



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 010

Wednesday, December 2, 2020

Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (1620)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon everyone.

I call meeting number 10 of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration to order. Before we proceed, I just want to remind all of those who are attending in person to be physically distanced from others by at least two meters and to wear a mask unless you are seated and are more than two meters from anyone else. This is a hybrid meeting. Some members are appearing in person in the parliamentary precinct, and the other members are appearing remotely.

As a reminder to all members, please speak at a pace that is slow enough for the interpretation to keep up. The clerk will be tracking raised hands and keeping a speaking list for the chair. If there are any, all questions shall be decided by a recorded vote except for those decided unanimously or on division. Based on the order adopted by the House on September 23, the meeting is webcast and is available on ParlVu.

Today, I welcome the Honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. Today, we have a briefing session on IRCC staffing levels based on the motion that was passed by the committee. The motion was moved by Ms. Kwan that the committee invite the minister and departmental officials for two hours to provide a briefing to committee members on the impact of the pandemic on Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship's staffing levels and the ability to process all immigration and refugee streams locally and abroad.

Welcome, Minister. Thanks for appearing before the committee once again. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks, and then we will go into a round of questioning.

The minister will be staying with us for the first hour, and then the second hour will be with the departmental officials. We have with us Catrina Tapley, deputy minister; Marian Campbell Jarvis, assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; Daniel Mills, assistant deputy minister, operations; and Fraser Valentine, assistant deputy minister, settlement and integration.

We will start with a statement by the Honourable Marco Mendicino.

Minister, you have five minutes.

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Madame Chair.

Colleagues, I'm pleased to return to speak to you again about IRCC operations and spending and, in particular, our work to process applications and assist Canadians and those who wish to come here. Local migration has been upended by the pandemic. From widespread travel restrictions and employees working from home to constraints on our settlement partners, it has had a significant impact on my department's work.

However, we've taken quick action, providing additional resources where they're needed most, streamlining our processes, and ramping systems back up. We've come a long way since the onset of the pandemic. Progress is being made every week to the point where we have now surpassed overall pre-COVID treatment rates in some cases. As of early November, our percentage of final decisions across all categories actually exceeded a similar period in 2019.

I would like to quickly note some other important decisions we've made to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and help those who wish to come to Canada. One of the very first things we did was to implement priority processing for those who need it most, like vulnerable people, family members seeking to reunite, and those in essential services. We're making great strides in processing more applications virtually. We've implemented adaptive measures, which extend submission deadlines for those facing delays due to travel restrictions. Adding this flexibility also results in extending processing times, but this is necessary to ensure that no application is refused due to restrictions related to the pandemic.

In this most challenging time, families belong together. That's why we're redoubling our efforts to process applications so that immediate families can remain together in Canada, or be reunited as soon as possible. We've significantly increased the monthly number of spousal, partner and child applications we're processing from fewer than a thousand in May to just under 5,400 in October. This means that we expect to process nearly 50,000 by the end of the year.

We've also introduced exemptions to allow immediate family members, as well as certain extended family members, to come to Canada.

Understandably, demand is very high, but we have processed tens of thousands of applications, and I'm pleased to share that these requests are being processed in 10 to 11 days if those applications are complete, well within our processing standard of 14 days.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

International students bring so much to our country. That's why we have worked with many partners to implement a process that allows them to arrive safely and study in Canada.

[*English*]

With public gatherings off the table for the foreseeable future, we've taken citizenship ceremonies online, welcoming more than 42,000 new Canadians at virtual ceremonies. We also recently re-launched citizenship testing online.

Finally, I'm pleased to share that we've developed a new process to assist permanent resident applications that were approved on or before March 18, but whose confirmation of permanent residence and PR visas have expired. Officers have been reaching out directly to determine clients' eligibility and willingness to travel, and reopen files as necessary. These efforts often require more time and effort than usual, but we will soon have contacted everyone affected.

[*Translation*]

Since time is short, I won't be able to describe in detail all the other ways we have reacted to this new reality, but I will simply say that we have adapted and created the necessary leeway to respond to the current circumstances.

Madam Chair, I am confident that the measures we are taking on immigration application processing, combined with our recently announced immigration levels plan, put us on the right track to build a stronger, more prosperous and diverse Canada for the future.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now move to our round of questioning. We will start our first round of six minutes with Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, and thank you, Minister, for being here. I appreciated your remarks.

We're here today to question you on the family reunification study that the committee has been undertaking for the last number of months in response to the tremendous challenges faced by families and by others as a result of your government's immigration response to the pandemic. We heard very heartbreaking stories, and I'm sure you've heard many of those, as well.

Christmas is coming, families are getting very desperate. It's really been a brutal nine months for everyone, but I can't imagine doing it without a spouse, a sibling or someone who's very close to you.

Last week, you committed to the committee to personally review the list of 100 people who have been separated because of the border closures. On October 2, you committed on national television to process these family reunification requests due to border separations by October 28, which we know is over a month ago. Yet, here we are, and there's a list of about 100 people that we're aware of, and we suspect there are many more that we're not aware of, that were not approved.

I have a specific question. Courtney is a woman on that list I gave you. She's a mother of a newborn baby. Her fiancé is Canadian living in Calgary.

Will she be able to reunite with her Canadian fiancé for Christmas?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First of all, this is a difficult time. I acknowledge that. We are doing everything we can to reunite families. I have been in touch with my team to be briefed on those outstanding cases. We will continue to work with you and all members to troubleshoot those cases to ensure we reunite as many families as possible.

• (1630)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Last week, your officials had confirmed that you personally authorized over 1,300 national interest exemptions, presumably with the stroke of a pen. We know that these exemptions your government has provided has allowed many elites, American billionaires, others, to enter the country with no questions asked, no quarantine plan.

Then we have this list. I appreciate that you are looking at it, but in normal circumstances, these folks would be able to come into Canada.

Can you confirm that those 100 people will be reunited with their families for Christmas?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Again, Ms. Dancho, as I've committed to and fulfilled, I continue to be in touch with my team and my department to ensure we are reuniting as many families as possible. Obviously, it would not be appropriate for me to speak to any particular specific case in a public forum, but you do have my ongoing commitment and the commitment of the entire government to continue to reunite families, in addition to the thousands of more families. We will do it in a way that is fair and as efficient as possible.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate your remarks about fairness, but I feel there is a communication issue from your office or your department. Many folks have reached out. They're reapplying every day, because they're not hearing anything from your government. That's contributing to the backlog and the confusion, so more communication and transparency may be key to this.

Recently, we learned there were five million people who were allowed to come into Canada without quarantining. Most of them were worked in essential services, such as hauling goods and things, but the fact remains that your government has allowed five million people into the country without quarantine plans. Yet, folks like Donna McCall, who died in a hospital bed holding her husband's hand, while in his other hand he had his children on his iPhone, who couldn't enter the country at the Canadian-American border.

Stories like that are devastating, and there have been many of them in the last nine months. Frankly, I haven't heard any public apology from your government about the shortfalls, about the families that have been ripped apart, and those who have died without getting to say goodbye. Are you considering issuing an apology to those you've let down?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Like you, my heart goes out to everybody who has lost someone during COVID. This pandemic has made it very difficult.

With regard to those who are travelling back and forth over the border, including in border towns like Windsor, where I have family, where we see the incredible service of our front-line responders, we ensure that health protocols are being followed so that the health and safety of all Canadians are protected and, more importantly, people are getting the treatment they need. There is integrity at the border by adherence to following the best public health care advice—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —which has informed every decision we've taken at the border.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that. It's just that there are lots of people who have been able to come in, and yet there's this 100 list and Donna McCall's children. It seems you're letting some in and not others. It has really not been going very well for many people. Much of it is because of the border closures. We recognize the importance of that, but yesterday the Prime Minister said, and I quote, regarding the Canada-U.S. border closure, “Until the virus is significantly more under control everywhere around the world, we're not going to be releasing the restrictions at the border.”

Really, we know that we could be living with COVID for many years, unfortunately. There's family breakdown. There are people dying without being able to say goodbye. There are a lot of these issues going on. The status quo hasn't been working very well for all these people falling through the cracks. I have to say that I don't feel you're communicating very well on the new application processes. Frankly, today I'm seeing a little bit of empathy from you, but this is the first time we're really seeing an acknowledgement of the suffering. I think that needs to be more acknowledged more often.

What is the plan for the next year or two years or three years that these borders are going to remain closed for all the people who normally cross the border to see family? What is the long-term plan? I don't feel it's really working very well right now.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Well, on the contrary, Ms. Dancho, the plan is working very well. Our decision at the border to put in place a set of travel restrictions that limits all but the most essential travel has contributed to our capacity to reduce the spread of the virus.

With regard to our plan in reuniting families, we have reunited thousands. We are living up to our service standard. Where those applications require additional information, we work with you and all members to try to reunite as many families as possible.

That is my commitment to you, Ms. Dancho—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I recognize that, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —and we will continue to—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate your commitment, but I think a little bit more goodwill and trust of Canadians wanting to be reunited may do very well for these families separated by the border closure, moving forward.

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

The Chair: Yes. Thank you.

