given for PPE, sanitizers and everything that will be needed. Do you feel you've had adequate support to be able to go forward in an election, or do you have concerns?

• (1235)

**Ms. Amber Potts:** As I stated in my remarks, it's absolutely essential that first nations be provided with the PPE needed to support in-person voting. I don't think first nations have those supports on hand right now. We do have obvious concerns about PPE and the impact of the pandemic on first nations. We know that the first nations have been impacted disproportionately.



**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** One of the things I noted is that the turnout was lower. What do you think we ought to incorporate to make sure the turnout is as high as it can possibly be?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Voter turnout is a complex issue that has many factors. There's political motivation. There's the timing, and I mentioned moose hunting. The fixed election date does not take into consideration first nations' priorities. Making sure there are polling stations on first nations reserves when that's requested is essential as well. Providing training—and this is a very simple recommendation—to Elections Canada staff to make sure we're not perpetuating systemic racism in institutions and that we're ensuring first nations can participate in the federal electoral process, should they choose to do so, is essential. It's about making it a process that works for them.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Could you elaborate? You mentioned that you want to make sure the people working on the polling stations don't do unwelcome things. Could you give some examples of things that have been done that would not be welcome?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I don't remember using the word “unwelcome”.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** I think it had to do with people not understanding things that are not consistent with first nations culture. It's possible I misunderstood.

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Yes. I'm sorry that my remarks were not clear.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** No problem.

What about if there were a polling station on the reserve? My idea is that throughout the whole writ period, you could always show up and vote by special ballot. Do you think this might encourage a better turnout from indigenous people?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Perhaps. I think that providing as many options as possible for first nations to participate in the federal electoral process is important.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Good.

I think that's my time. Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Next we have Ms. Petitpas Taylor for five minutes.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.):** Thank you so much, Madame Chair. I also would like to take an opportunity to thank Madame Potts for being with us today. Thank you for your opening remarks, your clear answers and your straightforward responses to our many questions.

The committee members, like you, certainly want to do all that we can to alleviate the challenges that our first nations communities and many other vulnerable groups face when it comes to voting.

We've talked a lot about mail-in ballots. I come from New Brunswick, and I can tell you that mail-in ballots for the general population are not something we utilize freely here. We just don't think of them. However, if we do have an election during the pandemic, we certainly recognize that mail-in ballots will be a tool that we hope more people will use.

Assuming that Elections Canada can make mail-in ballots more accessible for first nations communities, how do you think we should communicate the use of mail-in ballots? What should be the communications strategy to make sure that first nations understand and appreciate that this could be a good tool for them to exercise their right to vote?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Early communication on the process for mail-in ballots would be essential. Communication in first nations languages would be helpful, including communication on first nations local radio stations. I think early communication on all fronts would be helpful to support that option.

● (1240)

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Great.

Could you explain to us the relationship between the AFN and the Chief Electoral Officer when we're not in a pandemic and now that we are in a pandemic? Is there a difference with respect to the level of communication that takes place?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I'm trying to have a good understanding of that question. We don't communicate with the Chief Electoral Officer, so it's difficult for me to answer that question.

We have had a relationship with Elections Canada, generally, to provide outreach services on the federal electoral process for almost a decade. It's intermittent. It's when an election does happen. For 2019, we started working to share information with first nations on how they could participate in the federal electoral process.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** In sharing information right now and preparing for an eventual election, whether it's during a pandemic or not, have those communications started already with them?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** No.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** We also know that several provinces have had provincial elections over the past few months. I'm wondering if there's any information that you could share with us with respect to best practices within the provincial elections.

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I don't have anything to add. I did review the remarks from chief electoral officers in those provinces. I think that it would be best to reflect on those remarks or go specifically to first nations that participated in those elections to discuss the provincial processes.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Great.

To alleviate the many challenges that exist—and I know that you've given us a summary—what supports would be needed to ensure that first nations can fully participate in this process, even during a pandemic?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Again, I suggest respecting first nations' jurisdiction; making sure that there are mail-in ballots, making sure that first nations are represented as staff at the polls, making sure that staff are adequately trained on the history of disenfranchisement that first nations have had with regard to the elections process, ensuring they have adequate IDs so that we don't continue to disenfranchise first nations in the elections, and of course making sure that first nations are afforded the resources so that there are safe and sanitary conditions should there be a polling station in their community.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** I'll be very quick. I know my time's almost up. You may not have the answer to this, but do you know what percentage of polling staff are first nations?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I do not. This is because they do not keep track of it. One of our recommendations in our report to Elections Canada is that they start to measure this.

**Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor:** Thank you so much, Ms. Potts. I appreciate your time.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Monsieur Therrien is next, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Is first nations voter turnout higher in federal or provincial elections?

[*English*]

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I don't have that statistic.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** All right.

Are there provincial differences in first nations voter turnout, or are the numbers approximately the same?

[*English*]

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I don't have that statistic available. I think it would vary, election by election.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Okay.

In provinces with more first nations people, could that number be higher because they are perhaps more involved in public affairs? Does that make sense?

• (1245)

[*English*]

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Again, it's speaking to factors influencing participation. I think more outreach is needed in the number of.... There's a population impact of voter turnout. I don't have that information.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Okay.

I have one last question. When candidates are members of first nations, does first nations voter turnout increase significantly?

[*English*]

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Generally, academic research in not just Canada but also in other countries has shown that people tend to turn out to vote for someone who represents them. I can say generally that this has a positive correlation with voter turnout, but I can't say definitively for the Canadian situation. More research is needed in this area.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I understand.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

I want to get your view very quickly on the question of how long the election ought to last. We have heard different things from different groups about what effect a longer writ period would have. Does the AFN have an opinion on whether the government should be looking to have a relatively longer election period, within what's permitted in the legislation, or tend toward a shorter writ period?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** The AFN does not have an opinion on the length of the writ period, but as I mentioned in my remarks a couple of times, we do feel that earlier communication on how to participate in the electoral process would be positive.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I know we've spoken a lot about first nations communities. I'm wondering if there's anything beyond what you have said already to do with urban indigenous populations that you think is important for the committee to consider in terms of barriers to voting they may face as a result of the pandemic and things we could be doing now, either as Elections Canada or the federal government, in order to reduce those barriers.