We will now move on to Madam Martinez Ferrada.

Madam Martinez Ferrada, you have six minutes for your round of questioning.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to greet my colleague Minister Mendicino and thank him for being with us tonight.

I think it is important to give you the opportunity to explain to the committee members all the efforts that have been made to try to mitigate the impact of this pandemic on the immigration system. I think it's important that all members understand how the immigration process works and what important steps your department is taking.

Could you explain how activities in Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada centres around the world have been affected? Could you tell us how it was before the pandemic and how it is now, and what you have been able to do to help the immigration process? Then I have another question for you.

• (1635)

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister, you are on mute.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm sorry, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank my colleague for all her work as parliamentary secretary responsible for this file.

It's true that we have made a lot of investments. We've added resources, we've made our policies more flexible, and we continue to work with all our provincial partners to achieve the goals of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada—to create jobs, to accelerate our economy, and even to reunite families and do important work in the refugee sector. Thanks to all these investments, we have made great progress. It's true that there was some disruption a few months ago, but this progress has yielded many concrete results.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to give you a chance to talk more about some very difficult situations that newcomers who had obtained permanent residency have experienced. My colleague talked about this earlier. Could you elaborate on the measures you put in place to help unblock the files of some immigrants who were trying to come to this country but could not because their residency had expired?

Give us concrete examples of how you have innovated to find solutions.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you again.

There are several examples of innovation. For example, regarding the process of obtaining citizenship, we have transformed the citizenship ceremony into a virtual space. We are now continuing our progress in the planning and administration of the test. This is another step in the transition to the virtual space. This will make the system more efficient.

As for permanent residency, I will continue in English.

[English]

In the space of permanent residency, we are also continuing to transition to more virtual processing, particularly toward the latter stages of landing individuals. That is one of the reasons why we were able to land as many as we did in 2020 and why I am optimistic about more work and more progress going into 2021 with our plan, which again is very focused on jobs, economic recovery and reuniting family.

Finally, Madam Chair, I would say that, in the meantime, for those immigrants who are in Canada, we have introduced flexibility around work permits and around restoring status. There are many, many examples of where we have innovated to minimize disruption and to land people as quickly as we possibly can.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Can you tell us how important it is in a few streams of immigration to modernize our system and why is it so important? What did we do during the pandemic that is actually a good example that this is what we need to do, that we need to modernize our system to make it more efficient? Maybe you can talk about that.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: One of the reasons why it's important that we've been able to innovate is to keep the economy going. I think about some prime examples like the health care sector. As I mentioned before, we have doctors, nurses and support workers who have been going 24-7 to try to provide treatment and health care to Canadians as we fight the second wave.

Immigration has been a lifeline throughout the course of the pandemic. I think of international students, where we've shown some flexibility to allow those who are working in the health care sector and studying in the health care sector to contribute and to lend their helping hands. I think, going forward, we'll also be able to take a look at some workers in that sector.

That's a very concrete example of how we have adapted to the very challenging circumstances in a way that meets the urgent needs of our economy and ensures that Canadians are getting the health care that they need throughout the second wave of the pandemic.

• (1640)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Quickly, maybe you have a word on the agreement we have with Quebec on immigration. How do you see that unfolding in this pandemic?

[Translation]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for the question.

We work in close collaboration with the Quebec government. I have spoken several times with my counterpart, Minister Girault. This collaboration is based on an agreement...

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister. Your time is up.

We will now move on to Madame Normandin.

You have six minutes, Madame Normandin.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much.

Thank you very much, Minister, for being with us today.

I'm going to start with a somewhat mathematical question. I would like to know if you agree with me on the following principle: if your selection threshold is higher than the admission threshold, you create a bottleneck and you risk creating a backlog of files.

Do you agree with this principle?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: What I want to emphasize is that our plan is focused on jobs. We have the capacity to work with your province, Quebec, with whom we share jurisdiction over immigration. It's an arrangement that works well for both our governments.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'm going to go a little further. In fact, let me take the opposite principle. When the current government took office in Quebec, there was a backlog of applications for permanent residence, including skilled workers. The government turned off the tap on selection so that we could reduce the backlog. From 45,000 backlogged files in July 2019, the backlog had grown to 33,800 files by May 2020. It has been gradually decreasing. Waiting times have slowly decreased from 28 months in July 2019, to 18 months in May 2020.

Does the minister agree that the strategy has worked relatively well in reducing the backlog and delays?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Our plan was to create jobs to attract the experience and expertise our economy needs. We are using immigration to advance and strengthen the economy. This is a very important goal, including for Quebec with whom we have an agreement and whose skills and immigration choices we respect. It's an arrangement that works very well for all of Canada.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'm going to go a little further, because the minister does not want to comment on the Quebec strategy.

In a Radio-Canada/CBC report three weeks ago, federal officials said that the pandemic didn't really explain everything. The lowering of immigration thresholds set by the Legault government as soon as it came to power has had significant consequences.

I would like to know if the minister agrees with the statement that Quebec is partly to blame for the current processing delays.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I said, there are some anomalies, but on our side, we have made investments to add resources and use the technology. We've also relaxed our policies somewhat. These examples show that we are more efficient.

With respect to our partnership with Quebec, we work closely together under the Canada-Quebec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission. We respect the jurisdiction of Quebec, which chooses its immigration levels.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have a question about efficiency. Quebec City's current target for the number of skilled worker permanent residency admissions is 21,800 for the year 2020. As of August, only 7,600 files had been processed, so there are easily 15,000 left.

Is the minister confident that the 21,800 target will be met by the end of December?

• (1645)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: We will continue to invest on our side to improve efficiency. As I said, there are some anomalies caused by COVID-19, but we continue to look for good solutions to achieve our part of the plan.

Ms. Christine Normandin: So, if the target is not reached, it will not be because of the thresholds, it will be the fault of COVID-19.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes, it's true that there are problems caused in part by COVID-19, but for the rest, we continue to look for solutions to be more effective. We have made investments, we have been flexible in our policies, and we will continue on that path to accomplish our part of the plan.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Speaking of solutions, I'll give you one that Quebec asked for. It involves prioritizing the permanent residence applications of people who are already in Quebec. However, the federal government hasn't followed up on this request.

Does the federal government agree with the idea of prioritizing the permanent residence applications of people who are already in Quebec? This is a request from Quebec City.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: That isn't accurate. I'm still in contact with my counterpart in Quebec. We're working together a great deal. Our two governments share responsibility for a number of issues. Our representatives are in contact each week to implement the status—

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for the interruption, Minister. The time is up. I will have to move to the next member.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes for your round of questioning.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

Why won't the minister extend family reunification sponsorships for permanent residents to extended family members such as siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins? It would be an important measure for the people of Hong Kong and beyond.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Kwan, we've done tremendous work in reuniting families, and we have done that by innovating and creating new pathways, including in the context of Hong Kong, where we are promoting existing pathways. We're going to attract the skills and experience that are necessary to ensure that we attract those individuals who wish to come from Hong Kong to lend a helping hand to our economy.

With regard to a broader definition of family, we have extended the definition of family for the purposes of reuniting families during COVID-19. That has contributed to the success. We know that there are still challenges. We've worked through those cases with your office and others, and certainly we will continue to be committed to family reunification.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: But with all due respect, Minister, that's only for temporary visits. It's not for permanent resident status.

With the escalating situation in Hong Kong, more and more people are at risk of persecution and are internally displaced. Canada used to have an immigration stream for the internally displaced: the source country class. That, however, was ended by the Harper government.

Now, I recognize that the program is not perfect, but the government can update a program so that Canada can provide a humanitarian pathway to safety for the people of Hong Kong. Will the minister undertake to put in a program of that type?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Kwan, as you know, we are very dedicated to continuing our commitments in the humanitarian space. The United Nations and many others have recognized Canada's global leadership.

For two years in a row we have been a global leader in resettling refugees, thanks to many initiatives, some of which we have continued to progress—not only private sponsorship, but important pilot projects such as the experienced mobility protected persons pilot; such as, for example, the additional protections that we have introduced as part of the Hong Kong initiative.

All of these are concrete examples that demonstrate our commitment to refugees and to providing safe harbour for the world's most vulnerable.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The measures that the minister announced for the people of Hong Kong do not extend humanitarian measures; the minister knows that. That needs to change.

My constituent applied to obtain a copy of her proof of citizenship in January of this year, well ahead of the pandemic. It's now December, and they still have not heard a word from IRCC on this request. While she waits, she can't apply for medical, driver's licence, passport, or her CAVCO personnel number or ID, which is required for her employment.

What is the government doing to fix this process?

• (1650)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Well, as I said in my introductory remarks, Ms. Kwan, we are reaching out to those individuals who had applied and who have not heard back, as well as to those who had received visas that are expired under the permanent residency application process. So we are—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, I'm going to interrupt for a second.

This is for the proof of citizenship, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes, and I was coming to that example, Ms. Kwan. I'm just demonstrating that we are being very proactive in reaching out to those individuals who have applied and who have not heard back.

With regard to citizenship, we are adding resources and are prioritizing so that we can ensure that citizens are able to achieve that milestone as quickly as possible. I mentioned the innovation in that area—going virtual when it comes to ceremonies and to testing as well. We will certainly endeavour to reach out to anybody who has applied, as quickly as possible.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This is actually for a proof of citizenship; it's not for a new application.

Maybe I can follow up with the minister and his staff directly on this case.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm sorry, Ms. Kwan, I have a more precise answer. I apologize for that.

Between April 1, 2020, and October 31, 2020, almost 14,000 proofs of citizenship were issued. We have, then, made progress and will continue to work on this priority.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. This person has waited for a year and still hasn't gotten it.

Now their job is in jeopardy, Minister. Maybe you think you've made progress, but do you know what? For many people who are desperate, it's not good enough.

I will follow up with the minister and his staff with respect to this case.

On the Quebec skills worker—I've written to the minister about this—whose post-grad work permit has expired recently and couldn't be renewed because IRCC gave him bad advice and told

him in writing to apply for the bridging work permit, which as we know does not apply to Quebec....

His job is as a professor, and as of yesterday he has now lost his status in Canada, because his work permit cannot be renewed. His application is nearly complete; he is only waiting for IRCC to extend his medicals, which would likely have been completed, had it not been for COVID.

This is his only option: IRCC is now telling him that he should leave Canada.

My question to the minister is this—he earlier said that no one would lose their status or face deportation—will this person be able to continue to work and have implied status through the work permit and not be deported?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I reaffirm the principle that I mentioned on the last occasion, which is that we are doing everything we can to minimize the disruption caused by COVID-19 in all of our immigration processes. We've introduced numerous flexibilities, including restoration of status, including work permit flexibility, and yes, by encouraging those who've fallen into an expired status to reach out so that they can remain in Canada.

For those who are waiting, we will reach out as quickly as we possibly can. We're making progress. We will continue to work very diligently on this.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This is for the Quebec skilled workers program, and IRCC gave the individual bad advice. Now he is stuck. Will the government fix that?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Kwan, as I've said, I am always open to working with you and other members of Parliament to ensure that we can troubleshoot cases whenever possible. We have a strong track record on that and we will continue to collaborate with you.

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Minister.

The time is up. We will now move to our second round of questioning and we will start with Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Dancho, you have five minutes for your round of questioning.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, a few weeks ago you announced your government's very ambitious plan to admit 401,000 permanent residents into Canada, which I think is the most in Canadian history. The goal was to include 80,000 family class permanent residents as well in that 401,000.

The committee has heard testimony on this, and my understanding is that on November 5, we received notice that 60,000 people were back-logged in the family PR stream, so to speak.

We've heard the testimony of Misha Pelletier and Chantal Dubé, who are Canadians in Canada who have been separated from their husbands abroad for years. They've really had no response or communication from your government on why their husbands have not been approved to come be with them.

My question is as follows. Can you commit to women like Misha and Chantal that they'll be reunited for Christmas?

More than that, can you commit to clearing the family sponsorship backlog for next year, as the first priority for those 401,000 PRs you're hoping to bring in?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Certainly, as I said, we have put a tremendous focus on reuniting families. On the basis of the tremendous effort that my department is continuing to exercise day in and day out, I am confident that we are going to hit the 49,000 spousal sponsorship target by the end of December.

With regard to individual cases, as I've said, Ms. Dancho, we're happy to collaborate with you.

• (1655)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, I recognize that. I was just hoping we could give them some good news since they desperately need it, and frankly deserve it, but we'll move on.

I do feel that a lot of these problems [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] they haven't received any updates, they don't know the timelines, they're not being told why they're not being approved and this goes across all streams. It doesn't really provide a lot of dignity to these individuals, whether they are Canadian or trying to become a Canadian and get into [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

There was a good example of this is in your government's economic update on Monday. It said that this year you have only brought in half of the permanent residents you wanted to. Clearly there are some problems.

If we look at expired permanent residents, for example, the CO-PRs as they've been calling them, we find people who have been vetted, paid the fees to come into the country, sold their homes, quit their jobs, taken their kids out of school and bought the plane ticket to come to Canada. Then the border closed and your government told them that they all needed to get an authorization letter. The problem is that they haven't been issued these authorization letters and it's been nine months of this.

When I spoke to your officials about it, they wouldn't really acknowledge there was a problem. In fact, they said, "Oh no, they can all come to Canada."

We received a lot of emails following that. I want to give you some feedback from one mother. Her name is Pranali Mane, who wrote, "Our immigration dream has turned into a nightmare. I resigned in January, child out of school in May, ready to travel since June, all required docs submitted and acknowledged by IRCC, but kept waiting ever since. Please help us."

I'm not sure if there is any compassion you've been offering to women like Pranali, but do you feel that she's just not being truthful or that these expired COPRs are just not being truthful about not being able to come in? I'm just really not clear.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: My message to her is to keep the faith.

No one denies, Ms. Dancho, that there has been disruption caused by COVID-19. That is the simple explanation for the impact on our levels.

Certainly, with regard to the decisions at the border, I think the vast majority of Canadians agree that we've had to take those decisions to protect our health and safety—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, okay, we spoke about that earlier.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —and we are making tremendous progress, including on reaching out to individuals who have expired permanent residence—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that, Minister, but you didn't really answer my question about them, but we'll move on.

The Chair: Can I just have one person speak at one time, please?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We'll just move on. We only have a minute and a half left.

I just want to leave you with this, Minister.

Again, there are a lot of communication problems happening. There is not a lot of empathy being expressed by you or your department for the struggles going forward. I was trying to get to know what kind of minister you are and I went through your remarks in the House of Commons. I just want to share this one quote that you shared in the House of Commons near the beginning of your political career. You said:

In the mandate letter of every minister, the Prime Minister notes the government's commitment "to set a higher bar for openness and transparency in government."

You went on to say:

...we live up to these words every single day.

Further, you noted that the Prime Minister had mandated that every minister "shine more light" on government to ensure that it remains focused on the people it serves. Indeed, in his mandate letters, the Prime Minister stated that "Government and its information should be open by default. If we want Canadians to trust their government, we need a government that trusts Canadians."

Again, I don't think we're seeing a lot of trust from you or your department in these people who are suffering, trying to be reunited with their families. Really, I do feel that the mark of a good leader, Minister, is not if you can stick to your principles in the easy times; it's whether you can stick to them in the bad times.

Over the holidays, I just ask that you reflect on your previous words and principles and consider all of the communication issues and transparency issues that you're facing. I also ask that you bring more empathy to your talking points and your announcements, and acknowledge the suffering that your department has caused people at home and abroad. Finally, I ask that you do everything you possibly can to reunite as many people as possible for Christmas. I'd just ask that you consider that.

I thank you, Minister.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I appreciate your referring to those words. I do my level best to live up to that, as I know we all do as parliamentarians.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Chair, I believe my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Minister.

We will now move to Mr. Serré.

Mr. Serré, you have five minutes for your round of questioning.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister Mendicino, thank you for your transparency and leadership. Thank you again for appearing before the committee. This is your fourth appearance in 2020. I think that the fact that you're coming here to talk to committee members, from all parties, about the issues that we're facing and about possible improvements shows your transparency.

Here's my first question.

[*English*]

Can you tell the committee more about the choices that the department made in August to allow visitors to apply for work permits without leaving the country?

• (1700)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First of all, let me just thank you for your kind words. It is always an honour to be able to appear before this committee and to work with you and everyone.

We are endeavouring to shine a light—to refer back to those words—on every aspect of our efforts to reunite families to ensure that immigration is going to contribute positively to our economic recovery. That includes demonstrating some flexibility with regard to the in-Canada work permits.

We are making progress on that front. We have shown real flexibility when it comes to work permits. We are ensuring that visitors who are currently in Canada and who have a valid job offer will be able to remain in Canada and they will be able to transition from visitor status to work permit status again if they have a job offer.

That is one of the ways in which we are innovating to leverage immigration as much as possible.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

In September you introduced a public policy allowing PRs to be able to use previously submitted biometrics, extending biometrics that had been received over the last 10 years.

How do you view this system of optimization that is needed to ensure the smallest number of obstacles possible for individuals seeking PR?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I said, we do know there have been some disruptions as a result of COVID-19. We put the measures in place to reduce and mitigate some of those disruptions.

When it comes to biometrics, which is an important part of our screening process, we are showing flexibility. If you had previously filed within the last 10 years then you do not need to file those biometrics again. That is one way in which we are minimizing the disruption caused by COVID-19.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

I also just want you to update the committee on the changes that have been made to citizenship ceremonies, citizenship testing and the process online. Can you explain to the committee what your department and staff have done to improve efficiency online?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Absolutely. As I've indicated on a couple of occasions, it's always a very special occasion to be able to preside as part of the citizenship ceremony and to be able to look in the eye the aspiring new Canadians who have reached the significant milestone, whether it's in person or whether it's in virtual space, as now. It is a very special moment and probably one of the most unique functions that we get to exercise.

As a result of the innovations that we have introduced both initially at the ceremony stage and now in the testing phase, we're going to be able to see even more progress and become even more effective than what we were prior to COVID-19. It's a great example of how my department has innovated and shown leadership throughout the pandemic.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Minister.