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I think the recommendation on training on acceptable forms of ID is just as applicable to on-reserve voting stations as off-reserve. Inadequate training or incidents of racism can happen anywhere, not just in rural or remote settings, but also in urban settings. It's really important that elections staff or polling stations staff and volunteers do not perpetuate systemic discrimination and marginalize first nations people from participating in the elections process even when they have adequate ID.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Next we have Ms. Vecchio for five minutes.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Potts, for joining us today.

I recognize that many reserves are remote and that many don't have access to the general public facilities that we have. What is the percentage of reserves that have voting and polling stations on reserve during a general federal election?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I don't have that statistic available. It is available and it is in our report.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** A percentage have them and some do not have them on their reserves. There would be some reserves without a polling station. Is that correct?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** That's correct.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Is that because some of them are more remote? Do you know some of the reasons a polling station may not.... For instance, you've referred to the Mohawk first nation. I'm wondering specifically whether it's because they're not welcoming, or is it just because it's been a true oversight and Elections Canada should have done a little more due diligence? What are your thoughts on that?

• (1250)

**Ms. Amber Potts:** There's the situation of first nations not wanting a polling station, and then there's the situation of a first nation wanting the polling station and being refused. It could be timing or poor communications between Elections Canada staff and first nations.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** For those people who are on reserve but are being made to vote off reserve, are there challenges in getting to those voting stations? What are some of the challenges?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Transportation is a challenge to participate in voting off reserve.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** When they are looking at it, does Elections Canada as a whole look at on-reserve voting, or is it done by the local returning officer to verify what needs to be done in each constituency? Do you know?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Could you ask the question again?

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** In my riding of Elgin—Middlesex—London, we have Carrie Snyders, and she is in charge of this area for finding all the polling locations.

In an area that has both off-reserve and on-reserve voting, does Elections Canada assist with on-reserve voting, or is it the local returning officer who has to work with the reserve voting at the time?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** It's the returning officer. This is key, because they are not returned until far too late, in our opinion.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** That's great to understand. Do you think that maybe with the federal government working more closely with first nations and more closely with Elections Canada, we can maybe.... To me, if a first nation wants a site there and we're going through a pandemic and they have the ability to have poll clerks and everything there, it would be very useful, and then you're not bringing strangers on reserve. I'm wondering what the best method would be to make sure that all are at the table to have these discussions.

**Ms. Amber Potts:** Communication between first nations administration and that person is critical. That's who sets it all up. The AFN is supporting information sharing, but we don't get that information until far too late, and it's not available to first nations administrators until far too late. This is a recommendation that was included in our report to Elections Canada as well. That's a key position to enable an effective polling station, and of course it impacts the staffing of that polling station.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** If you have people who are living on reserve and you're trying to promote more indigenous people working at these polling stations, this is a sweet situation whereby we're actually fixing both things. We'd not be bringing people on and we'd be seeing that the poll workers will be from those communities as well. To me, it might be the right fit.

With regard to mail-in ballots, we've spoken to a lot of long-term care homes and we've spoken to different communities. Do you think that mail-in ballots would be a useful resource for first nations? Do you think it would be better to have more time for mail-in ballots, or should we focus on locations on reserve for polling stations?

**Ms. Amber Potts:** I think there need to be both. The first nations community is vulnerable to the pandemic, especially the elderly, and mail-in ballots need to be accessible to them and to those who don't want to vote in person but still want to participate.

**The Chair:** Ms. Vecchio, I thought you were going to finish right there.

We have a minute or two. Is there a Liberal member who would like to take a one-minute question before we switch into the next panel?

If not, then—

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** On a point of order, Chair, we had two minutes left in the last panel, and you did not allow me to ask the quick question that I had. There were two minutes left, and now you're asking if there's a Liberal who has a one-minute question—

**The Chair:** There were not two minutes left. I said that I would be stopping five minutes before the hour, and we had even gone past that.

At this point we had one minute, but now we're at five minutes to the hour as well, so we have no more time. We'll switch into panel number three.

I would have definitely given it to you, Mr. Tochor, but we were beyond the hour mark at that time.

Ms. Potts, thank you so much for being here today and thank you for your testimony. There were many questions, and you did a wonderful job of answering all of them and giving us some input as to the views that the AFN holds. Thank you.

The team will get set for the next round of witnesses.

**The Clerk:** Yes, Madam Chair. I will just do a quick sound check.

Madam Chair, you're good to go to start the next panel.

• (1255)

**The Chair:** Okay. Fantastic. Thank you so much.

Now we have, from the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, Jewelles Smith, the past chair. From the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, we have Ms. Diane Bergeron. We've had her before at this committee as well.

Welcome to both witnesses, and welcome back to Ms. Bergeron. We look forward to hearing your testimony. You both have five-minute opening statements.

We'll start with Ms. Smith.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith (Past Chairperson, Council of Canadians with Disabilities):** Good morning, Madam Chair and committee members. I guess it's good afternoon to some of you. Thank you for inviting the Council of Canadians with Disabilities to appear before the committee.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in article 29, "Participation in political and public life", requires states parties to ensure "that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use; protecting the rights of persons with disabilities...to stand for elections".

These rights are not altered by a pandemic, and we are confident that by following principles of universal design, the duty to accommodate and "nothing about us without us", it will be possible to ensure that voters with disabilities are not disenfranchised by the COVID-19 pandemic or discriminated against by any new barriers that would make voting more inaccessible.

During the pandemic, accessible communication to people with disabilities concerning access to the electoral process is very important. A twin-track approach to communication would be beneficial, focused on successful communication directly from Elections Canada to people with disabilities and on communications to people with disabilities by their own organizations on behalf of Elections Canada.

It would be helpful to people with disabilities if Elections Canada increased its capacity for direct communication with people with disabilities so that voters with disabilities are not frustrated or discouraged by not having their inquiries answered in a timely manner. During the pandemic, people have questions about how their needs will be met, and it is discouraging and frustrating when these inquiries go unanswered.

It is recognized that if an election is called during the pandemic, it will be necessary to have appropriate distancing measures and sanitizing practices along with various forms of PPE. A disability and human rights lens must be applied to how these are rolled out.

When constructing the layout of polling stations that conform to COVID-19 safety measures, the principles of universal design need to be followed, and design and practice testing by qualified people with disabilities needs to take place to ensure that the design and practices do not include barriers to voters with various types of disabilities.