I believe I have 20 seconds.

I just want to thank you and your staff for introducing a new rural immigration pilot project. I know your staff has gone above and beyond to introduce this in rural areas. It is making a difference. It has been difficult to do this during COVID, but the staff have. The municipalities, employers and rural communities are benefiting from it. Thank you very much for doing that.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It's 11 towns, to be precise, under the rural and northern immigration pilot, and I'm looking forward to seeing more results.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now move on to Madam Normandin.

You have two and a half minutes for your round of questioning.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you again, Minister Mendicino.

I'll address the issue of Quebec skilled workers. Last Monday, we heard from people who applied for permanent residence but who, since 2019, have no longer been receiving an acknowledgement of receipt. As a result, they can't find out whether their file has been received and whether it's complete. They told us about how much this affects their file, particularly with regard to the Quebec health insurance board, or RAMQ; the other documents that they must obtain; their status; or the renewal of their Quebec selection certificate, or CSQ.

My question is quite simple. Will the people who haven't received an acknowledgement of receipt since 2019 receive one?

• (1705)

[*English*]

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The short answer, Ms. Normandin, is that we are working very closely with the Government of Quebec to ensure they are meeting their immigration needs. As I have said on a number of occasions, we respect the decisions and the jurisdiction of Quebec to select its immigration levels.

For our part, we are putting in additional resources, we are innovating through technology and we are making tremendous progress when it comes to notifying individuals. I believe we're in the area of approximately 6,100 people who we've reached out to, and we are going to reach out to the remaining number of individuals who are awaiting a response. This is work that we do in close collaboration with the Government of Quebec.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: With all due respect, Minister Mendicino, the acknowledgement of receipt concerning the admission of candidates, hence permanent residence, is solely a federal responsibility. It isn't necessary to work with Quebec to send an acknowledgement of receipt.

I'll repeat my question. Will the people who haven't received an acknowledgement of receipt since 2019 receive one?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I said earlier, Ms. Normandin, we've made a great deal of progress on the issue of permanent residence. We've notified a number of individuals and we'll continue to put in the necessary resources to inform applicants that they can continue and complete the process.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now move on to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes. You can please start.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Following up on that with the minister, who offered to work with our office, I should note that on the Quebec skilled case I've written to the minister on this since November 17, and we have yet to receive a response. Perhaps he can direct his staff to follow up with us on that case.

With respect to deportations, CBSA has announced that they will resume deportations. Since the minister says that they will not be rendering people without status and that they would not proceed with deportations, can we be assured that CBSA will not deport people whose status has run out?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The first thing I would say is that we are minimizing disruptions caused by COVID-19, as you know, and ensuring that those who have lost status can apply to restore it where they are eligible.

With respect to removals, as you know, Ms. Kwan, we pride ourselves on due process. There are many avenues that individuals can exercise, including appeals and pre-removal risk assessment. No one will be removed without having exhausted those rights, and that's one of the reasons why Canada continues to be acknowledged as one of the most progressive and strongest immigration and asylum systems in the world.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that talking point, Minister, but that is not my point. The reality is that many people actually face a very difficult situation because of COVID, and it seems that CBSA is saying that those who qualify for the guardian angels program will be safe, but the rest of them are not. That means, then, for the government, that only those who fall into the guardian angels program are deemed to be essential by government, because that's in essence what the government is doing.

I want to move on to another issue and that's paragraph 179(b), which is one of the biggest frustrations for spousal sponsorship applications. Even with dual intent, they're routinely denied because of paragraph 179(b). It is within the minister's power to make adjustments to that regulation. Will the minister reduce the barriers surrounding paragraph 179(b) for loved ones to reunite?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'll just quickly go back to your initial question.

You're quite right. We have said that those who are eligible will not be removed, under the guardian angels program. With regard to others who have made similar exceptional contributions that are not eligible, my door remains open to working with Quebec if they wish to broaden those parameters.

With regard to dual intent, all of—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but your time is up.

We will now have to move to the next member.

Mr. Saroya will have five minutes for his round of questioning.

Mr. Saroya, go ahead, please.

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

Thank you, Mr. Mendicino.

Mr. Mendicino, can you commit to something? Some of the files for family reunification are four to eight years old. Would you look into those things first? I sent one of the files to Deputy Minister Catrina Tapley this morning, and she was nice enough to respond in 30 seconds that she would look into it right away.

There are a number of files that have been outstanding for many, many years. Could you do something? Could you commit to taking care of them first?

• (1710)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: First, it doesn't surprise me at all that you heard back so quickly. We do pride ourselves on being responsive to you and to all members.

In fact, when it comes to family sponsorship, we have dramatically reduced wait times from the multiple years that they had been prior to 2015 to where we are now. I'm confident that based on the investments that we are making throughout this pandemic that we will continue to see a very efficient system so that as many families can be reunited as possible.

Yes, of course, Mr. Saroya, we're happy to work with your office on the individual case you mentioned.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Perfect.

There's another case I want to talk to you about. Really, we all look bad—all of us. I wrote to you twice a couple of months back. This was the student in Surrey, B.C., who drowned—whatever happened. The case was covered by Global TV and the CBC and everyone else.

When the kid died here in Surrey, B.C., he was a student and his parents had a 10-year visa, but they were back in Punjab. They tried their level best to come to cremate the body and go back. They completely failed, and finally they came to me and I wrote to you twice—and nothing happened.

Six weeks later those people kept going to the Delhi airport over and over and over. Six weeks later somebody at the airport felt sorry for them and they put them back on the plane.

Could you do something? Could you make sure this kind of thing doesn't happen again?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It's a tragic case, and I express my sympathies to the surviving members of that family. Mr. Saroya, I would ask that you would share those sympathies on behalf of the government.

We're doing everything within our powers to reunite families as well as trying to address compassionate cases. We set up a separate pathway to provide the opportunity for those who want to come and grieve, or who want to be part of an end-of-life decision. That is a process that we co-administer with our colleagues in Health as well

as Public Safety, and where there are individual cases, of course, we remain committed to working with you however we can.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you so much.

My next question is regarding the students. You know how many students are here. There are a number from India, China and many other countries. They are part of a \$21-billion to \$25-billion economy in this country. Most of the students are complaining that they are qualified but they can't find a job. If they can get the job, if they can find the job, it's not the supervisory job, but something else.

Mr. Mendicino, I have been in small business for my entire life. When I started—when I came to the country back in 1973—we started at the bottom. We need those people in the restaurant and transport industries and many other industries. They are young; they are willing to work and they want to work. They want to succeed; they want to stay in the country and they want to buy a house. This is how the economy grows.

Is there any different way or any new pathway you can bring to the table so these students can live in the country and can do all of those jobs? I can name 10 companies that would be bankrupt without the students, including Pizza Pizza, Tim Hortons, McDonald's and others.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I hear you, Mr. Saroya, and I agree with much of what you say about the value of international students. They do contribute over \$21.6 billion each year to our economy. That's why we are introducing flexibility in the program to keep it a success. That's why I was very proud that we were able to revive the international student pathway on October 20, 2020, by doing important work with our provincial partners, as well as with the universities and colleges themselves.

We are going to continue to ensure that those international students are set up for success when they come to Canada, not only by getting a first-rate education here in Canada, but also by contributing to our communities. We are seeing that every single day, including by giving back in the context of COVID-19. I could not agree with you more on those broad streams.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but the time is up.

We will now move to our last round of questioning.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you have five minutes, and then we will end the first round.

• (1715)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome, Minister, as always.

Minister, earlier my very good friend on the other side, Bob Saroya, asked you a question about this person. My sympathy goes to those families as well. You know that we had many cases like that one as well. We came to you and you [*Inaudible—Editor*] Before you brought in another minister's regulation or order in council, we were not able to bring those families here because they did not fit in that category. I appreciate all of the great work you have done over the last many months. Make sure that we keep up that great work.

Now going to the real question here, Minister, before the COVID-19 pandemic, permanent and temporary resident applications had been increasing greatly over the past number of years. At the same time, IRCC reduced processing times and inventories. By 2019, the number of temporary resident visa applications received from around the world had increased 80% from 2013 levels. Also in 2019, over 550,000 temporary workers were issued work permits, including extensions to work in Canada, and 87% of new work permit applications were finalized within 60 days of the service standard.

Could you please elaborate on some of the processes put in place that have allowed the department to process applications in a timely manner and reduce the backlog at the same time?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you very much, Mr. Dhaliwal, for your advocacy on immigration. In every facet, I am always grateful for your perspective and the leadership you show.

As I said, we have made tremendous progress in numerous lines of business. I've talked about how we are making that progress by investing resources, by leveraging technology, as well as by being very innovative when it comes to minimizing the disruption of COVID-19 through policy flexibility. I've talked about how those strategies are yielding concrete results in very specific lines of our business—on permanent residency and on citizenship.

I'll also shed light on the progress we are making when it comes to our temporary workers. For example, in the seasonal agricultural worker program, we had 47,362 temporary workers arrive in that specific category. That's an 85% increase year over year from last year's volumes. It's a remarkable figure and one that is allowing us to ensure that Canadians are getting access to the safe and affordable food they need on the table. It's another way in which I think we are demonstrating the strides we have made from the beginning of the pandemic to where we are right now.