Sanitizing agents that do not exacerbate environmental illnesses, allergies, asthma and other conditions also need to be used.

Some individuals, because of their disabilities, are not able to wear a mask or face covering, so these voters with disabilities need to be accommodated at the polling station or at an Elections Canada office. Accommodations need to be available both for voters with disabilities and for employees with disabilities.

Because of the need for physical distancing, at some polls it may be necessary to limit the number of people in a polling station. As it is difficult for some people with disabilities to stand for prolonged periods of time, it may be necessary to have as an accommodation a

priority access line for people for whom long waits would be a barrier to participation.

The application process for the mail-in ballot does not include an Internet-based application option. It would be helpful to have this type of option added, because at this time, those who are trying to avoid exposure to COVID-19 may want to avoid going to a postal box, and not everyone has a home fax machine. Further, an option for phone-in voting is highly recommended.

There are concerns about how a voter must establish their ID for voting. A voucher can vouch for only one person. With the number of people who are seeking to limit their personal contacts, it may be difficult for people to find someone willing to go out in public to vouch for them. To alleviate this situation, vouchers should be allowed to vouch for more than one person.

Elections Canada hires Canadians to work during federal elections. For example, there are community relations officers for accessibility. It is recommended that Elections Canada hire additional community relations officers for accessibility to ensure that new barriers are not created as the COVID-19 response is developed. It is also highly recommended that additional communications personnel be hired by Elections Canada to ensure that there is sufficient messaging to people with disabilities about access to the electoral process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additional outreach needs to be done for Canadians with disabilities who would be interested in working for Elections Canada in these positions or other positions. This outreach should include information about how employees with disabilities would be accommodated during the pandemic.

The Council of Canadians with Disabilities would be open to working closely with Elections Canada on messaging voters with disabilities and on barrier prevention.

I thank you and I look forward to your questions.

● (1300)

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

Go ahead, Ms. Bergeron.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron (President, CNIB Guide Dogs, Vice-President, International Affairs, CNIB Foundation, Canadian National Institute for the Blind):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'm Diane Bergeron, and I'm just going to ask for a second as I set up my adaptive equipment. As a person who's totally blind, I use various technologies to help me in my presentations.

I'm here on behalf of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, known as the CNIB. There are approximately 1.5 million Canadians with sight loss. Sight loss is a spectrum. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to removing barriers for people with sight loss.

CNIB has been around for more than a hundred years, and during that time we've supported and provided assistance to people with sight loss. Now we're in this great world of the pandemic, a place that causes confusion and complications for everyone; and people with sight loss are no different in that situation, including in elections.

For over 90 years, CNIB has been advocating tirelessly for accessible elections. In the 1930s CNIB led the charge for the passage of the Blind Voters Act, which stopped the practice of a voter who was blind or partially sighted from sharing their vote with Elections Canada officials and party scrutineers vocally and out loud. Can you imagine not being able to vote in secret or independently?

We've come a long way, but barriers to our independence remain, and that includes in elections. CNIB has heard from Canadians with sight loss across the country in places where a pandemic election has taken place. In New Brunswick and Saskatchewan, we heard from the community about anxiety and frustration over how to independently mark a mail-in ballot without the accessibility tools that are offered in an election, such as a magnifier or Braille ballots. While many people who are blind or partially sighted may have access to assistive devices to help with voting, it should not be assumed that everyone does. It should be mentioned that the tools provided by Elections Canada do not fully provide independence for someone who is trying to vote who has a disability. It's more of a stopgap measure to assist in the voting process.

However, in British Columbia, there is a tool to help people with disabilities to vote independently, and it should be replicated by Elections Canada. Voting by phone has become a safe and independent way for someone with sight loss to vote without having to use an inaccessible paper ballot or without the assistance of a sighted guide. Elections BC and the government of Australia have implemented a system whereby those with disabilities are able to verify and mark a ballot by phone. Not only is this helpful in an pandemic in which a marginalized population is at greater risk of exposure, but it would also be another tool in the tool box to combat barriers to independent voting. In both instances, and to the best of our knowledge, there have been no instances of voter fraud or coercion.

This method of voting helps to eliminate another barrier that we have, which is to get to a polling location. Many who are blind or partially sighted must rely on a family member or friend to drive them to a polling location, or else take public transit. In rural or remote communities, this may prove to be more difficult because of the lack of public transit options.

If the government takes the suggestion of the electoral officer to move election day from a Monday to a Saturday or a Sunday, this also presents an issue, as many transit operators have reduced or eliminated service on weekends. Ride-sharing in taxis or Uber presents a financial barrier as well. Voting by phone would eliminate these barriers.

Again, I'd like to thank the committee for inviting me to testify on behalf of CNIB. I'd be happy to take questions from members of the committee to better explain the voting process for someone with sight loss. I've gone through these processes myself, and I know how difficult it is when you have a disability to go in, be independent, and exercise your right to be able to vote independently and in secret without having to give out information to others.

Thank you.

• (1305)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Bergeron and Ms. Smith. That was very valuable, and of course we don't want to create any more barriers as we're trying to make sure that an election can be run safely.

We're going to start with six minutes from Ms. Vecchio, please.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Thank you very much, and a special thank you to Jewelles and Diane. This is a very personal way of looking at things, because we're talking about Canadians in general, but what you're bringing to the table are factors that need to be considered as we're moving forward, because it's so vital that every Canadian has the opportunity to vote. Thanks for bringing forward the concerns and barriers that not only you but people you work with are dealing with.

To begin, Jewelles, I really liked that idea of the priority access for the disabled, making sure that there are appropriate lines and things like that. That is one of my greatest concerns. If we're asking seniors or people with disabilities to go out and vote and there's a two-hour lineup, how can we expect them to do so?

Have you seen priority access being used in elections so far, and if so, what's been the response?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I haven't seen it used. We did just have an election here in B.C. I was able to vote by mail. I have an autoimmune condition as well as a mobility disability, so I accessed that.

Not having seen it, I don't have that personal experience, but I have seen it work in other places. For example, when I was in Europe and I went to a museum, I didn't have to stand in the two-hour lineup, which might then have meant that I could do only one floor of a museum because of my disability. It's been done in other spaces, and I really hope that this is taken into account.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Adopting that method and bringing it forward sounds so simple to me, so why would we not put that forward when it makes such sense?