We will continue to be innovative. We will continue to invest where we need to and leverage technology so we can make the necessary progress to meet our immigration objectives.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: You mentioned the technology, Minister. In 2018 the IRCC launched two pilot projects using computer analytics to help officers to triage the online applications for temporary resident visa applications from China and India. The goal of the project was to help officers identify routine and straightforward applications for fast processing, and to trace files that are more complex and that need a complex or comprehensive review. Protecting the safety and security of Canadians remains a priority. In all cases,

officers must screen, scrutinize and check all applications for criminality.

Could you please elaborate how successful these projects were and how you are going to implement this in other countries?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Again, it allows me to highlight how, through technology, we are streamlining our processes. You've already described the part of the sorting process that allows us to get to positive outcomes and to welcome the workers, the students and the permanent residents, which will allow us to achieve the fundamental goals of our immigration plan. Those are simple, straightforward cases. Some of the other cases can be a little bit more complicated and require a closer look from some of our highly trained and professional immigration officers, work that we are very grateful for. All of this is done, all of these technologies are used, with a view to achieving important goals in our immigration plan.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: With this, our first panel comes to an end. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Marco Mendicino for all of the hard work you are doing on behalf of all Canadians and making sure that family reunification is at the forefront of your everyday thoughts. Thank you once again.

We will now move to our second panel. We have the officials.

Thank you, Minister. You can leave.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you very much to all of our colleagues on the panel.

The Chair: We have done the sound checks so we will move to our second panel. I welcome the officials here who are appearing before the committee.

We will go straight into the round of questioning. We will start our first round with Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Dancho, you have six minutes for your round of questioning with the officials. Thank you.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I just want to circle back to some of the questions we asked last week. I don't feel that I got a lot of clarity. I just want to ask a couple more questions about the COPR specifically.

Can you share with the committee how many travel authorization applications for expired COPR holders approved after March 18 are awaiting review by IRCC?

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Just to unpack that a little bit, if you have an expired COPR, your COPR was probably issued about a year ago. As long as it was issued before March 18, which would indeed be the case, then we've been going back. We've been contacting people. We've been looking at these. So far we've reissued or added letters to about 1,000 of them.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay, because my understanding from your remarks the last time was there were folks who were authorized, yes, but weren't authorized to travel. It happened to be that their authorizations came after the border closure. Those folks are really the issue.

Then I think you mentioned last time that a couple of them weren't able to travel at first because of subsequent issues in their country—or whatever—but you had mentioned that many of them are welcome to travel. However, we know that that's not quite the case. I only know that because I got an onslaught of emails and calls after our meeting last week.

Can you just reiterate what's being done? Where is that authorization at? I know you said that you started issuing them in September. I'm not sure why there was such a gap, but can you elaborate a little bit further on that?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I'm going to ask Mr. Mills to chime in on this one, too, but we're talking about a couple of different things here.

First, if your application for permanent residence was approved prior to March 18, you're allowed to travel to Canada. When we finalize that application, we issue a confirmation of permanent residence. Typically, that confirmation of permanent residence is valid for about a year. Now we have some cases where those have expired. We've done a lot of work to process those applications. We would very much like those individuals to come to Canada. That's the part we're working on now, to deal with those who have expired COPRs that were issued before March 18, and to work through that.

Mr. Mills, do you want to add to this?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Pardon me, but could you also tell us how many travel authorizations have been granted or approved since the travel restrictions and border closures in March?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Do you mean how many permanent resident files we've approved since March?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: The travel authorization letter—that's my understanding of what they need to get into Canada.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: If your COPR has expired, then you need an additional letter from us. We've issued about 1,000 of those.

Mr. Mills.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Mills (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I just want to clarify that the confirmation of permanent residence is related either to the validity of the passport or the medical

certificate. The validity of the confirmation of permanent residence depends on one or the other.

People who had a confirmation of permanent residence before March 18 could travel to Canada. In some cases, the medical certificate or passport had expired. When the medical certificate had expired, we reassessed the certificate and automatically renewed it in cases where there were no issues. We contacted the clients to inform them of the renewal and to ask them whether they planned to travel to Canada. If so, we issued a letter of authorization to allow them to travel.

As the deputy minister said, we issued about 1,000 authorization letters. Over 675 people have already arrived in Canada with these letters. We contacted over 6,000 people whose confirmation of permanent residence had expired. We still need to contact about 4,000 people.

• (1725)

[*English*]

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Mills.

You mentioned the medical certificate specifically. That seems to be a bit of a hang-up. Have you considered accepting an expired one, because of the pandemic and everything else? It's not their fault. In some of the communications we've received, that seems to be a huge barrier. Either they're not able to afford to get another medical certificate, or they don't have access to the services because of the closures. Have you considered waiving that, considering everything that's happening?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We have extended medicals in some cases. We look at these on a risk basis. The health and security of Canadians still remains our number one priority. I think, as Mr. Mills indicated, we look at these on a case-by-case basis now, where they have expired, and where we want to see these work.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: At the rate you're going, how long do you think it will take for the remaining 6,000?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I'm hoping it will be quicker. As you indicated, there are a number of cases where people have really put their lives on hold to be able to do this. We are anxious for them to be able to come and join others here in Canada and take their place in Canadian society.

We are working through this as quickly as we can, but I just should—

The Chair: Sorry for interrupting, Madam Tapley, but the time is up.

We have to now move to our next member.

Mr. Regan, you have six minutes for your round of questioning.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Let me thank the deputy minister and her officials for being here today.

As you understand, international students, along with other immigrants who stay in Canada, help to alleviate Canada's skill shortage crisis. I know there have been a number of measures announced to make sure that students could come this year to universities and community colleges. I understand that private career colleges are also seeking to be eligible for the post-graduate worker permit program.

Is that something you're looking at?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Private career colleges have asked us this question. It's an issue that we continue to look at pretty carefully with respect to a post-graduation work permit. There are a number of factors that I think we would consider. One is the integrity or the robustness of the program. Other countries have had issues with their student programs and student pathways, where people have come and not necessarily been bona fide students. That's what we want to avoid. The reputation of Canada's program is important for us. As a member mentioned earlier, it's a \$21-billion industry. Ensuring that we're able to offer a quality education and that we have a robust program remains really important to us.

Hon. Geoff Regan: As you know, we've been hearing about the issue of people whose confirmations of permanent residency are expiring, or may expire. When you're reaching out to the holders of expired confirmations of PR, what complexities are there that are involved, and what's the current estimate of expired PR holders?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Perhaps I'll come back and just quickly finish the previous answer.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Oh, sorry.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: No, no, that's okay. It was the previous answer with respect to the confirmation of permanent residence.

Not everybody whose confirmation of permanent residence has expired has an intention still to come to Canada. Although that might be hard to believe from the number of emails we receive around this, and many of you receive, when we have contacted people, a number of them have still indicated that conditions are such that their intention is not to come to Canada at this time. It's a dilemma at the department. We have to figure out what we're going to do with those expired confirmations of permanent residence. It's not something we tended to worry about in the past.

That's part of what we have to work through and consider as we look at those 6,000 expired confirmations of permanent residence that are out there. These were all applications that had been approved before March 2018.

Mr. Mills, do you want to comment?

• (1730)

Mr. Daniel Mills: Yes.

[Translation]

As the deputy minister said, we must ensure the health and safety of Canadians. Prior to issuing the authorization letter, when we

contact clients, we also make sure that they already have a well-established quarantine plan to facilitate their arrival in Canada.

[English]

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you.

We're hearing, of course, about visa offices around the world. Some are closed. I don't know how many. What kinds of processing limitations exist, or have existed, at these offices globally? How have staffing changes over time addressed new processing priorities? What's happening in terms of the pandemic and getting those offices open?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Part of the difficulty of COVID-19 with respect to the immigration business is that it's not just its impact on IRCC; it's also its impact on the immigration ecosystem. As you indicated, one of the biggest impacts has been on our visa application centres. These are centres that we contract with through a third party to help us and to assist us with visa processing.

At the worst of it, I think we were down to about 25% of them remaining open. It would depend on local conditions. I'm happy to say that I believe more than 75% of them are open now, some for only limited business. The biggest were the ones last week that reopened in India. Those are putting priority exclusively on students and families and to work through that caseload first.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Can I ask you to talk about the purpose of the principle of dual intent in our immigration system and how that factors into processing spousal visas?

I only have 45 seconds, so I'll let you use that up.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Dual intent, which is in the immigration act, is that there would be a reasonable expectation of somebody who is coming here on a temporary basis to leave at the end of their stay. Although many permanent residents are in the country already, they have been temporary residents first. There is an expectation that if they're not successful to become a permanent resident, then they would leave at the end of their stay as a temporary worker. One of the issues with the spousal program, of course, is that if you come as a temporary resident, is there a reasonable expectation that you would leave at the end?

With apologies to the lawyers amongst us, that would be my quick highlight of section 179 of the act.

The Chair: Mr. Regan, your time is up.

Madame Normandin, you have six minutes for your round of questioning.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the senior officials for their responses to my other colleagues. They answered questions that I had as well. That's very much appreciated.

I want to follow up on the acknowledgements of receipt for permanent residence applications.

What's preventing them from being issued? Is it a matter of staffing or logistics? Is the system not designed for this?

I just want to know where the process is stalled.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

There are a number of reasons for this. I'll ask Mr. Mills to join me in responding.

First, this is a new business line for us.

[*English*]

We haven't really had to deal with expired confirmation of permanent residence before, or certainly not to this level. Trying to figure out a good way to do that and a good way to communicate with clients has been challenging at times as we try to get better footing on this.

With respect particularly to Quebec skilled worker cases, I wonder if Mr. Mills might like to comment.

• (1735)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Mills: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Normandin referred to the acknowledgements of receipt for the Quebec skilled workers class. This business line is located in Sydney, Nova Scotia. It's completely paper-based, which means that all documents are submitted in paper format. Because of the pandemic, our offices were closed. We were unable to have people on site to issue the acknowledgements of receipt.

However, I'm really pleased to say that, since the implementation of our workplace reintegration plan, we've staffed this business line with people who are actively working on the issue. In the past few weeks, we've processed over 7,500 applications for Quebec. Acknowledgements of receipt were sent to clients up until the end of November. We still have more to go. However, by mid-December, we hope to clear the backlog of acknowledgements of receipt for Quebec skilled workers.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you. Your clarifications are greatly appreciated.

I have a general question. The minister said that applications for permanent residence in the sponsorship class are now being processed at a higher volume. There are 5,400 applications being processed every month. Hopefully, there will be 50,000 processed by the end of the year.

First, just so I know whether the goal is realistic, can you tell me how many applications have been processed so far?

I also want to know whether it was necessary to reassign staff from other business lines to family reunification or whether new staff were hired to help increase the pace.

Mr. Daniel Mills: Yes, this is indeed the case. Regarding family reunification, this year we approved just over 41,000 applications. As the minister said, our target is 49,000 applications. We're working hard on this. We had a significant increase in approvals in the fall, in September, October and November. We're confident that we'll achieve this goal in December.

I forgot the other question.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Who is processing the applications: new staff or people from other business lines?

Mr. Daniel Mills: We've reassigned staff from other business lines that had a slightly lower volume of work. We've also hired new staff. It's a mix of both.

Ms. Christine Normandin: My question is more for the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, but I'll make it a general question. In the rest of Canada, while people are waiting for permanent residence, they can obtain a bridging open work permit. However, they can't do so in Quebec. This would probably have been useful during the crisis. If people had had an open permit, they could have worked in other places. Could the bridging open work permit also be implemented in Quebec, even if it were to be defined by region or job category?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

Depending on the circumstances, these permits may be open or closed,

[*English*]

what we have looked at and what we have done is that we have enabled people to change jobs and still hold on to that work permit where they have another job to go to, without coming back, without having to redo some of the paperwork.

There have been some accommodations made to that already and, depending on the category, the work permit will differ, particularly in the Quebec case around some who are here on TFWs.

Mr. Mills, do you want to add to that one as well?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Deputy Minister. The time is up. We will have to move to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes for your round of questioning. You can please start.

• (1740)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the officials.

I just want to follow up quickly on the acknowledgement of receipt. Could the officials table for the committee the average time it takes to issue an acknowledgement of receipt after it reaches the processing centre, both pre- and post COVID?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thanks for the question.

It will depend on the type of business that we have. Where we have electronic applications, which we do on many of our temporary lines of business, acknowledgement of receipt can be issued very quickly. We're able to do that. Where our business is paper-based—and here's where we're really struggling—we find, not to put too fine a point on it, that the mail is actually stacking up.

When we had difficulty between the end of March and July, before we got people back into our offices in significant numbers... What we have is a backlog of envelopes that needed to be opened. Until we can actually get the mail open and get those applications scanned, it's difficult to make that acknowledgement. I will acknowledge that this is not client service, and it's an area in the department where we really need to do better.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps we can get a response back from the officials to let committee members know what is being done to do better, because right now it is hugely problematic.

I'd like to move on to another area, then. The government's website on the Hong Kong special measures could easily be misinterpreted. Can the officials confirm that the government's definition of "extended family members" only applies to visitor visa applications and not to the family sponsorship stream for permanent residents?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I just want to double-check that I'm right on this one. I believe your interpretation is correct. We will take hard look at that, and I'm also happy to get back to the committee on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If I can get confirmation, that would be really good, because I think it's misleading, and that is a disservice to the people who are hoping to access this stream, even though I know the government wants to make it sound like there's more being done. Either way, I would like to get confirmation. If you could submit that to the committee, that would be appreciated.

On the postgrad work permit issue, last week you indicated that those with expired post-graduate work permits would not be deported or lose status. In the case I mentioned to the minister just now, today, this expired postgrad work permit holder is a university teacher. As of yesterday, he is without status while he waits for his PR application, which is only waiting for an extension for his medicals. Is it illegal for him to work or will his employer have to let him go? When our office inquired about it with the IRCC agent, the agent actually told us that we should be telling this individual to leave the country.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, the member has indicated that she has written to the minister on that. We would like to go and find her correspondence on that and check into this case.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. I'll follow up as well with this situation, because it's hugely disturbing in this instance. The individual received instructions from IRCC, which were followed, and now his status is expired. He's absolutely in a state about this. Then, when we followed up with IRCC, they advised for us to tell the individual that he should leave the country.

With respect to the Quebec skilled workers, I have another situation of individuals whose applications have been listed at 100% completion since March 11. Last week, Mr. Mills indicated that ap-

plications in this stream that were in the final steps were mostly resolved in May and June. Is there still a backlog with these applications? I do have individuals who are still waiting.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I know there are a number of applications under the Quebec skilled workers program that are waiting to be processed, but those whose applications were completed prior to March 18—I'll repeat what I've said before—should be eligible to travel to Canada, where that final determination has been made. If there are particular cases, Madam Chair, we are happy to look into them.

• (1745)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right. We'll follow up with that as well.

I guess my trouble with individual cases is that, more often than not, they are not just individual cases. I have one, two, three or whatever. You can bet that there will be more in the system, so there is something wrong with the system that's creating this problem. That's what I want to point out as well, but I will definitely follow up in this instance.

With respect to spousal sponsorship, does IRCC consider the beginning of the 12th month standard processing time to be when the application was submitted in March, or is it when it was entered into the system in September?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Mr. Mills, do you want to take that one?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: Yes, thank you, Madam Chair.

In terms of the processing time, we're talking about the time when the department receives the application, in other words, the date of receipt—

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Mills. The time is up.

Deputy Minister, you can look into the information you said you would communicate to us and send it to the committee. That would be good.

We will now move on to Mr. Hallan.

Mr. Hallan, you have five minutes for your round of questioning.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the officials.

I don't think we got proper answers, especially for my constituents. A lot of them have been contacting me, as have people all across Canada. They're still concerned that they've applied to get their grandparents and parents here. We don't have any information or transparency as far as how many have been applied for. What are we looking at in terms of when we are going to start seeing any type of information at all?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We received a considerable number of applications for the parents and grandparents program when it was opened. We are in the process now of going through those applications to ensure some integrity. In other words, we're reducing duplicate applications we may have received. Once we have finished doing that, then we'll proceed with the next stage of the process for the parents and grandparents program.

Mr. Mills, would you like to add some specific operational comments on that?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Mills: Yes. Thank you.

As the deputy minister said, the program was open from mid-October to early November. People who wanted to use another method to submit their application, such as a paper application, were given a few extra weeks to do so.

Now that the program is over and we've received all the applications, we're proceeding with the internal audit of program integrity. As the deputy minister said, we just need to move on to the next step and invite people to submit an application. We anticipate that this will happen in late December or early January.

[*English*]

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: When can we get some actual numbers, though?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I think once we have finished quality assurance on the applications that we have received and we have a good, clear handle on the numbers of duplicates, then we'll be happy to release those figures.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I think there was some sound issue; I couldn't really hear the answer.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I'll make sure my microphone is okay, too. I apologize for that.

Once we have finished the quality assurance on the applications and gone through to make sure that we have eliminated the duplicates, then we'd be happy to release information on that.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Okay, thank you.

This is something we've brought up multiple times. I know that Mr. Dhaliwal has brought this up as well. We didn't really get a clear answer about this, but we're looking for a stream or some type of pathway for PR.

Mr. Saroya talked about this as well when he was asking the minister. We want to give dignity to these "low-skilled workers" and also to the international students. When can we see things moving on this front?

• (1750)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I'll start with students, Madam Chair.

A full 25% of those who came through our economic pathways in 2019 had been students in Canada or were coming through a postgraduation work permit and were successful in that. We have, then, a really good incidence of students moving into permanent residency. We would indeed like to see that continue and grow as we try to reach high levels.