As you're both indicating, transportation is definitely an issue as well. One thing I looked at was the uptick in mail-in ballots, which we heard about. We've seen that, and the Chief Electoral Officer is also anticipating a much higher mail-in ballot turnout.

I would like to start with Diane.

Diane, you were talking about these ballots. What are some of the things the CNIB would want us to consider on ballots for those who are visually impaired? For a mail-in ballot, what would be appropriate things for us to take into consideration so that the person receiving it would be able to use it?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Thank you very much.

People with sight loss, as I said, are a spectrum. It's very important, with any ballots, to make sure that the print is very clear, that the text is very clean, that it has good colour contrast and that the print is large enough. That will really assist seniors and other individuals with partial sight.

Those of us who are blind have our Braille templates that we use in the elections right now. Mine really helps me, because I am able to mark my own ballot. What it doesn't allow me to do is to verify that I have marked my ballot correctly. At this moment, in our current situation, there is no way for someone who is totally blind to be able to mark it and verify it without having someone else assist them.

If you're going to do a mail-in ballot, one of the things that we were working on with Elections Canada was having an option to have a ballot sent to an individual through email as a fillable PDF, so they could fill it in on their computer, not online, print it off and then be able to put it in their envelope and sign it to send it back. A tactile indicator of where to sign would be extremely helpful.

CNIB can help during that process by setting up stations around the country in our various offices to allow people with sight loss to go in and use a computer to print off their ballot if they don't have the equipment at home.

Those are some of the ways we can help.

• (1310)

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** That's very useful, Diane. Thank you so much. It sounds as though there's been a lot of groundwork and homework done on this beforehand and that these are things that we would be able to move forward with.

One of my concerns when we're talking about disabilities is that a lot of times when ballots are sent out, people are going to have to print in the name. On a special ballot, there may not be all the lists of official candidates until so many weeks into the campaign, and we're looking at time frames. My wheels are turning about what we can do on the computer, but what are some of the things...? In this situation, I'd say that we would probably have to make an election period longer so that we can make sure people get appropriate ballots.

Are there other things that we should take into consideration at that time as well, Diane?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes, absolutely we are facing some of those issues around the templates and with ballots that aren't ready

until just before the election. Given that we are working with organizations like CNIB and CCD and other disability groups, I'd think that there's a solution out there. We just need to work together to find it.

Having it tested by people with the disability that you are trying to accommodate is extremely important, because you won't know if it's going to be accurate and actually work unless you're right there testing it.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Absolutely.

Jewelless, I'll move over to you. We are talking not only about an election during this pandemic but also everyday situations that are impeding Canadians and those with disabilities right now because of the pandemic. I want to start with a bigger picture than moving into an election. What are some of the biggest challenges you're finding for people with disabilities during COVID-19?

**Ms. Jewelless Smith:** I did a review of WorkSafeBC and other responses to the pandemic through a disability lens and I realized there was not a consideration for people with disabilities in the set-ups that were created. There were no conversations with people with disabilities on how these clear plastic barriers would set up new barriers for us. Somebody with low vision might not be able to see them, for example. There are signs on floors that some people can't see, and many spaces don't accommodate wheelchairs, because they're not wide enough or the distancing doesn't allow for the space of a wheelchair.

I have a service animal. I have a lot of concerns about bringing my service animal into public spaces at this time. I know as well that people who use guide dogs have similar challenges. Those challenges are being communicated among the community so that we can figure these things out.

The biggest barrier I've seen is this rapid response with no consideration of our population. One in five Canadians lives with a disability, yet we were not consulted at all about all of these brand new things that just leapt up in society.

**Mrs. Karen Vecchio:** Thank you so much to both Diane and Jewelless. You had so much to offer.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Turnbull is next.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to Ms. Smith and Ms. Bergeron for being here. I really appreciate your perspective.

There are a lot of important facets to the elections process. We have to look through the disabilities lens and understand how to make the process more accessible. It goes without saying that we need to do this in normal times, but in COVID-19, it is even more important than ever. I find myself saying that a lot.

I have lots of questions.

I understand that both of you are on the advisory group for disability issues with Elections Canada. Is that correct?

• (1315)

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Yes.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes. We both are.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** That's great.

What is your relationship with the Chief Electoral Officer? How are you being engaged in that process? Could you tell us whether you think it's satisfactory or if you think there needs to be more input, more meetings? How can that process be improved to make sure you have as much input as possible into the process?

Ms. Smith, do you want to go first?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Sure, I'll go first.

Not specifically with the Chief Electoral Officer, but I've already been in contact extensively with the staff who engage with the accessibility committee. We are about to have our semi-annual meeting shortly. They also did a check-in with our committee over the summer on how things were going and on our thoughts if there were to be an election.

Another thing is that they've approached me to help put together a speaker's opportunity to talk about accessibility to voting in particular. We just went through this process in B.C., and they think it would be useful for government and for Elections Canada staff and returning officers to hear us. I feel we're very engaged.

I'll hand it over to Diane.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Thanks, Jewelles.

I would agree with and echo Jewelles's comments.

I find that Elections Canada has a really positive relationship with the committee. Although not every suggestion we put forward is possible, based on the fact that the legislation is there and that a lot of the suggestions we have would have would mean that you would have to open up the legislation to make some changes, Elections Canada is very creative in trying to do what they can to make sure accommodations can work within the boundaries of the legislation.

A key message there for me is that now that this is being looked at, maybe this is the time to open up that legislation and make those accommodations possible.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** That's great. Thank you for that. The point is well taken. Part of what this committee is considering in its interim report are some legislative changes, so I appreciate that.

I want to know why you say that. Are there specific elements of the flexibility required by Elections Canada that would help meet the needs of people who live with accessibility issues? Can you speak to that? Are there specific things that you think require legislative changes, from your perspective?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I'll jump in. I know that Diane has a few things too.

One thing we've really been pushing hard—and People First is also on the committee and has talked about this—is the ability to have a person vouch for more than one person. That would make a tremendous difference in a general election. In an election during a pandemic, I think it's really critical that we have that possibility.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you very much for that.

Ms. Bergeron, would you comment?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Some things have come up at the committee level. For people with sight loss, of course, it's about having those alternate ways of voting—telephone voting or potentially online voting, if there's a safe way to do that—and having other options that use technology and various types of technology so that we can vote independently.