Depending upon the pathway they come through, there are a number of different skill levels, including differences among the provincial nominee programs as well, that provide pathways for lower-skilled workers as they come through.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Right now we're seeing that there has been an announcement for 1.2 million new immigrants over the next three years. At this committee, we've discussed before whether it would make sense.... Low-hanging fruit would be those who are already here. Those who are on temporary foreign visas and people who are here on work permits are already contributing to our society in many essential and crucial ways.

Is there something we can do for them to give them a better pathway? They don't have one right now.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Absolutely, Madam Chair. Those who are already in the country, whether they're students or temporary foreign workers who are here and are already working, are people we absolutely want to attract as we try to meet levels targets in 2021.

There—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt, Deputy Minister. Time is up.

We will now move on to Ms. Dhillon.

Ms. Dhillon, you have five minutes for your round of questioning.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you.

I'd like to start with the minister's mention in his speech that in an average week in November, they processed a higher percentage than in a similar week last year. Do you see processing continuing to outperform last year's, despite the pandemic? Can you elaborate on the changes that are needed to make it happen?

Thank you.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

When the pandemic hit in March, we realized that some parts of our workforce were better equipped to work from home than others. For about 55% of our workforce—and we have about 9,000 employees here in Canada—it was easy to disconnect a laptop from their workstation and continue to work at home. "Easy" may be a stretch.

However, for many of our workers, particularly those on the processing side, where we run shifts—two shifts and sometimes three shifts a day—it's pretty difficult for one person to take the equipment, and in most cases it's not equipment that is easy to take home. Part of the problem thus became one of equipping our own labour force to work effectively from home and to do it well.

We saw a real hit on productivity. As we've been able to equip our workforce, as we've been able to train and get people back up to speed, we've seen productivity rise steadily. In the fall, now that people have gotten used to this and gotten used to new equipment, we've seen very good results on productivity around particular files.

If you can indulge me for one second, I think a really good example of this might be found in the call centre. I know it can be a source of frustration from time to time, but it is a microcosm for how much of this worked.

We had to send employees home who were not equipped to work from home. It became a real conundrum to find out how to do this fast, how to get equipment to employees, how to find software that was going to work in both official languages, to test the software, to train the employees, and to get it back up and working.

We did it in about five weeks. We've just now reintroduced the call-back feature for the call centre, which I know is popular and I think provides very good client service. It acts as a bit of a microcosm for the things we had to reinvent in the department to be able to get the productivity numbers the minister mentioned back up.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you.

The other question is regarding sponsorship application times. When the applications arrive at offices, sometimes they sit there for a long period of time. Then, when both sponsors are approved—I'll give you an example—they both have different processing times. I'm wondering why one is so different from the other.

For example, there's a couple who have a son four years old. The applications arrived at the same time. One was approved and finalized after 11 months, and the other one, after 15 months, is still sitting there.

It's hard to tell constituents who meet all the sponsorship requirements that the delays are normal, when they themselves know so many other people and are comparing notes. It gets very difficult for us to answer why, if both applications are approved, it takes longer for one than for the other.

Thank you.

● (1755)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Madam Chair, it may depend on what's in the file. I don't have a clear answer; let me start there. It may depend on what's in the file. It may depend on particular circumstances associated with the file. I wouldn't have a better answer on a specific case. I'm sorry about that.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: That's okay.

The other question I have is about medical examinations for permanent residents. If there isn't a designated panel physician authorized by the Canadian government, for example, in Cuba, are there exemptions for them, especially now considering COVID? They

have to travel nine hours to go get this examination done, but during COVID are there any safeguards? Is there anything in Cuba that can be designated...any panel physician? I know it's a very specific question, but I am just very curious.

The Chair: Give a quick 15-second answer.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Mr. Mills.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Mills: I don't have any details on this topic, but we can certainly give you some.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. Ms. Dhillon, your time is up.

We will now have Madame Normandin for two and a half minutes.

You can please start.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

I'll follow up on the situation regarding bridging open work permits. The idea here is to avoid situations such as the ones that we've experienced. The Bloc Québécois suggested that regional permits or permits by employment sector be used. This would probably have made the process easier during the crisis. Job losses resulted in a number of requests to change employers.

Could we consider making greater use of this type of permit rather than routinely using closed permits? Obviously, this would be done together with Employment and Social Development Canada.

[*English*]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We are always happy to look at things that will improve client service in this regard. It's a complicated area, as you know, Madam Chair, between us, our sister department at ES-DC and how we move quickly through this. Any suggestions are always welcome to us as we continue to look at issues with respect to temporary foreign workers.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

When they appeared before the committee last Monday, people in the economic class said that they found it somewhat unfortunate that the information on time frames posted on the IRCC website is often general. The website says the average time that it can take to process a file. However, a file can be more complex or more straightforward, so it may require a longer or shorter processing time.

Do you think that it will ever be possible to give people a foreseeable date for the completion of their file and that this date will be based on their own situation?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for the question.

[English]

Nothing would make me happier than to say that we could have an excellent system in there that would allow people to know exactly where their files are in progress. Until we have a system, a better digital system, and can move away from the number of paper applications we have, particularly on the permanent side, that's going to be very difficult for us to do. However, it's something that we absolutely want to come back to because that will also help us with the volumes of other things, including access to information requests.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

We will now move on to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I just want to go back to Mr. Mills' last answer. It wasn't clear to me.

If the application is stuck in the mailroom for six or seven months and is not opened until September, would the start date on the standard processing time be when the package gets opened in September?

• (1800)

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: The start date for calculating the processing time is the date when an application arrives in the department's mailroom.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It's the date when you opened the mail, not the date since it's been sitting there for six months. Am I correct?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: No. It's the date when the application arrives at the department. If the application arrives on January 1, but it isn't opened and processed until June, January 1 is considered the start date for processing purposes.

[English]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

All right, since this year's decision is to only process about 49,000 files and applications, does that mean we should still anticipate a backlog continuing into 2021?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We are working hard to make sure we process as many applications as we can, to not have that backlog continue and to move these files forward as fast as we can. We're in a situation now where we have, in person, about 30% of our workforce back in our large processing operations. A couple have now moved into a red zone where that will change. We're also looking at a number of contracts that have been put in place to be able to come in and digitize the applications and to be able to move those forward as quickly as we can.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The immigration targets were increased in the 2020 levels. The targets were within the low and high ranges, and

the lower range was actually reduced by about 20,000 for each year compared with those in the 2019 report.

Does that mean that IRCC anticipates the possibility of reaching lower targets than in previous years?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: For 2020, Madam Chair, we will not reach our targets. We've really been hampered by a border that's been closed since March 18—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Deputy Minister. The time is up. Maybe you can share that information afterwards or if it comes up again, you can share that information.

Thank you.

We will now move to Mr. Saroya. He will start, and he's splitting his time with Mr. Allison.

You have five minutes combined.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the Deputy Minister.

Deputy Minister, I have known you for the last five years and you have always been good.

Perception is a reality. When I was interviewed back in 1973 in New Delhi—the first time I came to the country—I had a good feeling. After the interview, the interviewer or the counsellor, whatever you call him, walked with me outside. I went to the interview as nervous as heck. I came out good, but it felt good in all the stuff.

Many of the people who fill out the application feel they are lying on the application. As I said, perception is the reality.

Is there anything we can do? Is there anything we can do for those people who always feel that immigration is looking at them as though everybody is lying?

Thank you.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thanks, Madam Chair.

Program integrity is a really important part of our business, as the member has indicated. We try to treat all applications fairly as they come through, but program integrity and fraud is a real part of our business. We're looking for things that are robust, incomplete or inconsistent and that really helps us analyze files, I think in a good way.

The other thing that I think is really helpful, particularly on the permanent resident side and the economic class, is express entry, where we're looking at things in a very qualitative way. We're looking at their educational experience, language levels and work experience. These are things where program integrity becomes a little easier. It's not that there isn't fraud in those lines of business, but it's easier to do. It's more transparent, and people can see that.

• (1805)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Madam Chair, my second question is this. We need those people. When I came to the country, I worked in a factory for minimum wages for a number of years before I upgraded myself, then I was the director of sales for a great Canadian corporation.

There are many people, thousands of people who are here in this country who I feel we can use. They speak the language. They understand Canadian culture. They are willing to work for the next 30, 35 or 40 years. They are the real resources we should be tapping into.

As I mentioned earlier today, at companies like Pizza Pizza, McDonald's, Tim Hortons—I could go on and on—and with truckers too, we cannot survive without them.

Why can't we do something for those people? Some of them are paying \$40,000 to \$60,000 for the LMIA, or on the black market and that kind of thing, to get into the program. If you and the immigration department can do something, I'd really appreciate it.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: On labour market impact assessments, I'll leave that as a question you can follow up on with my colleagues at ESDC.

On the other hand, I think I'll come back with something the minister said. With levels of 401,000 for 2020, it's going to push us in the department to be more innovative and to look at other means and other ways—particularly if the border remains closed—for those who are already here in Canada. Those are discussions we look forward to having with the minister.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you.

Mr. Allison, you can go back.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you for the 45 seconds, Bob. I appreciate it.

Deputy Minister, thank you very much.

I want to continue with what Mr. Saroya said and encourage you as you have those conversations with the minister. Certainly, as Bob said and as you indicated here, there are a number of people who are in our country right now. They're going to college, going to university, they're working in our restaurants. I don't call them “low skill”; I call them “core”. Their core skills are what we need. Food and manufacturing is the same way. I would hope that part of those discussions—and I'll leave my comments at that because I'm almost out of time—would be held with various industry groups that are struggling to fill those jobs right now.

As I said, I think a lot of people could benefit from some of those students who are in the country right now who are prepared to help us out with those jobs as they continue to improve themselves, as Mr. Saroya said. Thank you very much for considering that. I encourage you to have those conversations with the minister to make the best use of those people who are in the country already. Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now have Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you have five minutes for your round of questioning. You can start, please.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the deputy minister and the associates for being here today.

The department has shifted towards an easier client experience, while also maintaining the safety of Canadians, by moving online. Are these measures that have been adopted presenting a demonstrable change in terms of processing, and if it's proven successful, are there plans to implement digitization across the whole system?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: That's a really important question for our business.

I'll take it apart in two different ways. One is that we have had a lot of innovation in the past eight months, where we've had to look at different ways of doing our business. Where things have worked well, these are things that we want to keep.

When it comes to things like a virtual citizenship ceremony or an online citizenship test, hooray. These are innovations that we'll look at and we'll want to keep.

With regard to others where we can move more of our business onto a digital platform, where we can move applications more seamlessly within our network, that is the goal we want to achieve. There was a note in the fall economic statement yesterday about our IT platform, the global case management system. The statement reiterated something that had been announced already, that being the first two phases of our process to update our system. It's a legacy system.

The first is improving the technical depth of our system itself—in other words, to ensure that our system remains more stable over time. We have pushed our system to the limits of what it's able to do, so we need to be able to catch up with that.

The second is better disaster recovery in our system and to be able to try to reduce the number of outages in the global case management system and move it forward.

There will have to be a third phase to this. This will be the part that gives us more flexibility around digital applications, for us to continue to move away from paper-based applications.

We'll need to get the first two phases well under way. There's a lot of work going on now.

Having said all of that, 2019 was a record year on our system, across all categories. This was the same system that delivered. We continue to try to innovate. We continue to try to transform our business and to move that forward as quickly as we can.

• (1810)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

Mr. Mills, I want to thank you for answering the question that MP Kwan asked. It was a very important question about a one-year term, because before with spousal cases, people had to wait years and years, and now that have to wait less than one year. I thank you for clearing that up.

I want to come back to the deputy minister on the spousal sponsorship. Family immigration is a key to the government, and also particularly to me as well, because I hear from people all the time on spousal sponsorships. I know there have been considerable changes to the program to allow a specialized task force to increase spousal sponsorship decisions. As we mentioned earlier, there were plans to have 49,000 decisions by the end of 2020. How close are we to achieving this goal?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: This has been Mr. Mills' innovation and good work, and I'm going to let him answer that question.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Mills: Thank you, Madam Chair.

To answer the question, to date, we've processed about 40,000 family class applications for this year. As the minister said, the goal is 49,000 applications. We have one month left. We still have work to do, but we're confident that we'll achieve the goal.

We've put a great deal of effort and many resources into this business line. As the deputy minister said earlier, we've also set up a pilot project to digitize applications. Currently, all applications are received in paper format. The goal of the project is to be able to process the applications from any office in the world.

This innovation will hopefully enable us to process the applications more quickly.

[English]

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Do you think that you will not only—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Dhaliwal, but your time is up.

Each party can have two minutes before we end this panel. We can start with the Conservatives.

Mr. Allison is next. You have two minutes for your questions.

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. My colleague didn't give me much time, but you gave me an extra two minutes. I appreciate that.

My question is on one of the challenges that I always have, Deputy Minister. I have a number of businesses in my riding that need technical support from time to time. The challenge has always been on the essential versus non-essential opportunity to get people with permits into the country on a temporary basis.

I know that they have to self-quarantine and do all those other kinds of things, but in my thought process, here's the challenge. For example, I had a greenhouse that burned to the ground over Christmas. The people had to rebuild the whole facility. To bring in special equipment, we needed people to come in from Holland to help train them on those kinds of things. While they weren't doing

food products per se, where I would have deemed them as essential, obviously it was very important that this get back up and running.

I have a number of situations. I can count at least half a dozen situations of a technical nature where we've struggled to get people in to help train the trainer. Do you have any thoughts on how we can do a better job of getting those types of technical experts into the country?

I've just taken a minute of my two minutes.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thanks for that.

I should note that in the national interest exemption letters that have been issued, the vast majority have been for technical assistance, I think in the way which the member has described.

The other thing is that we are always looking for ways to improve our business, particularly when it comes to Canadian businesses that rely on others to come in and repair the equipment; they're there, and it's part of the essential service.

The global skills strategy has been a bit of a game-changer in that regard, but for those who are coming through on shorter times, it's something that we want to continue to look at and to work closely on with our partners at ESDC to make sure it's done in a timely way.

• (1815)

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister. Your time is up.

We will now move onto Madame Martinez Ferrada.

You have two minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll start by commending the work of the entire team at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. I know that you have all been hit hard by this pandemic, which has affected a number of aspects of your daily work. I believe that you have ultimately succeeded in finding innovative responses. You have stepped outside your regular work environment.

I know that we don't have much time left. However, I want to hear your views on this topic.

In terms of immigration and the immigration process, in your opinion, what are the most innovative measures that you implemented and the measures that you want to keep or push even further?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for your question, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

Perhaps our most innovative measures relate to citizenship, with the virtual ceremony.

Sorry, but I'll continue in English, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

[English]

The online citizenship test, I cannot begin to say how happy I am that we have launched this.

When I joined the department for the first time almost 10 years ago, we were talking about how we might do it, and we're distressed that took us as long as it did, but we're happy it's launched. This is a game-changer for our business and where we want to go in this area.

The other pieces are where we pick up bits and pieces of digital applications. Parts of the other innovations have been around those student permits. How do we hold on to that really important industry for Canada and, frankly, a really important source of immigration for Canada? One thing that we did as a halfway measure was the partial assessment of applications so that universities and colleges could continue to—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Deputy Minister. We will have to move to the next member.

We will now have Madame Normandin for two minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Tapley, I'll follow up on the answer that you gave to Ms. Kwan regarding when the calculation of the processing time for applications begins. For example, if a file is incomplete, if it's returned, if the applicant adds documents, if the file comes back, if it's returned, the time really starts when the file first arrives, right? It doesn't start when the file is considered complete.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: That's a good question. I'll need Mr. Mills' help.

Mr. Daniel Mills: Okay.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

To make things clear, in the case of a temporary residence application, we review the application when it's complete. Each time the departments share information, for example, if the biometrics are missing, the processing time stops. The time starts again when we receive the information or when the file is considered complete.

For a permanent residence application, the member is right. The clock starts when the application arrives at the department. First, we acknowledge receipt of the application. We then check whether all the information is included. If the application must be returned to the client, this obviously adds time to the processing of the application.

• (1820)

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now have our last round of questioning by Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have two minutes, and then we will end the panel.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I want to go back to the deputy on the question about the IRCC lower targets so she can finish her thoughts on that.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thanks.

On the lower targets, I'm looking at the multi-year levels plan now. Because we have a higher number for 2021, we wanted to make sure that there was a range. Also we're dealing with many unknowns for 2021, one of which is when the border will reopen. That's been a particular impediment to our ability to meet levels in 2020. How aggressive we can be and where we can be around our levels plan will depend on a number of unknown factors. Given those unknown factors, that's where we see a broader range.

Our targets, however, remain our targets, and we will do everything in our power to meet them.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I noted this because the lower numbers really reflect that there's a real possibility that IRCC would not be able to fall within range if we kept the same lower targets as previous years. That's why it's been reduced by about 20,000.

Moving on to a different issue, on COPRs, last week we were told that there's a system in place for expired COPRs. In the constituency case, as recently as November 27, IRCC call centre told our office that any application regarding the renewal of COPR won't be reviewed until the Dublin VAC reopens. We're running into that situation where we've just been told, "We don't know". When can we expect the VAC to be reopened?

I saw you shaking your head, Deputy. Does that mean that's wrong information, that in fact people are actively being called? I have two cases right now in my system of people who are not being called, and they don't know what's going to happen to their case. We don't know, either, because we can't find an answer.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, I'm sorry for interrupting, but your time is up.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: May I get a quick response from the deputy?

The Chair: Deputy Minister, would you like to respond?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I think we're struggling with very similar terms, and I worry a bit about that in the advice that's coming back. Regarding the Dublin visa application centre, I'll get back to the committee.

The Chair: We are now at the end of our second panel.

I want to take this opportunity to thank our officials for appearing before us and providing important information. This year and the last nine months have not been easy, but I want to take this moment to thank you, on behalf of all Canadians, for stepping up and being there.

I represent a very diverse riding, and I know there have been many requests coming to my office in the last nine months, so I can just imagine how many requests you would have received. Thank you for being there for Canadians. Your work means a lot. On behalf of all members, thank you.

Stay safe.

The meeting is adjourned.

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