Another thing that came up quite frequently at our committee was to have Braille lists of the names of the individuals on the ballot, but there are people out there who have no ability to read or who have limited literacy skills. There are people with various disabilities and cognitive levels. It's important to potentially have photographs or pictures of the individuals next to their names so that people know who they're voting for.

Those are some ideas that were put forward. Again, to my understanding, what the ballot looks like is all set within legislation. Maybe it would be possible to have a look at that ballot to see how we can make it possible for as many people as possible to be able to read it.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you. Those are really specific suggestions.

To both of you, I appreciated your opening remarks. You had very specific suggestions, which I really appreciate. All of those points are well taken.

Ms. Smith, I want to ask one other question about twin-track communications, which I think you opened up with. I feel it's a really big contribution to this conversation. Can you speak a little bit more about what that might look like in terms of coordinating with some of the accessibility organizations across Canada?

• (1320)

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Sure. I think it's really important to use multiple ways of reaching out to communities. There's TV and radio. Some of the earlier speakers today talked about using specific modes in the community, so maybe radio is a rural preference.

In terms of reaching out to our organizations, we have very large mail groups to whom we send out weekly notices from CCD. We also have social media to amplify it. If all of our organizations were working closely, we could definitely be doing that outreach. As Diane mentioned, CNIB has the ability to help folks in person. All of those modes are really critical to us. I know that reaching out to the community is important.

I'm not sure if you're aware, but the Council of Canadians with Disabilities is made up of different organizations that are represented at our council. We would amplify it straight out to all of our provincial and territorial affiliates as well.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Monsieur Therrien, you have six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, Ms. Bergeron and Ms. Smith. I am very happy to be with you today.

You are testifying about a reality that we do not know enough about, in my opinion. We tend to not look into it as closely as we should. Before I ask you a lot of questions related to the pandemic, I would like to know the voter turnout rate for people living with a disability. Is it comparable to the rest of the population, or is it lower or higher?

[*English*]

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** I'm not sure who that question was aimed at. I can say that we actually don't know how many people with sight loss in Canada are voting. Since the vote is secret, there is no way for us to be able to have specific statistics on that. Unfortunately, I can't answer that question.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I would say that as well. Those statistics are not available to us.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** If I understand correctly, you have not considered doing that analysis by asking the people you represent questions of that kind, in the form of a survey, say, to see whether the democratic process is working well for them? That's okay, I was just wondering.

[*English*]

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** CNIB did an analysis after the last election in regard to the experiences of individuals in their election process, but we did not ask the question on how many.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** So you are studying the process to see whether those you represent had any trouble, what kind of trouble they had, and how you would suggest improving the situation for them. That's commendable.

Did I understand correctly?

[*English*]

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes, that was the purpose of our survey. It was to make sure we knew what the challenges were so that when we're participating in committees such as the Elections Canada committee, and also in presenting here, we would have some information about what those experiences were like and how to potentially improve them.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I would just say that the council as well does conversations and outreach whenever we are meeting with the committee to discuss any recent barriers that were experienced or

concerns or ideas. We always bring those forward, but we do not have the capacity at this time to run a large survey.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Has anyone actually told you they would refuse to vote during the pandemic because they are too afraid of it?

• (1325)

[*English*]

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I'll take that one.

As I said, we just had an election in B.C. I didn't hear from anyone that they were too afraid to vote. We have a lot of options in B.C.

People were able to have a mail-in ballot or use the phone. It was more about solutions to vote. That's what I was hearing.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Is your answer the same, Ms. Bergeron?

[*English*]

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes, I haven't heard of anybody specifically who has been concerned about voting in the election due to COVID.

I've heard a lot of concerns about people not wanting to go out and interact in public due to COVID. Guide dogs don't understand physical distancing, and we can't follow the pathways on the ground, so it's been very difficult for people with sight loss to do their daily activities.

As for refusing to vote due to COVID, I can say that I haven't heard anything specifically about that, but I have spoken to some people who are blind and who have said they're not voting until they can vote independently in secret, as every other Canadian has the right to do. There are some folks who are not voting because of the lack of accessibility, but they haven't said that it's specifically around COVID.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** I understand.

You have voted by mail in the past, and you would like to see that option become more widely available? Is that correct?

[*English*]

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes. If the vote-by-mail option were more accessible, I think you would find that there would be a much higher rate. This is just anecdotal and from my opinion. I think you would find that there would be a lot more individuals who would be willing and able to vote, but that process would need to be accessible in order for that to happen.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I'm speaking not specifically to the blind community but to disability in general and to people who live in rural and remote places in B.C. I know that the mail-in and the phone-in options for voting were really well appreciated. I've heard that there was quite a bit of participation.

**The Chair:** Thank you.



Next we have Mr. Blaikie, please, for six minutes.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

My opening question is similar to Monsieur Therrien's. In light of the barriers that exist to voting and the complications of the pandemic, if those barriers aren't addressed, are you concerned that there could be a significantly lower voter turnout among Canadians living with disabilities?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** I'm sorry. Were you addressing both of us?

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** I am indeed, yes, and I'm very happy to have you start, Ms. Bergeron.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** From my perspective, as long as the situation with COVID is in place, you are going to have a significant drop in participation from people with disabilities because of the fear of going out.

In my particular case, I'm thinking of people with sight loss. It's not a fear, I would say, of getting COVID as much as it's a fear of the reaction from the people around you in a social situation, in a community situation. People get upset and angry because your dog can't figure out where the lineup is and which direction you're supposed to walk. With your cane, it's not tactile on the floor and you can't see the signage. It's such a stressful, anxiety-building situation that I expect you will see, for those reasons, a significant drop in voting participation during the next election from people with sight loss alone.

Again, that's just anecdotal and my opinion, but I think there will be a significant reduction unless something's done properly.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I would agree as well. If the issues are not addressed, we know that people with disabilities who live in long-term care homes or settings like group homes and such are going to have challenges. Not accommodating people with mobility disabilities might be a problem. Individuals with autoimmune conditions are going to have concerns about going out and voting. As well, ensuring that people with communication disabilities have a support person with them to assist in voting is also a priority.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

One thing that's been discussed through a number of our panels has been the length of the writ period, or how long the election ought to be. I'm wondering if either of you has an opinion on whether we should tend towards a longer or shorter election period, and if you think that would matter to the people you represent in terms of Elections Canada having more or less time to prepare ballots in the appropriate way and having polling stations and things like that.

• (1330)

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I would strongly suggest, especially during a pandemic, to have a longer writ period. In B.C., we had a very short one. I know it was very difficult for people to get the names of the people running for positions ahead of time and to make decisions about voting and to send in the mail-in ballots in a timely manner. However, they did alleviate that to some extent by extending the number of days we were able to vote, which was good.

Having a longer writ period, if the issues of accessibility were addressed, would definitely help.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** I agree with Jewelles. The longer the period, the more opportunities people have to prepare for their accommodation needs. I also think it provides Elections Canada with a longer period of time to get accommodations in place and to make sure that the communication is out there to tell people what accommodations are going to be available for their elections experience.

I would say that the longer the period, the easier it's going to be for Elections Canada and for people with disabilities to prepare. I also think that the more time you give during the voting piece.... If you have a three-day or four-day time frame to have people vote, it gives people an option to get different transportation options in place or get the supports they need in place for different times.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

If I understood the earlier conversation correctly, you were saying that there were some suggestions coming out of the disability advisory group for Elections Canada that would require legislative changes, meaning that those changes would be harder to make. I'm wondering in this context if you'd like to share some of those recommendations, given that I think it is very likely that the act will be opened up.

What things are most critical to reducing the worst barriers for people living with disabilities in the event of an election during a pandemic?

We could start with Ms. Bergeron and then go to Ms. Smith.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Thank you very much.

As a person who has never, ever, in my entire life in Canada been able to vote independently and in secret, I would really appreciate having the options of telephone voting, online voting or any other option that doesn't require my going into a polling station and having to either take someone with me to confirm my ballot or having to tell some stranger at the polling station helping me.

I know that the folks who are there take an oath. I've said before that an oath is fantastic, but it's only a word. As I mentioned to Elections Canada when we talked about the oath, my husband gave me a vow a long time ago, and he's now my ex-husband, so that tells you—with the divorce rate in Canada—how much an oath means sometimes.

I would really like to see those alternative measures in place, using technology to give us the ability to do it independently. If the legislation is opened up, I would be eternally grateful to feel independent in this process for the first time in my life.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

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

Next we have Mr. Tochor for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Thank you so much.

I will give a personal thank you to our witnesses for the work you guys do every day on behalf of your members. The one in five Canadians who are living with disabilities are, I'm sure, very appreciative of your hard work to make sure that people with disabilities can live normal lives as much as possible, just like every other Canadian.

My questions are a little about what would be ideal. We talked about the writ period and how the longer the period, probably the better possibilities would be. We have the example in B.C., where I believe the witness said it was a little too short and that it challenged people with disabilities. Another aspect is that we live in Canada. I'm very envious of Diane out in B.C., I believe. I'm in Saskatchewan right now, with a couple of feet of snow in my driveway. I think everyone knows the answer to this question, but I'd like to hear you guys talk about the perfect timing for an election for someone who has a disability. Is it in the middle of winter or in the middle of summer? What does that change for the members you represent?

• (1335)

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Thank you.

Jewelless lives in B.C. I'm also very envious because at the moment I'm in Edmonton. We have snow and cold.

For people I know with sight loss and other disabilities, winter is a challenge. If things are not shovelled, it's very difficult to use the tactile indicators you have on the ground to get around. Your sound is muffled because you have a hat and earmuffs and stuff on. Any time there's no snow on the ground is the best.

**Ms. Jewelless Smith:** I would echo that. Yes, I am in the beautiful coastal part of B.C., but I know that back home in Revelstoke there's snow.

I would agree that times when there is not as much snow are very important, because then there is much more accessibility for people who have disabilities. Also, people who are living in rural and remote communities are better accommodated in the better seasons. I'm not sure that the height of summer would be so great, because kids are off school and people have vacations and so on. There are plenty of months in the year when snow and ice are not such issues.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I've heard there are issues with transportation, obviously, on weekends versus a weekday. If you had your choice, would you hold an election on the traditional Monday or in the Saturday-Sunday period?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** It would be Sunday-Monday, because that would give the opportunity for people who need to get friends or family members to help them. Sunday's probably the day they'd be off work, and on Monday the transportation comes back. Otherwise, it could be Friday-Saturday if Sunday's an issue. It could be one weekend day and one weekday day for the public transportation and the availability of other people to help.

**Ms. Jewelless Smith:** I would echo those days.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** Okay.

I'll tell a little story. Back in 2011, I ran provincially. On election day, I was going to drop off lunches for my scrutineers at the assisted voting location. It was a place for people who had mobility issues or other disabilities, issues that needed additional assistance.

It was the only time in an election that I was actually scared that I would be unsuccessful. As my wife and I were walking in, there was an individual in a wheelchair who was being helped. The worker didn't recognize me or my wife, but we were walking behind them. The worker was helping this resident to vote and, with last instructions, said, "Remember Tommy Douglas—remember." It was a sinking feeling that there was undue influence on people in a voting station that potentially could impact the election. Now, take that example, and with an individual who doesn't just have mobility issues but has additional disabilities, that can really affect how things go.

I do share your concerns or your desire to make sure that everyone who wants to vote can vote. You've talked about how in the past you had to verbalize or share your vote with the worker. We had elections in New Brunswick, which didn't have as many COVID precautions or concerns as were going through B.C. Our country is so vast that there are a lot of different examples. We may need something different here versus in another province, or vice versa.

I'd like to hear a bit about the idea for a voting station that would be dedicated to people with sight issues. I guess that question would be for—

• (1340)

**The Chair:** Mr. Tochor, I let you go over by a minute just so you could get your question out, but it was a long question.

**Mr. Corey Tochor:** I had 1:41 as my cutoff, but okay. I digress.

**The Chair:** I just wanted to throw you a minute there, because I know you wanted to have some time that you were expecting before.

Go ahead, Ms. Duncan, please, for five minutes.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank you, Ms. Smith and Ms. Bergeron, for being with us and being so generous in bringing us your tremendous experience and expertise.

Ms. Smith, could you tell us how many organizations you represent in CCD, please?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Sure. Oh, my service dog is getting a little noisy right now.

We have 17 organizations that have council seats. We have two at-large seats that are for other members from across the country. We also will be having three more seats, which we've just approved.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you. Could you table with the committee the names of those organizations? Would that be possible?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Oh, you're really testing me.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** No, no. Could you do it at another time?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Oh, at another time. Okay. Yes, of course I can.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you.

Does Elections Canada engage CCD? Does it engage the council, or does it engage each of those 17 organizations?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I know that a number of my colleagues who are in national organizations have a seat at the advisory committee.

For example, Frank Folino previously was one of the members. He represented the Canadian Association of the Deaf. We also have People First represented. There are a number of individuals there who are not necessarily attached to their organization but who sit at council. It's a pretty diverse group.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Would you be willing to table specific recommendations with the committee? You and Ms. Bergeron talked about recommendations you had for Elections Canada. Would you be willing to table with the committee at a later time your recommendations to make elections easier, please?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Of course.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Ms. Bergeron, could I ask if Elections Canada consults CNIB directly?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes. I sit on the committee with Elections Canada and I work with my colleagues on various projects for Elections Canada to make sure they're getting the appropriate responses—not just Diane's opinion, but the CNIB's vast knowledge base.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Ms. Bergeron, could I ask you the same question? Would you be willing to table with the committee the recommendations that CNIB has made to Elections Canada to make elections easier, please?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Absolutely.

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Thank you so much.

Ms. Smith, could you talk about how COVID-19 is impacting Canadians with disabilities who live in group residences, please?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** For sure.

There has been a lot of press about long-term care facilities and our aging population, but many people don't realize how many people with disabilities live in those settings because they don't have appropriate and accessible housing within the community to live independently or with friends or whatever. The disability population is being impacted equally with our aging population. Those who are in those settings are experiencing isolation during the lockdowns that have occurred.

We do know, not necessarily coming out of Canada but from other countries, that people with certain disabilities seem to have higher death rates if they contract COVID-19. People with developmental disabilities seem to be passing away at higher numbers, which is shocking to me personally. I really worry about my friends and colleagues.

We also know that the inability to have family members or other support workers come in is a critical issue that's impacting those who live in these group homes or long-term care settings.

• (1345)

**Hon. Kirsty Duncan:** Might it be possible to table with the committee the COVID cases that have happened in group residences? You can do so at a later time.

As a last question, do you have recommendations for group residences in terms of elections? With that, I'll say thank you to you both and allow Ms. Smith to answer.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** We know that potentially there are some issues around vouching for people who live in group settings, long-term care homes or other larger settings. I brought it up in my introductory remarks. Sometimes people don't have the identification that is required to vote without vouching. It would really be incredible if the legislation were opened up and that problem could be allowed for, just as currently, if you go to a hospital, there is potential to support more than one person as vouched for by a staff member. That would be really great.

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

Monsieur Therrien, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ladies, what I gather from your approach is that we must take advantage of our collective thought in order to make voting easier during a pandemic. So we need to ask ourselves how can we make it easier to vote for individuals like you, who have disabilities, and how we can permanently amend the legislation to encourage them to participate in democratic activities.

Did I understand you correctly?

[*English*]

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** Yes.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes, I would agree with that statement. Thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. Alain Therrien:** Thank you. I agree with you. Good for you.

I have one last point to address.

Ms. Smith, you talked a lot about the British Columbia model. I will give both of you the rest of my time so that you can explain to me what you like about that model and what needs to be added to it to get closer to perfection.

[English]

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I think that Diane mentioned the potential to vote by phone. I think it's a really important option. I have heard from a lot of friends who are blind that they took advantage of that and that it was amazing to vote independently.

As a person with an autoimmune condition, I found the mail-in ballot was really great in providing access. Normally I work during elections, but I wasn't able to because it just wasn't safe for me to do so at this time. I think that the longer number of days for voting was really positive.

I would say there were some things that could be done better in B.C. The website wasn't fully accessible. Elections Canada does have a much more accessible website, so that's good.

Those are the things I would say.

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** I would agree with everything that Jewelles has said.

I think the key piece in of all of this, again, is making sure that whatever you're doing, you're talking to individuals with disabilities and testing it out with them to make sure that what's being put in place is actually going to work and is not just a concept.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I might add that it's not a one-size-fits-all answer for our community. What I require for accessibility is not the same as for Diane, which is not the same as what our colleagues who are deaf might need.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That was perfect.

Now we have two and a half minutes with Mr. Blaikie.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Ms. Smith, I think your comments around vouching are examples of something I asked about earlier. I asked about ways of reducing barriers for people with disabilities that are particularly important in the context of the pandemic that would require legislative changes. Beyond looking at the question of vouching, I want to give you an opportunity, because I ran out of time last time, to speak to some of the things you think are really important to be considered in any changes to the Elections Act vis-à-vis the pandemic.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I think that having the option to phone in and vote is one crucial change. I know that Diane has specific ones that she's worked on that she could mention. For me, there's the ability to easily do a mail-in or a phone-in option to vote, to have vouching available and to think about accommodations in rural communities for people with disabilities in the timing of elections.

• (1350)

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Thank you very much.

Ms. Bergeron, was there anything you wanted to add on that topic that you didn't have a chance to provide in your last answer?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Again, I would agree with Jewelles. With COVID, anything that allows a person to be able to vote without having to leave the safety and security of their own home is going to be key in the upcoming election, whenever it happens. Again, in taking that perspective and looking at how we need to do things differently now, let's make it right so that the future is going to be more accessible.

The one thing I do want to impress upon people—and we didn't talk about it earlier—is that people who are deaf-blind need to have intervenor services and assistance with that. That's currently not provided by Elections Canada. They do have access to interpreters for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, but intervenors are not provided, and that's key.

**Mr. Daniel Blaikie:** Okay. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We have Mr. Doherty now.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** I think it's really Marilyn Gladu playing the role of Todd Doherty.

**The Chair:** Okay, sure. Why not?

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Thank you so much to the witnesses for your testimony today.

Today Elections Canada and federal guidelines say that voting stations have to be accessible, but I had examples in my riding, even, and in some of the neighbouring ridings, of buildings that had been chosen as polling stations not being accessible.

Ms. Smith, have you heard of or experienced similar things?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** For sure. We know there are sometimes restrictions in communities when polling stations that are selected are not accessible, and usually people then receive an alternative spot to vote. I strongly encourage that all spaces be accessible. It can help people with disabilities, moms with strollers, the aging population and people who have invisible disabilities if they are just accessible always. However, I know that finding a large enough location is sometimes a challenge, and therefore those are there.

I had one suggestion around that at one point. There could be an easy-access line or a chat on the website where people could easily access somebody and say, "Hey, it's not accessible. I need support right now. Where do I go? How can I vote?"

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** It's an excellent suggestion.

Ms. Bergeron, how many adult Canadians are blind?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** That's a very good question. We say there are about 1.5 million Canadians who are blind or partially sighted. The majority of them would be adults. It would probably be in the area of at least one million, maybe 1.3 million or somewhere in that area. I don't have the exact number, but yes, there are about 1.5 million.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** You talked about the phone-in voting. B.C. did something, and you mentioned Australia. Were there differences in the way they verified and ID'd the vote?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes. It was a very interesting process. I don't know if Jewelles had somebody explain it and did it herself.

In the phone-in experience, you don't need to do anything in advance. You just phone in. You talk to someone who identifies you through your various identifications, such as your social insurance number, your address, things that only you would know. Once you are verified as the individual who is there to vote, they pass you over to another individual with whom you cast your ballot. You tell them the vote. They mark it. They hand the ballot to a third person, who then confirms to you who you voted for.

The difference in that process from what I go through when I'm on site is that the person who is verifying the ballot knows who I am. They know my name, so the privacy is gone. This way, the initial person knows who you are, but when they pass you over, that next person has no idea who you are. It's still a secret.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** What do you think about the idea of having, at the returning office, the ability for people who are blind to go in and be taken to a private place where they can actually say the vote after they're verified?

• (1355)

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** Yes, that would be a great option, although, as I said, sight loss is such a spectrum. I'm not sure how everybody is doing the actual marking of their ballot. That could be possible.

Again, a lot of these people working at the polling stations are people who have seen you in the community, because most of them live in the community, so there's an identification. Over the phone, they don't have a clue who you are.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Ms. Smith, one commonality between group homes for people who are disabled and long-term care homes.... We're talking about solutions that might work there for elections in a pandemic. If there were rapid testing available, then in the mobile poll idea, somebody from Elections Canada who has a negative COVID test would then go to the home to facilitate the voting. Do you think that's a good idea?

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** It's not my area of expertise.

I know you had earlier witnesses. I was listening to them while they were telling you about some of the options, and I do think the rapid test is amazing. I think the crossover potential.... I really liked the suggestion that one of your earlier witnesses had of having a different person go to each one, rather than one person going to multiple spaces, just to alleviate that potential for infection.

**Ms. Marilyn Gladu:** Yes, I think that is absolutely true.

Is there anything else you would recommend to this committee? I'll give you an open-ended question. Is there something you wanted to say but didn't yet have a chance to say?

**The Chair:** That's all the time we have, Marilyn. Perhaps we'll be able to somehow squeeze that into the next round.

Mr. Turnbull is next.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thanks, Madam Chair.

I'm really grateful to have another opportunity to ask a few more questions.

Ms. Smith, in her opening remarks, talked about using the principles of universal design when considering polling stations, and how those would be organized spatially and how they would be much different, potentially, in a pandemic. I wonder whether those same principles could be used when we look at redesigning the mail-in ballot process.

I know you've made several suggestions about this already, but I'd be interested to hear what that would look like and what that would mean from a timing perspective, a process perspective, and how those mail-in ballots could be streamlined. We've heard from quite a few witnesses that they're not very easy to use right now, and I think there needs to be improvement there. Without anticipating your response, I'd love to hear your suggestions on that, Ms. Smith. I'd be happy to hear from Ms. Bergeron as well.

**Ms. Jewelles Smith:** I like the option that was mentioned by Diane, which was having the fillable PDF that is printable. I think that helps with a lot of the challenges experienced. I personally have dyslexia, and sometimes fonts can be a real issue for me. I have a little bit of anxiety about whether I read that or wrote that correctly, so I like the idea of having the fillable PDFs that you can print and mail in as one option.

Again, there's nothing about us without us. We need to have them tested ahead of time by people with various disabilities to see if they work and what the difficulties are, and then go back and make sure that they're as accessible as possible.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Ms. Bergeron, would you comment?

**Ms. Diane Bergeron:** When we were looking at this before with Elections Canada, we found that having the PDF is a good solution. As long as it works with the PC, the iOS and different types of screen readers, and as long as it's accessible and can be accessed through Braille displays—which CNIB can certainly help with—it would allow me to read all of the information and check the box independently. It would allow me to make sure that I've marked it properly, and then, you would leave enough space at the bottom. As a person with sight loss, it makes me a little bit upset when I have to sign a document on the line, but the line is not tactile. Either a tactile line or just signing anywhere on the bottom of the page would be helpful.

Things like that are simple solutions. It's not going to work for everybody, but it's certainly going to give a much better option for some of us who would be able to access that option.

**Mr. Ryan Turnbull:** Thank you for those suggestions.

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

That's all of the time we have, unfortunately. I know that it's been an interesting panel. On behalf of the whole committee and all of the members, we really do appreciate your presence here today, Ms. Bergeron and Ms. Smith.

That's our third panel. We had a productive meeting with three panels.

I just wanted to let you know that on November 17, we have the meeting with Minister LeBlanc. Next, we have Elections Canada on November 19, and then on November 24 we have the Speaker, House administration and PPS. We have a lot of work ahead of us, and then we're going to continue with the study after that.

We weren't able to squeeze in a meeting on November 18 in the evening. We were trying to get the extra time slot, which originally

we were told we would be able to secure, but then it turned out that a lot of the committees are now also receiving two time slots a week rather than one, so we weren't able to secure that.

I'll do my best to fit in everything and try to get this study done as quickly as possible. I did have a conversation with the Chief Electoral Officer again, and I just wanted to inform you that he is really eager to have some insight as to the recommendations that he has made to the House and wants to know whether we can get some feedback to him on that as soon as possible, because they want to be prepared in all circumstances. That would be helpful to him, so he wanted me to let you know.

That's it for today. We will meet on November 17, and I will see you all then. Take care.

The meeting is adjourned.

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